

**THE IMPACT OF EXTRA-CURRICULAR  
ACTIVITIES ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: IN  
WHAT WAYS DOES PARTICIPATION IN  
SYMPOSIUM AFFECT HIGHER PRIOR  
ATTAINING STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN  
ENGLISH?**

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**A RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT PROJECT  
SUBMITTED FOR THE  
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The Impact of Extracurricular Activities on Student Engagement: In what ways does participation in *Symposium* affect higher prior attaining (HPA) students' engagement in English?

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## Abstract

During my second year of teaching, the OFSTED report specified that my school needed to develop its provision for higher ability students. Even though they are a small group of the whole school cohort (12%), they were not being challenged adequately in the classroom or beyond. In addition to the whole school initiatives I formed as a part of my new leadership role as Higher Prior Attaining (HPA) Lead Teacher, I collaborated with a Deputy Head teacher at another school within the county to create *Symposium*.

*Symposium* is an extracurricular activity comprised of six 1.5-hour sessions taught by a variety of speakers. This culminates into a final presentation evening held at an Oxford University College, led by the students. In this project, I seek to explore the impact *Symposium* has on high ability students from a deprived area – more specifically on their engagement within the classroom. Even though most of the research on extracurricular activities has been carried out using quantitative methods, I have used qualitative methods to gain a deeper insight into the ten students' perspectives.

American researchers dominate this area of research. American research into the impact of extracurricular activities explores the overarching impact a combined range of extracurricular activities has on the student's social, behavioural and academic development. In contrast, I have narrowed this focus by investigating the efficacy of *Symposium* as an *academic* extracurricular activity.

Due to the small group of participants, it is difficult to generalise. There are groups of students who seem to be excluded from the benefits I will explore, for example the lower prior attaining deprived students and the students who do not hold a strong enough interest in English Language, Literature or Media prior to their participation. However, significant findings include the importance of the school's role to developing deprived students' cultural capital; the impact extracurricular activities have on students' interest and confidence within lessons, which subsequently help them to engage more in lessons and the social benefits that can also be accrued. The development of students' relationships with both their peers and their teachers, seems to increase their sense of belonging within the school, which also seems to filter down into their classroom engagement.

Ultimately, this project seeks to explore whether extracurricular provision can begin to meet the needs of disadvantaged, higher ability students. In light of this research, I hope that *Symposium* can be offered across all subject areas within the school, so that a greater number of higher ability students can be selected to partake in and benefit from this challenging academic project.

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## Introduction

Educational research broadly acknowledges and accepts the significance of student involvement with extracurricular activities offered within schools (for example: (McNeal, 1998; Blomfield and Barber, 2010; Morris, 2015). They constitute as a productive use of students' unstructured time (Blomfield and Barber, 2010). Even though it is difficult to prove the full extent to which participation in these activities *cause* students' academic and social advancement, the positive correlation between student involvement in these activities and their development cannot be ignored (Shulruf, Tumen and Tolley, 2008; Stearns and Glennie, 2010). Despite the significance of student involvement, students who are from a low socioeconomic background are less likely to participate with these activities (Lehman and Dumais, 2017).

It can be argued that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in effective schools, are academically vulnerable even if they are higher prior attaining students – they seem to be less likely to excel academically in comparison to their more privileged peers (Strand, 2014); they are also less likely to attend a prestigious university or any higher education institution (Sutton, 2013). Granted, there are a number of reasons why this might be the case, one of the interventions that the Sutton Trust recommended was that 'state schools must do more to develop 'soft' or 'essential life skills' in less advantaged pupils, through a richer programme of extra-curricular activities'.

Thus, for this project, it is particularly important to explore how this academic extracurricular activity may help develop a limited cultural capital (more likely the case for students from deprived areas e.g., Larerau, 2003) and enable these students to begin to access better academic outcomes. More specifically, the intention here is to support the students with establishing ways to approach and cope with the learning required to prepare

for the new English Language and Literature GCSE specifications, which seem to draw more closely from the traditional 'Anglocentric' canon.

Student engagement is a loose term that has been used to refer to students' involvement with the school, which is also known as a 'sense of belonging' or the students' involvement within the classroom (e.g. Bryson, 2014). Due to the confines of this essay, it would be difficult to explore how student involvement in extracurricular activities affects student engagement across the school (e.g. Glanville and Wildhagen, 2007). In this assignment, student engagement moves beyond students' compliance to the school's expectations, and considers students' active engagement with the learning process within the classroom and outside of the classroom in the form of further research: an area that would be recognised by Finn (1989) as 'initiative-taking behaviours'.

I intend to explore the efficacy of extracurricular activities and its impact on student engagement in English lessons through a collaborative programme called *Symposium*. *Symposium* is an English Language, Literature and Media focused extracurricular activity that includes six 1.5-hour sessions taught by a variety of speakers. These sessions culminate into a final presentation evening at a college in a prestigious University, led by the students in front of their family, friends and senior members of staff from their respective schools.

## **School Context**

As a result of the final OFSTED report (see Appendix A), which moved the school out of a 2 year period of being rated 'Special Measures' into 'Requires Improvement', I was employed as a Lead Teacher with specific focus on developing the teaching and learning of the Higher Prior Attaining (HPA) students across the school. The report urged Senior Leadership and middle leaders to 'improve the teaching in order to raise attainment and increase rates of

progress in all subjects, by ensuring that all teachers are more ambitious, set high expectation and expect more of students, particularly the most able.' Eden High School (a pseudonym) is a comprehensive school placed in a particularly deprived area in the city. According to 'The English Indices of Deprivation' (2015), Eden High is in one of the three most deprived wards in Oxfordshire. In the most recent report on the school, 52% of the pupils in the year cohort have been eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) at some time during the past six years. That is over 20% higher than the national average. As a result of this high proportion of low socioeconomic status (SES) students, a majority of the students tend to begin secondary school with very low literacy and numeracy levels. Thus Eden High places a very strong focus on and effort to support these students with their academic progress. Meanwhile, the smaller cohort of students who are doing marginally well (who are also likely to be FSM) may not be pushed to the same extent, due to the school's current priorities and their perceived engagement.

Since becoming a Lead Teacher within my school, it has become apparent to me that HPA pupils, although they have achieved an average grade at or above a Level 5 across both English and Maths in their KS2 SATs, are largely failing to reach their full educational potential. The Progress Leader at Eden High created an academic 'flight path' to track the level the students should achieve at these checkpoints in order to be on target to achieve their GCSE grade at the end of year eleven. The HPA students across the school are largely identified as underachieving because of the negative correlation between their prior attainment (achieved in year six) and their attainment during each academic checkpoint. One reason for this underachievement might be in relation to the academic transition from primary to secondary school education. Thus efforts have been made within the English department to help the KS3 students integrate more smoothly; for example, the Second in Department has created a year seven scheme of work on 'The Odyssey' as a continuation of

their primary school study. There were a number of reasons why he did this, one of which being 'a way to get the students hooked into English at our school'. This idea of getting the students 'hooked' is significant both within the department and across the school, based on the common belief that student engagement is directly related to student attainment (Bryson, 2014).

Despite these efforts, due to the demand in GCSEs and the national move away from levels, students are struggling to work to meet their expected targets. For example, the year nine HPA students, who are expected to be achieving A\*s at the end of year eleven, remained labelled as a cause for concern on their report. Despite this demotivating factor, these students are still expected to excel in all of their subjects - especially the core subjects English, Maths and Science throughout their school career. Thus, in addition to the efforts being made within the classroom, as members of the teaching and learning team, we were responsible for facilitating student engagement within the classroom, with learning opportunities beyond the classroom. These efforts were made in an attempt to develop a culture of embracing challenge for students.

I worked with a Deputy Head Teacher from Zion High School (a pseudonym) named David. In 2015 we created and established *Symposium*. Interestingly, Zion High has a very different student profile in that only 19% of the students have been eligible for free school meals at any time during the past six years – 10% below the national average with 0.6% pupils with a statement of special educational needs or education, health and care, compared to Eden High's 1.6%. Despite these differences, we both shared common aims since we were working with students within the state school system.

## Symposium Design

*Symposium* was inspired by a programme called *The Brilliant Club* (2017), which is a registered charity, which employs PhD students from highly selective universities to teach high level content in a one hour tutorial a week for five weeks. These PhD students are also required to support these under represented students with writing a final 2,000-word dissertation. The intention of this charity is to support under-represented students with their ability to attend highly selective universities. As an extracurricular model this had a great impact on the students, since out of the eleven students who got involved, they all submitted a dissertation and were able to attend the graduation event; all of the students passed the assignment (5/11 of the students achieved a distinction or an upper second class). We could not however justify investing thousands of pounds into this programme a year, so David and I created our own more affordable programme, which had elements of *The Brilliant Club* within it.

*Symposium* is an English Language, Literature and Media extracurricular activity aimed at both boys and girls, who are identified as HPA. This programme consists of six, fortnightly undergraduate style lectures, on Tuesday afternoons. It offers different advanced and complex contents in relation to topics that the speaker is an 'expert' in. These speakers range from University professors and authors, to Theatre Company and BBC professionals, to teachers who desire to share areas of interest and expertise. I understand that the concept of being an 'expert' or having 'expertise' is ambiguous, but I will define it here as an individual who may or may not be certified in this area, but has carried out some research (either for a thesis or dissertation) and/or acquired (and continue to acquire) some work experience and possibly publications in that particular field.

The titles of the six sessions held this year were:

1. An Introduction to Ways of Reading and Literary Theory
2. Creation Theatre: Working in the Theatre
3. Modernism and Philosophical Literature
4. What is Behind the Door? A Creative Writing Workshop
5. The Evolution of British Poetry
6. Postmodernism: Alienation in Modern Society

David and I specifically decided to make this programme available to KS3 students. Firstly, these students are not influenced by high stakes assessments as a motivating factor for their progress. Additionally, these students have the time to engage with these extra-curricular activities without the extra pressures of revision and extra timetabled lessons. Thus the KS3 students' engagement, although likely to be influenced (positively or negatively) by a number of other factors outside of school, is not affected by these high stakes exams. To some extent, I would anticipate that high stakes exams might even taint the impact activities like *Symposium* could have on students in KS4 and above, because of the added pressure and its assumed meaninglessness. Therefore, we decided to select students in years seven, eight and nine.

We also decided that the project should not culminate into a marked assignment, but a presentation evening. We wanted the students' work to be a contribution to the field of Literature, Language and Media, as opposed to a marked assignment that would eventually be forgotten.

## **Research Aim**

Due to the minimal authority teachers have over curriculum decisions within the English department at Eden High, extra-curricular activities are a reasonable way to support students who need to creatively develop their engagement levels. *Symposium* is my attempt to provide a stimulus for student engagement. It is important to explore whether

these extra-curricular activities are also contributing to the students developing their engagement and understanding within the classroom and if so, to what extent. As argued by Reschly, Christenson and Wylie (2012), student engagement is the 'glue... that links important contexts - home, school, peers and community to students, and, in turn, to outcomes of interest' (p.3) Granted, we cannot expect the students to maintain an equal and consistent measure of engagement for every subject, but we should be making an effort to support students with making progress in their engagement.

The purpose of this study therefore, is to establish the impact the students' involvement in *Symposium* may have on the students' engagement with their English lessons.

Additionally, it would be important to identify whether the students' engagement with the activity correlates with their engagement in English. Not only do I want to establish a cost effective and sustainable extracurricular programme within my school, but I also want to highlight how involvement in these activities are worth the time spent organising them.

Based on these ideas, I will frame my literature review around these key questions:

1. What is student engagement within schools and the English classroom?
2. What are extracurricular activities and how are they implemented in schools?
3. What are the benefits of student participation in extracurricular activities?
4. What barriers inhibit the efficacy of extracurricular activities?

## Literature Review

### 1. What is student engagement within schools and the English classroom?

Student engagement is a significant area of study in educational research. American and Australian writers, due to large-scale national surveys, dominate this area of research. Research has repeatedly established the positive correlation between students' academic outcomes and their engagement within the classroom and the school (Finn and Zimmer, 2012; Astin, 1991; Finn, 1989; Holland and Andre, 1987; Pace, 1982). Engagement is a loose term in the sphere of education, which considers a variety of things such as: the quality of the students' work, the students' discussion, curriculum design (when students are able to see themselves represented in the work studied) or the student showing appreciation to the staff (McInnis, 2005). By the end of this section, I want to establish the definition of student engagement and its significance in this context.

Before doing this, it is important to address my standpoint on whose responsibility it is to improve student engagement. Literature seems to have evolved from the belief that students need to apply themselves in schools, to an enquiry surrounding the school's or the teacher's role in facilitating better student engagement (Zyngier, 2008). The significant roles of parents and peers have also been considered in relation to student engagement (Bundick et al., 2014; Finn and Zimmer, 2012). I do not believe that these are separate components; schools and English classrooms are complex environments (Turvey, 2012), which indicate that even if researchers or teachers decide to investigate the impact of one component, all the outside elements of a student's identity still informs and has an impact on the student's sense of engagement.

In relation to the English classroom, more specifically, to engage with the content and 'make-meaning' is learnt behaviour, which depends on the way parents have taught their children how to 'prepare...for participation in settings involving literacy' (Brice-Heath, 2005). Therefore, although students may actively engage with the lesson based on their interest or connection with the knowledge being shared (Applebee et al., 2003); their parents and their socioeconomic status have still influenced the way they do this (Brice-Heath, 2005). Since, as suggested by Brice-Heath (2005), 'children from three communities (Maintown – 'middle class'; Roadville – 'white working class'; Trackton – 'black working-class') respond differently, because they have learnt different methods and degrees of 'taking' (the ability to learn, hold and retrieve content) from books', we as teachers need to understand the context of the student in order to understand their reason for engagement (see also, Appleton et al., 2006; Camacho and Fulingni, 2014).

Even though Brice-Heath particularly focuses on the American society and there are distinct differences between there and the UK in relation to the stark racial divide, the principle is generally the same: students from middle class families (especially if their mothers are teachers) are more acclimatised to the mainstream education system, than students from the working class. I am also mindful of the 'deficit discourse' (students being seen as 'at risk rather than at promise' [Swadener and Lubeck, 1995]) and it is not my intention to suggest that this limits them or their futures in any way, but it's an important point to acknowledge.

Additionally, students may find their social interactions as primarily influential for their sense of engagement within the classroom (Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews & Patterson, 1996) or the teacher's personality and instructional approach (Krajcik et al., 1998). Thus, this multiplicity of influence, also points to the multi-faceted nature of responsibility, which qualifies a more qualitative methodological approach, to allow students to express how

each of these elements may have an impact on their sense of belonging in the school and their engagement within the classroom. By investigating the impact of student involvement in extracurricular activities more specifically, I will be able to explore the complex interaction between the school's, teachers', students' and parents' efforts to develop the students' sense of engagement from their perspective (Finn and Zimmer, 2012).

One element of student engagement explored in research literature is a student's 'sense of belonging' in the school. This relates to the students' attendance, remaining in and completing school at full term as well as students being able to establish a bond with other students and teachers in the school (Tinto, 1987; McInnis, 2005). Ultimately, it has been argued that students who are engaged in school are less likely to truant from lessons, suffer delinquency or drop out of school, since they are eager to fulfil their full potential within school (Juvonen, Espinoza & Knifsend, 2012; O'Farrell and Morrison, 2003). Pace and Kuh (1998) measured students' engagement across over 1500 colleges in Canada and the US, using a survey instrument: 'The National Survey of Student Engagement' (NSSE). The findings from the first survey conducted in 2000, were collated in a document entitled: *Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice*. The most significant element of the findings is that this 'sense of belonging' involves an academic collaboration with other students and staff and the overarching sense that the institution is concerned with the students': academic challenge, aspirations and outcomes.

Extracurricular activities can have a significant impact on the improvement of a student's sense of belonging. Extracurricular activities may have the potential for contributing to the students' sense of identification with school (Fullarton, 2002). It can be argued that a student spending extra time in the school environment increases the likelihood of their internalising a feeling of belonging. Also, extracurricular and social activities may be the

only source of students' attachment to school, especially students whose academic work is weak (Finn and Zimmer, 2012). Zyngier (2008) develops this with the idea that student engagement goes beyond academic outcomes and is also about establishing 'a social, cultural, political and intellectual participation in life within and beyond school', which he argues is establishing through extracurricular participation (p. 1771). Although, as argued by Finn and Zimmer (2012), student engagement may not necessarily be the cause of students' progress, there is certainly a positive correlation between the two. Therefore, students' involvement in extracurricular activities can directly influence student engagement in a positive way, which has the potential to influence students' interest in and attitude towards a variety of future outcomes as stated above.

Even though methodologically, quantitative studies like Kuh's are comprehensive, since they investigate the views of a large scope of students, Bryson (2014) raises valid contentions in regards to using this approach to explore student engagement. Bryson argues that student engagement is more 'complex' and therefore cannot be measured in this aggregate way (p.7). Even though the surveys are able to measure the level of engagement, it does not interrogate the reasons why the students are or are not engaged (Finn and Zimmer, 2012). He argues that a student's individual context is paramount to their sense of engagement, thus promoting the qualitative approach (see also Bryson and Hand, 2008), which I will be adopting.

Fullarton (2002) argues that in order to address students' disengagement with lifelong learning, teachers and researchers need to engage with students' disengagement with schools. However, in order to measure students' academic performance, teachers and researchers cannot focus on the students' sense of belonging alone (Willms, 2003). In relation to this, another form of student engagement is explored in research in relation to

the students' engagement within the classroom. This is significant, since it points to specific dimensions of student engagement. In his literature review, which critically explores 62 different articles on student engagement, Zyngier (2008) highlights the contesting elements of student engagement investigated: behavioural, academic, cognitive and psychological as explored in literature (Finn, 1989; Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004; Appleton et al., 2006). Before engaging in the significance of cognitive and psychological engagement, Appleton et al., (2006) gives a brief summary of the different subtypes of student engagement explored across education literature, which I will list below:

- Behavioural engagement consists of observable actions students adopt in order to convey their involvement with the school. This type of engagement can be measured by a student's decision to take up a course to gain extra credits, get involved in an extracurricular activity or their attendance (see: Finn, 1989).
- Academic engagement is also based on observable actions the students adopt in order to engage with the activities set within the classroom. This type of engagement can be measured based on the time a student spends on a particular task, whether they complete their homework. At a second level, this can include students asking teachers further questions outside of class and completing more voluntary research or homework tasks beyond the required work set (see: Finn, 1989).
- Cognitive and psychological engagement tends to be more abstract in nature, since they refer to the students' internal motivation and attitude towards reaching or exceeding their personal goals and attaining their academic aspirations. This is measured by a student's task persistence, interest and reported sense of autonomy (Appleton et al., 2006, p. 429).

Interestingly, these different forms of student engagement have been placed in a hierarchy. Even though they are more widely studied, behavioural and academic engagement seem to only consider students' engagement on a surface level, while cognitive and psychological engagement are considered more intrusive and investigate the reasons why students engage in the way that they do (Appleton et al., 2006; Zyngier, 2008). Again, I would argue that engagement is an amalgamation of all of these subtypes, which can be discussed in this fragmented manner, but in order to garner an understanding of the child's full sense of engagement, we need to consider how all of these elements fit together. This hierarchal distinction is too limiting and does not consider the fact that the most practical way for students and teachers to effectively evaluate engagement is based on the students' observable actions.

For this project, my definition of student engagement is a student's interest and active participation within and outside of the classroom environment. Within the classroom, I consider active participation to be based on students: listening, writing and speaking in class. Outside of the classroom, I consider active participation to be in the form of further research. I desire to explore student enjoyment especially due to Eden High's English Department's recent assessment-focused KS3 curriculum design, which has the intention to prepare students for the new KS4 national GCSE exams. Therefore, as a department, it is important to know whether students are also enjoying the content studied, while they prepare for their exams.

## **2. What are extracurricular activities and how are they implemented in schools?**

Although there is a plethora of research exploring the significance of extracurricular activities, they are usually described in the form of examples (Bartkus et al., 2012). These

examples span from a task as simple as 'reading a book' according to MacGaha and Fitzpatrick (2010) to a range of visits to different locations, voluntary work or student clubs (Birzea et al., 2004 as cited in Keser et al., 2011). This absence of a clear definition is problematic, since we cannot attribute the same advantages, disadvantages, impact or actions concluded in research to all types of activities (Bartkus et al., 2012). Also, some research suggests that the benefits of extracurricular activities may be type dependent – thus it is difficult to generalise that all activities are equally beneficial for the students, since some students may benefit from a sports activity, while others benefit more from their involvement in the student council or an arts project (e.g: Bartko and Eccles, 2003).

For example, Camacho and Fuligni (2015) attempt to address the gap in literature about the impact extracurricular activities have on immigrant students (focusing more specifically on Latino and Asian American youth). They highlight a broad distinction between three types of activities offered in schools: sports, arts and academic. While, Stearns and Glennie's (2010) research offers a list of twelve types of activities based on data from the yearbooks and school websites of 264 high schools across a one-year span. These are: academic; arts; ethnic identity/advancement; government/leadership; honours; media; music; recreational sports; religious; service; varsity and junior varsity sports; and vocational (p.301).

Interestingly, some of these activities are particularly American in their focus, which might make it difficult for British teachers to replicate these activities in their own schools or even compare these activities to those provided within the British schools.

Despite these findings, it would be difficult to posit that all of these activities would have an equal impact on a student's academic, social and cultural progress, therefore the meaning should not be left to assumption (Bartkus et al., 2012).

Bartkus et al. (2012: 698) offer a definition of extracurricular activities as:

'[A]cademic or non-academic activities that are conducted under the auspices of the school but occur outside of normal classroom time and are not part of the curriculum. Additionally, extracurricular activities do not involve a grade or academic credit and participation is optional on the part of the student.'

This definition overlooks the importance of the rigour and regularity of these activities (Bohnert, Fredricks and Randall, 2010) and the research also fails to move beyond the micro-focus on the definition.

For the purposes of this research, I prefer to focus on the academic extracurricular activities as an intervention for HPA students and by academic I mean: a detailed focus on a particular area of the chosen subject that is studied regularly for an extended period of time, outside of school hours in an unconventional way (students participate voluntarily and sessions do not have to take the form of a conventional classroom setting in terms of delivery or outcomes). This extracurricular content should go beyond, yet may have the scope to be relevant to, the school curriculum.

Unless specified, when I refer to 'schools' here, I am primarily focusing on secondary schools, since this is the academic period that is more closely associated to my own project. Additionally, extracurricular activities explored in this section are related to school-based activities, even though it is not always easy to identify the distinction between activities provided within the school or external agencies (Feldman-Farb and Matjasko, 2012).

Student involvement in extracurricular activities seems to be an important feature of any student's learning experience (Feldman and Matjasko, 2005; Bartkus et al., 2012). Zhang (2001) even goes as far to posit that 'students' out of class experiences appear to be far more influential in students' academic and intellectual development' (p. 105). Within the state sector more specifically, the British Government have recently decided to give £415

million to schools (primary, secondary *and* sixth form colleges) to develop their extracurricular provision. The Education Secretary Justine Greening states that as a way to help students establish a 'healthier lifestyle', they intend 'to support sports, after-school activities and promoting healthy eating, so [they] can secure the future health of our young people' (Greening, 2017). This Government initiative is consistent with my view that academic activities are a significant element of a good education and with my intention to use them to help improve students' life chances - especially students from deprived areas (as suggested by Marsh and Kleitman, 2002; Eccles et al., 2003; Shulruf, Tumen and Tolley, 2008; Blomfield and Barber, 2011; Chan, 2016).

Despite this recent government initiative, the impact of extracurricular activities in schools is scarcely explored by UK education researchers, especially its provision within the state sector. It may be a long-standing tradition that extracurricular opportunities are offered as a part of the students' education within a private school, but this does not seem to be the case in the state sector. In the survey conducted in 2015 to students aged 14-18, Demos commissioned a study which reported students who attended fee-paying schools were more than twice as likely to have opportunities to partake in extracurricular activities (Birdwell, Scott and Koninckx, 2015). In state education, extracurricular activities seem to be treated as a temporary intervention, rather than a significant aspect of student education. In addition to the fact that extracurricular provision is limited in the UK, it is also an under-researched area in the UK (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Fundamentally, American researchers dominate the area of extracurricular activities (Blomfield and Barber, 2010). This might be due to its significance in their own education system, since students are required to engage with extracurricular activities in order to graduate from high school (Honoré, 2008).

There is an even more limited scope of research based on academic extracurricular activities specifically. Arts seems to involve music and drama, but it is difficult to discern from the research what is truly meant by academic extracurricular activities – there seems to be a greater focus on academic co-curricular activities for example extra tutoring or class-teacher support within a particular subject (Shulruf, Tumen and Tolley, 2008). In contrast, there seems to be a much larger focus on the impact of sports activities and their impact of the students' social and academic outcomes. Interestingly, this predominance within literature positively correlates with its dominance within schools both in the US and the UK (Eccles and Barber, 1999; Fredricks and Eccles, 2006).

Even though the activities are attended on a voluntary basis, staff's inherent selection process cannot be ignored (Quiroz, Gonzalez and Frank, 1996; McNeal, 1998; Lehman and Dumais, 2017). For sports activities, these selections are more likely to be based on the student's physical skill. Snyder and Spreitzer (1990) and McNeal (1998) note that maintained involvement with the sporting activities does demand students to maintain acceptable academic outcomes also. This might be true for the American system, which accounts for the focus on academic co-curricular activities. However, in Eden High, students are selected solely on their sporting ability. Further problems associated with the UK student's academic outcomes arise, since they would be expected to repeatedly engage with these activities and (unlike the American system) miss lessons for matches, thus consistently interfering with their progress (Heckman and Neal, 1996). This approach defeats the academic objective of extracurricular participation, for a 'once relevant [student] identity' as a popular athlete to become futile in adulthood (Kort-Butler and Hageman, 2010).

To contrast this selection process, especially in relation to academic co-curricular activities in Eden High, students are selected based on their academic shortcomings and they are

strongly encouraged, if not forced, to consistently attend these classes for extra support. This approach has the potential to negatively affect the students' academic outcomes in the long term, because it is an, in the students' perspective, undue extension of the school day. Thus, if the distinction between academic co-curricular and extracurricular activities is not made by the school, students themselves may avoid all extra academic activities altogether.

Considering all of this and due to the focus on maintaining the HPA students' literacy and numeracy outcomes at Eden High, coupled with my role as an English teacher, I have decided to focus on the impact of an academic extracurricular activity on the students' engagement in English classrooms.

### **3. What are the benefits of student participation in extracurricular activities?**

Sociologists began the exploration of the role of extracurricular activities in the 1960s, followed by economists in 1970s and in the last couple of decades, psychologists have made a substantial contribution to the field and have focused on the developmental aspects of activity participation and their impact on students over time (Feldman-Farb and Matjasko, 2012). Among all of these schools of thought, the benefits attributed to student involvement in extracurricular activities cannot be ignored; they continue to be discovered. These benefits range from: increased student self-esteem and motivation; cognitive developments; academic and social developments; and cultural literacy benefits. For the purpose of this essay, I will explore the academic and the social benefits, since these directly link to the students' engagement within the English classroom.

## **Academic benefits**

This section is more specifically focused on student academic achievement and students' cultural capital.

The most significant postulation made in Pierre Bourdieu's famous cultural reproduction theory is that cultural capital is a scarce but important resource, possessed by families and passed down by parents to young individuals, which contributes to their education success (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu goes on to suggest that cultural capital provides the skills and knowledge students require, but he also elusively argues that cultural capital provides a set of cultural rules (Sullivan, 2002), which when known, enable the students to effectively navigate and operate within the educational system and be rewarded for this. This pioneering work instigated an investigation into whether students were able to acquire 'new' cultural capital (e.g., Kisida, Greene and Bowen, 2014), since it suggested a fixed nature of cultural capital's impact on individuals with a high SES. Lamont and Lareau (1988) further argue that cultural capital allows 'individuals who have knowledge of institutionalised high-status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials) to exclude other from advantaged social positions (as cited in Jæger, 2011). Thus, cultural capital and the lack thereof has the potential to limit socially and economically deprived students, like those who attend Eden High, from attaining their aspirations and from attaining academic success. This is particularly distressing since students who are academically brilliant have the potential to be excluded from these opportunities by their peers, teachers and institutions, because they are not privy to the 'rules of the game' (Bowles and Gintis, 1976 as cited in Eitle and Eitle, 2002; Covay and Carbonaro, 2010; Lehman and Dumais, 2017).

This sense of hopelessness concerning low SES students established by this static nature attributed to a students' cultural capital, which seems to promote poverty, justifies my

exploration of extracurricular activities' role in allowing students from these backgrounds to develop their cultural capital. To contrast Bourdieu's theory, DiMaggio (1982) argues in favour of a cultural mobility model in which cultural capital is thought to benefit all children. He elaborates this idea by suggesting that children with low SES have a greater incentive to invest in their cultural capital to compensate for their disadvantage in other domains. Kisida, Greene and Bowen (2014) support this cultural mobility model in their study as they found that students with lower SES exhibited a higher presence for cultural consumption than students with high SES. They suggest that students from disadvantaged backgrounds develop this appetite for refining their cultural capital to counterbalance the influences of their family background. This study explored the impact of students' involvement in a school-based art museum's educational programme, and they highlight the significant role schools can play in enabling students to develop their cultural capital through providing opportunities for students to engage with culturally 'high-brow' activities.

School-based involvement seems to be just as necessary as parental involvement in developing students' (disadvantaged students more specifically) cultural capital. Educational research also supports schools developing academic support and interventions 'after the school bell rings' (Covay and Carbonaro, 2010) that are carefully targeted to better support the educational success of all young people irrespective of their socioeconomic background (Lareau, 2003; Morris, 2015; Benner, Boyle and Sadler, 2016). It can be argued that the inherent correlation between low socioeconomic status and low prior attainment and achievement found in educational research, further highlights the desperate need for teachers, researchers and policy makers to take notice of the students who are deprived, but academically able. *Symposium* is an attempt to provide these students with an opportunity to engage with 'high-brow' literature, have more experience communicating with adults and engaging with activities and spaces that may spark a

genuine interest in engaging with their English lessons and the world around them more deeply.

Upon first glance, it is assumed (generally by Senior Leadership in schools) that extracurricular activities have the potential to distract students from focusing on their grades, which would in turn have a negative effect on the student's future and the school's community and countywide reputation (Heckman and Neal, 1996). However, Stearns and Glennie (2010) concluded, contrary to this intuition, that schools that provide more extracurricular activities have more students committed to and regularly attending the activities offered in the school, which tends to result in students developing both their academic and non-academic skills, which are both useful in school and long after they have completed school. Thus, extracurricular activities have the potential to help students become and remain more academically engaged, which will in turn enhance a school's academic profile.

Morris (2015) argues that extracurricular activities have the potential to reduce the achievement gap between students from advantaged and disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Marsh and Kleitman (2002) develop this idea further in their particularly comprehensive study, which investigates the extracurricular provision and participation in a variety of schools, with students from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. They argue that extracurricular activities benefit socioeconomically disadvantaged students more than advantaged students because these students are less likely to engage with and benefit from the traditional curriculum. Birdwell, Scott and Koninckx (2015) considered a variety of extracurricular activity types, and seemed to place emphasis on the significance of uniformed activities more specifically. Despite the view purported by Morris (2015), this study found that FSM students reported being at least 10% less likely to partake in extracurricular activities in comparison to their non-FSM counterparts.

Shulruf, Tumen and Tolley (2008) in their study on one large school in New Zealand, which offered a variety of 66 types of extracurricular activities, found that students involved in team sports activities were likely to improve their attitude to and achievement in literacy. But these miniscule statistical findings still contribute to the overarching concept purported in research literature that the academic benefits of participation are undeniable. Cooper et al. (1999) found that the more time students spent in structured extracurricular activities resulted in a reduction in time spent in front of the television and were associated with better school grades. Gerber (1996) found that student participation in extracurricular activities is related to academic achievement, but more so for white students who engage with activities sponsored by the school (cited in Marsh and Kleitman, 2002). Marsh and Kleitman (2002) agree that students' involvement with a variety of activity types does result in an improvement in student outcomes; however, they found that student participation in academic clubs has the most consistently positive effect on students' outcomes. Camacho and Fuligni (2015) encourage us to be wary of excessive participation, since students who participate in six or more activities would experience a decline in their academic motivation, thus affecting their engagement in school or class.

Having said this, the academic benefits cannot be measured in their totality, since the benefits of this involvement has the potential to span right into the students' adult life (Stearns and Glennie, 2010; Besjes-de Bock and Ruyter, 2011). Secondly, it is difficult to truthfully verify that extracurricular activities are the *cause* of better academic outcomes; it is more accurate to suggest that participation in these activities are closely associated with better academic outcomes (Morris, 2015; Stearns and Glennie, 2010). Also, research generally attempts to provide quantitative data based on the impact extracurricular activities have had on the students' grades. Thus, it is difficult to understand how the

students' participation has impacted their academic development (e.g., Gershonson, 2013; Chan, 2016).

As can be seen from the literature review above, there is insufficient research on the different components that make up the activity; the students' experience of these elements and the time spent participating in these activities. As a result of this gap in literature, I endeavour to explore the impact of the different elements (presentation evening; individual session topics; inviting speakers; inter-school relations etc.) of *Symposium* and discover whether there are particular aspects that the students engaged with more. This has the potential to help to steer practitioners towards a particular direction when they are planning their extracurricular provision.

### **Social benefits**

This section focuses on the impact participation in extracurricular activities can have on students' self-esteem and relationships with other peers and teachers.

Holland and Andre's (1987) traditional yet significant critical literature review explores the methodological approaches and findings of 30 American research literatures on the academic, personal and social impacts of student participation in extracurricular activities.

This review was to highlight what was already known about extracurricular activities to potentially influence policy decisions, but also establish the areas that still needed further research. They suggest that extracurricular activities do not only contribute to the development of students' academic ability, but that the school's provision of extracurricular activities seems to affect a student's social development, influencing personality development and socialisation more specifically (p. 437).

Coleman (1961) posits that during adolescence, peers determine a student's standard of acceptance. As a development of this, Phillips (1969) found that students who participated

in activities that were highly regarded and well noticed by peers were more likely to experience increased self-esteem (Terenzini, Pascarella and Blimling, 1996). With closer inspection, it seems as though student involvement in non-academic activities tends to have a positive correlation with physical and motivational self-esteem, but they would experience a reduction in their intellectual self-esteem (Dowell et al., 1972). However, the recent focus on children's perspective of their mental health and well being in the UK challenges this. The *Good Childhood Report* by the Children's Society (2017), which surveyed over 30,000 children aged 8-17 across England, highlights that students from 2013-2015 (females more specifically) are significantly happier with their school work. Even though this study did not address the impact of extracurricular activities explicitly, it can be argued that Dowell et al.'s forty-year-old US findings do apply to young people in the UK today.

Even though little research has been done on the specific impacts of academic extracurricular activities, students may potentially develop their intellectual and motivational self-esteem, but it is difficult to know. Chan's study of 131 business students in Hong Kong (2016), found that students who are more engaged with the extracurricular activity, are more likely to enjoy an increased sense of accomplishment, competence and self-esteem. Chan also suggested that students should be recognised for their involvement in these activities through awards ceremonies held by colleges to acknowledge their achievements. This is an especially significant idea, which we incorporated in the *Symposium* model, because the presentation evening is an opportunity for the students to present their work, but also be acknowledged for their academic ability with a certificate. However, this presentation evening might not be enough. Chan's research highlights that these awards might best be given in front of the whole school as this might raise the profile of the programme as well as the students' involvement and self esteem.

Research does not only suggest that various types of extracurricular activities have a positive effect on a students' self-esteem, but they also seem to have a positive effect on the students' relationships with their peers and their teachers. The most significant finding highlighted in Camacho and Fuligni's (2015) research on immigrant students' involvement in extracurricular activities, is that it has the potential to develop the students' social capital and improve their knowledge and understanding of the American school system. This presents a link between the extracurricular participation and the students' sense of belonging to the school, since the students' ties with other students and teachers would be strengthened (Stearns and Glennie, 2009).

According to the social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), this new and improved sense of belonging has the potential to improve the students' behavioural development. Although 'belonging' seems to be a rather ambiguous term, it has been identified as a significant component for academic success, because it has been linked with positive social behaviours, which in effect decrease delinquent behaviour and low attendance (Battistich and Hom 1997; Gonzalez and Padilla 1997; Calabrese and Poe 1990; Finn, 1989).

#### **4. What barriers inhibit the efficacy of extracurricular activities?**

Lack of involvement discussed in this section is based on a student's failure to participate in an extracurricular activity throughout their secondary school career. Based on the previous section, it is clear that there is a lot of evidence to show that extracurricular activities have a positive impact on student outcomes and has the potential to positively influence the students' perception of themselves and their connection to the school (Darling, 2005).

Notwithstanding, there are still students, staff and schools who do not fully engage with extracurricular activities. These cannot be viewed as disadvantages per se, but there are certainly barriers that prevent people having consistent engagement with these activities.

Non-participation is certainly an area that practitioners and researchers need to explore further (Feldman and Matjasko, 2005), since it is starkly clear that extracurricular activity are generally viewed positively (Eccles and Barber, 1999), but it can be argued that not enough is being done to expose, encourage and assert the importance of student participation.

### **Barriers to school engagement with extracurricular activities**

Feldman and Matjasko (2005) assert that student non-participation is largely due to the insufficient availability of these activities within schools. Stearns and Glennie (2010) argue that one of the reasons for this deficiency is the pressure it has the potential to place on funding. Thus, schools are restricting their transport provision and are not paying external speakers to come in (which have the potential to inspire student involvement (Sniezek, 2005)) and they are also unable to provide the range of activities that may pique the interests of a variety of students.

Although urban and suburban schools tend to offer a relatively similar number of extracurricular activities (Guest, 2016; Stearns and Glennie, 2009), there is a tendency for the quality of the extracurricular provision to depend on the 'community, ecological, and cultural contexts of participation' (Guest, 2016; Vandell et al., 2015). Thus, schools with more money per student are more likely to spend more on extracurricular activities, which to some extent clarifies one of the reasons why private schools may offer a more extensive and comprehensive range of quality extracurricular activities. This is especially true for the private sector in the UK where they are able to offer twice as many extracurricular activities based on the financial and human resources in comparison to the state sector (Birdwell, Scott and Koninckx, 2015). Interestingly contrary to this, despite funding pressures, the Senior Leadership Team at Eden High encourages the extension of extracurricular activity provision within the school, rather than decrease it. This may be the case, because of the

school's 'developmental position', which 'stresses that school programs should provide experiences that further the total development of individual students' (Holland and Andre, 1987).

Despite the obvious benefits of the extracurricular activities, the schools (state schools more specifically) may be potentially less inclined to engage and invest in extracurricular activities due to the pressures of national exams (Guest, 2016; Stearns and Glennie, 2009). Holland and Andre (1987) conclude that if (American) schools hold an academic perspective, they are less inclined to offer and promote extracurricular activities, because they 'provide a means of relaxation and fun' (p. 438). This seems to be a rather flippant dismissal of the potential rigour associated with academic extracurricular activities, especially since the authors seem to defend the 'importance' of 'non-academic' programs. Stearns and Glennie (2009) also concede that schools can view extracurricular activities as an 'extravagance' because of the imminent need for students to pass their exams and access opportunities in the future (p. 307). Arguably, the time commitment required of these extracurricular activities could detract from the time spent on curriculum based study, within and outside of school. Thus schools become less inclined to promote student involvement and, more specifically, teachers discourage student participation to protect student grades. Sports activities tend to have the largest amount of participation (Stearns and Glennie, 2009). Further to this, these sports activities are likely to infringe on particular students' curriculum time, which may cause school leaders to limit unrestrained involvement in these activities.

One of the greatest deterrents for staff in relation to supporting the provision of extracurricular activities is time (Whiteley and Richard, 2012). Upon examining the workload of secondary English teachers in Canada, Naylor and Field (2001) found that approximately 40 per cent of English teachers withdrew from participating in extracurricular

activities during term time. There are great expectations placed on teachers from parents, students, the school leadership and even the government at large, to produce and provide quality lessons, accurate assessments and a safe and nurturing learning environment, that teachers struggle to cope with an extra activity that will place a further strain on their already limited time. Further, with high stakes national exams, this pressure would intensify. Generally, Whiteley and Richard (2012) discovered that secondary teachers who teach core subjects are less likely to offer and supervise extracurricular activities due to time constraints. Despite this being a study carried out in Canada, it can be argued that the pressures on teachers who teach core subjects is the same in the UK, which may explain the reason why there are more option subject teachers running extracurricular activities in Eden High, than core subject teachers. Furthermore, the frequency and intensity of these extracurricular activities are important to consider, since it would be unreasonable to expect the same teachers to run the same extracurricular activities for the whole academic year.

### **Barriers to student engagement with extracurricular activities**

It is possible that the students' academic ability has the potential to prevent them from accessing some of the extracurricular activities within the school. Sastre I Riba et al. (2015) use quantitative analysis to assess the satisfaction of students of high intellectual ability and their parents who are involved in a science based extracurricular activity. Although this research highlights the importance of practitioners evaluating the quality of these activities, it also shows that there are programmes that are suited for a specific group of students (Van Tassel-Baska, Quek and Feng, 2006). It is difficult to view student selection process as punitive discrimination, since there are instances, much like Eden High, where a specific group of students require a certain element of support, because the context has failed to appropriately address their needs. While in Zion High, according to David, the sheer multitude of students with high intellectual ability, resulted in an application process in order to select the 'top' students who would eventually be selected to be involved

in *Symposium* – ‘a very exclusive programme’. In this instance, the school’s context does determine the stringent nature of these academic preconditions.

The family’s socioeconomic background also has the potential to affect student participation. Stearns and Glennie (2009) suggest that students who are from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) are likely to struggle to participate in these activities (O’Brien and Rollefson, 1995), not just because of limited facilities and resources in schools, but also because of pressures at home. Students with low SES are less likely to partake in activities in comparison to children with high SES, because they are less likely to cope with the possible direct costs of activities. Additionally, children may not be able to engage with these activities, due to the indirect costs associated with this involvement, such as extra paid work or not being available for caring for their younger siblings. Generally, students with high SES are more likely to be encouraged and supported by their parents with their involvement in extracurricular activities (Stearns and Glennie, 2009; Lareau, 2003).

In order for these activities to continue to have a positive impact, it is important to be aware of the barriers, which cause students to refrain from being involved in extracurricular activities.

Following this research, I have decided to explore these following research questions:

1. Does *Symposium* impact student engagement in English classrooms and if so, how?
2. To what extent can *Symposium* be considered an effective academic extracurricular activity?
3. How does the design of *Symposium* begin to address barriers to participation in extracurricular activities in schools?

## Methodology

The current study is a qualitative evaluation of an extracurricular activity called *Symposium*. A typical *Symposium* session happens after school either in the school or in the partner school. Before the learning begins, the students have refreshments and time to socialise with the students from both schools; the teachers and the speakers involved. Following this the speaker introduces themselves and the key ideas they intend to explore. The speakers then encourage the students to discuss and create an example of the key ideas in pairs or groups. As mentioned in the introduction, these sessions last 1.5 hours and usually culminate in an opportunity for students to share what they have created in the session. Before the students leave, David, Esther (the teacher within my department who I collaborated with) and I remind the students of the presentation evening and share a few ways the ideas explored in that session could be connected to ideas from previous sessions and presented. Even though there is not a specific seating plan, they must sit with students from different schools and year groups.

Even though across the two schools there was a total of twenty students who attended all of the *Symposium* sessions, I have only collected and evaluated data from the ten students who attend Eden High. Four of these students are in year seven and there are three students from year eight and nine. I collected a variety of data from the students, which included a pre and post questionnaire, a blob tree evaluation of their experience before and after each session and a group interview with the year seven and nine students to help clarify and develop some of their comments on the previous data collected. I also interviewed the three members of staff at Eden High who lead a *Symposium* session, the two teachers I collaborated with and a member of the Senior Leadership Team at Eden High.

## Practitioner research

'We are writing it as teachers, with teachers, for teachers, whether they are in training, beginning their career or established crafts people' (Burton and Bartlett, 2004, p. 2).

Practitioner research is a strand of research that attempts to bridge the gap between Academic Educational Research and the practice within the context of an individual school or classroom. Hargreaves (1996) challenged the research in Education that existed and called for teachers to actively engage with research and to use evidence from it to inform their own practice. Hargreaves (1996) encourages a quantitative research approach and Hammersley (2002) and Elliot (2001) speculated that Hargreaves' approach was completely devoid of the inquiring approach that teachers need to take concerning education. I believe teacher's research should be more reflective. Despite the understandable time constraints associated with reading and conducting research, it is important for teachers to at least engage with practitioner research for their own professional and teaching development (Dadds and Hart, 2001).

One of the greatest challenges of practitioner research, especially the qualitative type, is the fact that it can be perceived as subjective and changeable. Therefore, it is not regarded in such high esteem as longitudinal quantitative academic research carried out on a bigger scale. If conducted without self-awareness, honesty and reflection, practitioner research can become superfluous.

Despite this challenge, the close correlation between practitioner research and my own professional development continues to motivate me to pursue this style of research in this project. Since my research group consists of ten students in total, it would be illogical to pursue a predominantly quantitative research method, because the percentages would be misleading. Additionally, both Bryson (2014) and Guest (2016) imply that quantitative research methods produce limited data concerning student engagement and

extracurricular activities respectively. This qualitative approach is also significant, because it enables me to engage with the students' evaluations of the project and its impact on their learning – closed questioning common to quantitative research would have prevented this. Thus, it is important to gain the students' insight on how the extracurricular activity has impacted their engagement in lesson - it would not be wise to seek the teachers' or even the parents' perspectives alone. Furthermore, student and staff testimonials on the *Symposium* are instrumental to the annual review and longevity of and student and staff inclination to participate in the project.

Ultimately, practitioner research seems to be the most effective research style to use in this case, because it provides the ability to collaborate with other professionals within my school and gain a deeper insight to student perspectives.

## **Participants**

Initially, David and I thought it would be more productive to make the project exclusively available to students in year seven and eight, so they would begin to consider University as an option available to them at an early stage in their school careers. This was an idea, which arose from our evaluations of the previous year, because the older students seemed set in their decision not to attend University and seemed to question the relevance of the knowledge explored in *Symposium*.

Despite our initiative to involve younger participants, in reality, it was very difficult to just obtain committed student participants from year seven and eight in my school. Looking solely at the HPA registers for these year groups, there are twenty-nine students in year eight (two of whom were involved in the programme) and only four students in year seven (three of whom were involved in the programme). Voluntary participation meant it was even more difficult to encourage all of these students to be involved. From this, I became

aware that I had failed to truly advertise *Symposium* successfully at Eden High, based on the previous year. But also, it is fair to say that the cohort at my school are generally not as willing to commit to extracurricular activities in general, because it seems like 'a lot of hard work' (said by a student who refused the invitation to participate).

To counter this, I invited two, year nine HPA students from my class who had enthusiastically asked to be a part of the project at the beginning of the year, based on the verbal testimonials shared by student participants from the previous year.

The remaining three students who were keen to be involved in the project are not on the HPA register. We could not be too hasty to allow these students on to the programme, because Esther and I questioned whether the students would be able to cope with the undergraduate level of work. Dorcas is a Low Prior Attaining (LPA) student in the bottom set of year eight; Abraham is an EAL (English as an Additional Language) student in the top set of year nine and Anna is a middle prior attaining student who is in the top set of year seven. Esther and I used considerations from the class teachers, to support our decision to include these students on the programme. We realised that based on the students' potential, they would value a unique opportunity such as this to be exposed to and engage with challenging work. Despite my research title, I had to fulfil my responsibility as a teacher to set high expectations which motivate and challenge all students.

As well as the four external speakers involved in the programme, three of the staff participants are in the English department at Eden High volunteered to lead a *Symposium* session. In addition to the students named above, I have used these pseudonyms to also protect the teachers' identities: Rachel, Timothy and Jacob. The staff members were briefed on the way to lead the sessions and were also given an informed

verbal explanation of the Masters investigation. Their responses will contribute as a form of data triangulation.

The reliability of practitioner research can be challenging to control, since both the staff and the students may feel pressured to be involved in the investigation and afraid to share their true views, because of my close connection to the activity and the project. As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2013) suggest it would be 'unwise to think that threats to validity and reliability can ever be erased completely', but the threats can be 'attenuated' (p. 105). I sent a whole department email asking the teachers whether they wanted to be involved. I hoped that the email would depersonalise the request, thus addressing the risk of teachers feeling pressured to be involved in the programme. I used open questioning during the teacher interviews and I urged the teachers during the debrief that their honest and constructive professional opinions were necessary to review the efficacy of *Symposium*.

For the students I decided to attempt a similar freedom of choice. Both Esther and I went into the top and second set, year seven and eight English Lessons and informed them about *Symposium* and the academic research. Esther's presence in these talks helped to distinguish my identity as an independent research, while she maintained her identity as a teacher and leader of *Symposium*. This distinction was more viable for the year seven and year eight students, because these students were not aware of the project when it first ran and I had never taught these classes before.

The final way I tried to preserve the reliability of my data was by not leading the *Symposium* sessions. This distance would aid my desire to be perceived as a researcher as well as an English Teacher. Despite all of these efforts, the small participant group and close proximity in which these students had to me, it would be difficult to generalise the data to be a reflection of all students' views of *Symposium*.

## Methods

I have included a Methods Timeline, because it is important to see the trajectory of my data collection. In order to develop a more detailed understanding of the impact *Symposium* has had on these students, I have decided to triangulate a variety of different method types to gain a deeper insight into the impact the project had on the students. Just to reiterate, every name of students, teachers or schools used is a pseudonym, these are used intentionally to ensure the confidentiality of all of the participants.

### Methods Timeline

#### ***Student selection process complete***

1. Ethical clearance letters submitted and returned when appropriate

#### ***Symposium begins***

2. Student questionnaire before the programme starts
3. Blob Tree image for students to identify their views before and after the session
4. Three staff interviews after their *Symposium* sessions

#### ***Symposium sessions complete***

5. Student questionnaire after the programme is complete
6. Interview with David – collaborative teacher from Zion High
7. Interview with Esther – collaborative teacher and also the classroom teacher of the Year 7 participants
8. Interview with Naomi – member of the Senior Leadership Team

#### ***After the presentation evening***

9. Group student interviews to gain a deeper insight into their responses on the questionnaire and the Blob Tree.

## Questionnaires

The questionnaires are both predominantly closed statements with an ordinal data scale.

The first questionnaire consists of eight statements with a scale from 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' (see Appendix C). I included one open-ended question on this questionnaire, because I wanted to gain information about the students' interest in the English curriculum offered in the school. Primarily, this was

because the students had opted to be involved in an academic extracurricular. These questionnaires were created based on the PISA survey on 'A Sense of Belonging and Participation'. Instead of asking the intrusive questions about the students' feelings, I centred my statements on the measurable ways in which the students engaged with their English lessons: reading, writing, asking and answering questions etc.

However, the post questionnaire consists of twelve questions and I changed 'neutral' to 'nothing has changed' (see Appendix D). This phrase change was important at this stage, because I wanted to clarify the areas in which the students were unaffected by the programme. Additionally, extra questions were added to the final questionnaire, because I wanted to garner information about how the participants found *Symposium* itself. Five open questions were added to this questionnaire to establish a more detailed understanding of what the students enjoyed about *Symposium* and how they believed it could be improved. To avoid students feeling compelled to criticise members of the department, questions focused on the students' favourite session, leaving the least favourite to be discussed during the group interviews.

It would have been impractical to pilot the questionnaires with the students themselves, due to time restrictions and the necessity to preserve the integrity of the data. Instead, I asked another teacher on the Masters course who understands the nature of my research reviewed my questions to ensure the questionnaire was appropriate and comprehensive enough for the task. Despite maintaining anonymity in this assignment, the students completed these questionnaires with names clearly marked on them.

## **Blob Tree**

This is a more unique way to collect data from the students created by Pip Wilson and Ian Long in the 1990s. The purpose of this resource was to ensure people of any age were able

to express their feelings and emotions. The Blob Tools, which are usually used for counselling purposes within and outside of the classroom for people aged 5 up to 95 (Wilson, 2003), consists of a variety of blob trees that depict a group of genderless, colourless blobs performing activities or posing to reflect an emotion (see Appendix B). The tree is used to ensure the resources are not restricted to a particular context and the blobs are just expressing a variety of emotions without words and the student can interpret these in any way (Wilson, 2003).

I decided to give the students a sheet with the blob tree on it to record their feelings before and after each of the six sessions (see Appendix B). On these sheets, the students were supposed to label their options 'red' to for the beginning of the session and 'green' for the end of the session, so I could differentiate their feelings at each moment. In an attempt to avoid too much misinterpretation of the data, I also included a box at the bottom of the sheet where the students were expected to write a sentence to explain their emotions with some more depth.

The greatest advantage of this research method is that it is a quick, fun and accessible way to collect data from the students about the way their feelings progressed over the course of the project.

In aid the analysis process, I organised the response sheets in order of the sessions. Due to student absences from school or *Symposium*, I collected 54/60 blob sheets.

## **Interviews**

### ***Teacher interviews***

To gain the teachers' perspective of *Symposium* I conducted informal interviews. I interviewed Rachel, Timothy and Jacob, the three teachers who had been involved in

leading *Symposium* sessions. Their involvement helped me to consider the school-wide barriers to extracurricular activities within the school, more particularly in relation to teacher-time and their ultimate focus on KS4 and KS5 students' academic outcome.

These interviews were conducted individually and they took about 20 minutes. Teachers were asked to come to me when they felt they had the time to spare, but I encouraged them that it would be beneficial to have the interview quite closely after their session, so that the details required to respond to the questions were still fresh in their memory. These interviews occurred the day after the teachers' respective session. It seemed that since these teachers had volunteered to be a part of the project, they were keen to be involved in sharing their views about the project in an interview.

These interviews were much more conversational than the student interviews. Even though the questions were predetermined, I was able to organically move through the questions as a continuation of their responses - so the order in which the questions were asked varied in relation to the teacher I spoke to. There were six questions in total and they are generally based on the teacher's involvement with the project, their views of the students' engagement in the session and perspective of the extracurricular activity as a whole (see Appendix E). The interview-guide approach I used, meant the teacher was able to raise other ideas to consider in relation to extracurricular provision in our school context, which helped with my review of *Symposium*.

In the same way as these teacher interviews, I also interviewed Naomi, a Senior Leader. I used a different set of six questions in this informal interview, which facilitated a discussion about the project in relation to the wider school context. (see Appendix F).

To transcribe these interviews, I hand wrote their responses. To ensure the teachers felt they were being appropriately represented, I read back the responses I wrote down. This also helped to build the trust between us within the interview.

### ***Student Interviews***

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the students' perspectives of *Symposium* and its impact on their engagement in English, I conducted two separate group interviews with the year seven and the year nine students respectively (seven students in total). These interviews were conducted in the break out space – renowned as a student space in my school. These interviews were conducted separately to reduce the amount of information the students held back. Especially in relation to the intimidating presence the older students may have had.

The purpose of the interview was to develop my understanding of some of the students' questionnaire responses, their blob tree responses and also to ask further questions about their experience preparing for and since their presentation. More generally, the interviews helped to solidify the qualitative nature of this research, which directly contrasts the quantitative studies published in relation to student engagement and extracurricular activities explored in the literature review.

As argued by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2013), interviews are 'expensive' in time and so I decided to conduct a group interview and ask individual students about particular responses they gave in their questionnaires. Additionally, this method helped to bring together the different views and experiences the students had. The interviews I conducted were an adaptation of the standardised open-ended interviews. The interview questions were pre-determined and they were a mix of questions for the group and questions for individual students (Appendices I & J). I addressed the limitation of group interviews identified by

Patton (1980) by creating questions that were targeted at particular students, it meant that we overcame one of the weakness of asking specific questions to individuals within the group (as cited Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2013). For the general questions, I accepted students giving group responses where appropriate; I accepted students declining to answer a question they found uncomfortable and I also asked follow up questions and employed active listening techniques to ensure the interview style was more conversational.

I arranged a convenient time with the students as a group to avoid inconvenience. I explained the scribing method: typing their responses on my laptop as they spoke, to encourage them to speak one at a time and to avoid the dominant students commanding the interview. Since it is inevitable to lose data by any format other than video recording, I decided to transcribe the student responses. To avoid completely distancing myself from the students, I tried to maintain eye contact with the students while I was note-taking.

### **Data analysis**

I established a chronological paper and digital filing system, based on the types of methods used to collect the data, to aid my data analysis process. By doing this, I was able to pursue an iterative process of interpretation, which is common to qualitative research, since it is difficult to wait to the end of the collection process before interpreting the date (in fact, interpretation is an inherent process that occurs throughout the process).

Dey (1993) identifies a more detailed descriptive approach: 'thorough description', which involves the researcher's consideration and exploration of the contexts (the social setting in which the setting takes place); research and participant's intentions (the communication of the researcher and participant's motivations for responses or interpretations) and the research process (considering the trajectory of the data collection process). This style was

certainly significant for the first stage of my data analysis, so I could create pertinent questions to gain a deeper understanding of the students' responses.

Following this, to develop my mode of data analysis within the assignment and avoid being too descriptive, I used the research questions to form three general categories to group the data I collected. I then allowed key concepts within the data to establish sub categories to explore the data further. For example: the data related to the 'efficacy of extracurricular activities', I considered the 'academic' and 'social' benefits in line with the sub-headings in my literature review. This also helps me to establish a clear way to present my findings.

Categorising helps me to draw close connections between the data collected from the teachers and students that only closely relates to the focus of this study: the efficacy of the extracurricular activity and the impact of the activity of the students' engagement.

## **Ethics**

In consideration of the ethical issues that may arise from conducting this social science research, I completed a CUREC form detailing all of the ethical precautions I took in order to ensure all of the participants were able to give consent from an informed position. Only once I had received ethical approval did I collect any data for this research.

I requested written consent from the Head Teacher of Eden High to conduct this research within the school (see Appendix K) and to request the permission from parents and students involved (see Appendix L). I gave the students and their respective parents both a full written and a verbal explanation of the potential research methods, purpose of my project and the different aspects of the project that would require their involvement. Students and parents were given opt-out letters. None of the students or the parents submitted opt-out reply slips.

To avoid the selected students feeling pressurised, I made it very clear from the outset that their refusal to be involved in the research would not affect their involvement with *Symposium*. I recognise this was a significant caveat to address with the students and parents, so they would not feel coerced. I also assured the students that they were welcome to withdraw from the research project at any stage of the year.

It can be argued that in the case of the power dynamic in each interview, I could be considered the more powerful party, because I created the project and the resources used to carry out the research and I would be expected to have a lot of knowledge and possibly even an emotional investment into the project (Kvale, 1996; J Cassell cited in Lee, 1993). However, I trust that my close relationships with my colleagues would encourage them to be more honest and not feel obliged to say something they did not mean in an attempt to please me. Similarly, due to the relationship I have with the student participants, which developed over the course of the project, I believe they felt comfortable articulating their honest thoughts during the interview.

Ethically, this research project does not compromise any fundamental ethical principles. In accordance with the details outlined by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2013) this research is 'non-maleficent'. Thus, no damaging implications could arise to harm these participants. The pursuit of this project was done with little emotional and academic cost. The students completed the pre-questionnaire on the coach to the first *Symposium* session and during the extra *Symposium* session the students requested in preparation for the presentation evening. The blob tree resources were filled in before and after the sessions and the group student and individual teacher interviews were conducted during a time that was more suitable for them. Altogether, no participant spent more than an hour engaging with the data collection process.

However, the potential benefits of this research are great – both for current and future students. These benefits are far reaching because of the need for more extracurricular opportunities within Eden High and other state schools within the county. The intention is not only to respond to the OFSTED feedback, but also to give these HPA students access to more challenging English Language, Literature and Media content. It also gives them an opportunity to see external speakers and their English teachers share this challenging content.

Additionally, I assured confidentiality to all participants. I have kept the details of the teachers, students and institutions involved anonymous using pseudonyms (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992). I have also shared micro-aggregate data, which identifies the participants as a whole, as opposed to individual responses. I have also kept all of the student data collected on the school system, which is protected with a security programme set up by the school's IT department. The data I have collected has only been shared with Esther, the teacher I have collaborated with in my school.

This research will be made available to senior members of staff. This report will be accessible to all staff in the English department upon completion and MLT students at The University of Oxford according to the BERA guidelines (BERA, 2011).

## **Collaboration**

Collaboration was a significant part of this research from the outset. There are two tiers of collaboration, which I explore in this section: collaboration with David from Zion High and also with Esther in Eden High. English teachers within the English department were also given the opportunity to engage with the project by leading a session of *Symposium* on a topic of their choice.

Firstly, in order to initiate this process last year, David, the deputy head teacher of teaching and learning at Zion High and I had a meeting about the way we could support the higher prior attaining students within our schools. Our meeting consisted of the structure of the project and the outcomes of the project. Even though our school contexts are starkly different, as explored in the introduction, the purpose and aims we set out to one another were similar. We were creative during this meeting, but we were also keen to begin the project imminently. Every single decision we made for *Symposium* was shared and we also shared administrative communication with guest speakers and with the parents via email to ensure we were working in unison. In order to gain evidence of David's perspective, I conducted an informal, standardised open-ended interview. This interview consisted of eight questions and it was conducted during the final session of *Symposium* (Appendix G). At the beginning of this academic year, we also had a meeting to evaluate *Symposium* in preparation for improvements for this year. This continued communication proved very effective for the seamless supervision of the project.

It was important to have the opportunity to collaborate with another school in the county for the students, the staff and the school. For the students, this collaboration was an opportunity for them to connect with other students who were also interested in English. Students could also develop friendships outside of their own school, visit another school and host students at their own school, which may have given them a sense of pride.

For us as staff, we were able to bring together our own teaching experiences as a means for establishing the best ways to support the students with their learning within *Symposium* and their approach to further education also.

During her interview, Naomi, highlighted that she believed the collaboration between the two schools to be the greatest benefit of *Symposium*:

Q: What do you believe to be the benefits of *Symposium*?

**Naomi:** 'We work in a school for which people have low expectations and a low perception. We rarely do things collaboratively with other schools [...] But it was incredibly valuable to build friendships and work with them and realise they were as bright and capable as the students in this leafy, middle class, high performing school'.

Therefore, for the school as a whole, the collaboration seemed to benefit the school's reputation and contributed to the continued efforts to change the community's perception of the school. Both the local newspaper coverage on *Symposium* and the presentation evening were instrumental in altering the community's perception of Eden High.

Three teachers enthusiastically volunteered to lead a *Symposium* session - two of these teachers decided to collaborate and conduct their session together and the other teacher did the whole session independently. With all of these teachers, I had an informal chat with them about the way their sessions could be structured. Even though they were responsible for the topic they discussed, Esther and I debriefed them that it would be like an undergraduate lecture to ensure the standard of challenge remained high. Further to their involvement, in their interviews they offered ideas for ways *Symposium* could be improved.

The final tier of collaboration for this project was with Esther, an English teacher. Esther is both involved with the student participants, because she teaches a group of them and she also supports with the administrative element of the project. It was very important for me not to make this project synonymous with my presence within the school, so that the project could continue without me. Collaborating with another teacher in the department meant that we could analyse and evaluate the impact the programme was having on the students together. I also gained her perspective of the project through a formal standardised open-ended interview. This interview consisted of nine questions and it was

conducted during an appropriate time of her choice after all of the *Symposium* sessions were over (Appendix H).

## Findings and Discussion

I have included a table to convey the two sets of data from the pre and post questionnaires below. I have done this because I refer to the aggregate data collected from these questionnaires. However, I am also using this information and the data collected from the Blob Tree reflections as a springboard for the students' more detailed responses about the impact of the extracurricular activities on their engagement in lessons and their interest in English in the group interviews.

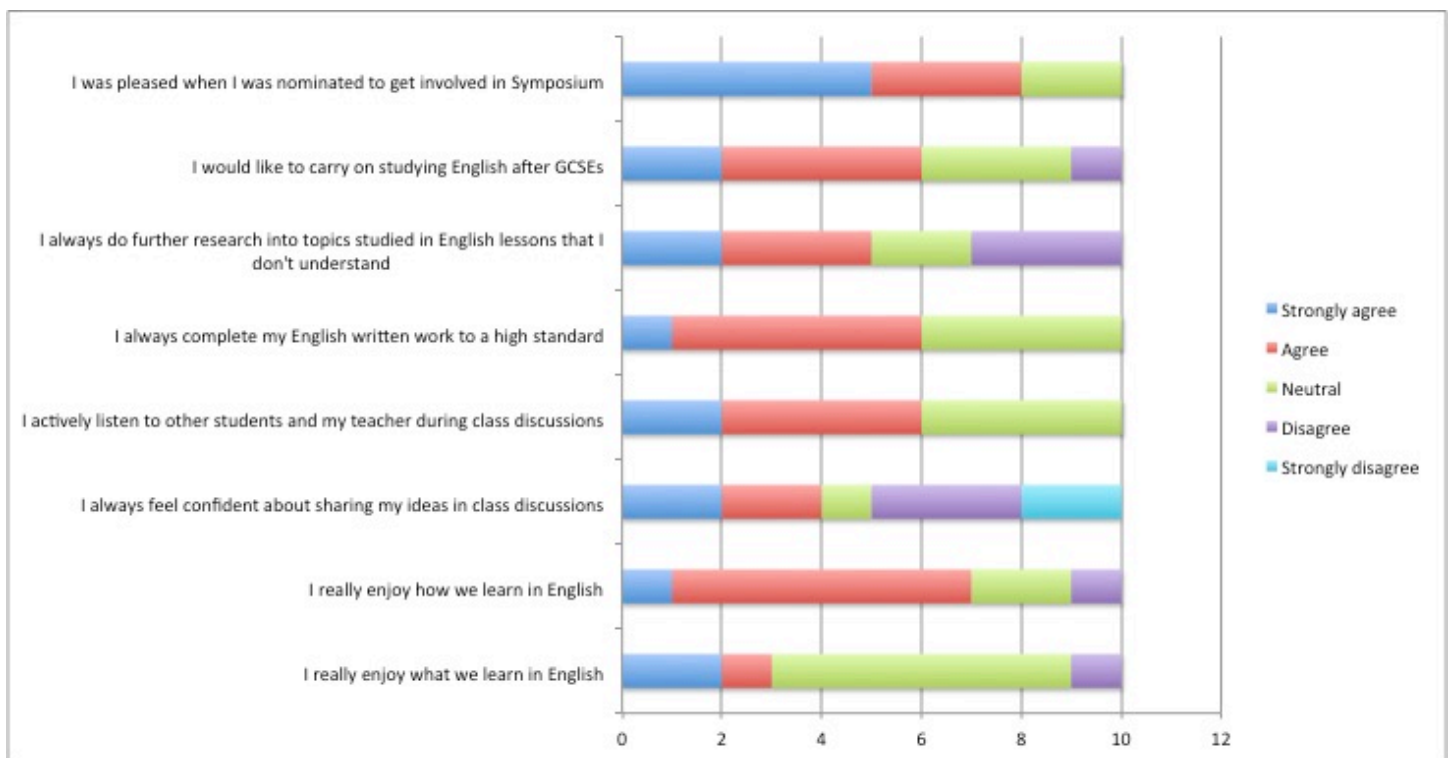


Table 1: Pre-Questionnaire completed by all ten participants at Eden High.

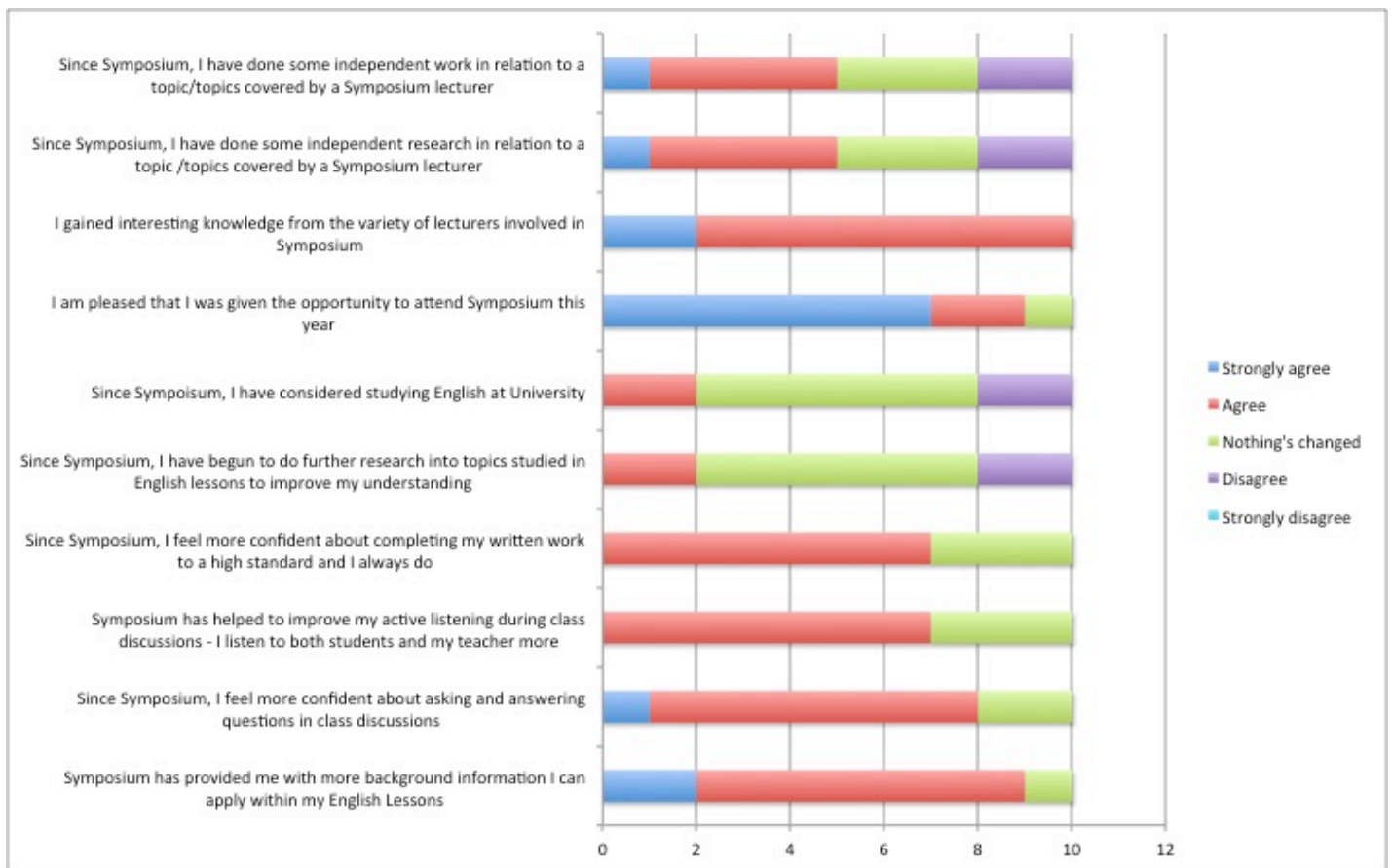


Table 2: Post-Questionnaire completed by all ten participants at Eden High.

### 1. Does *Symposium* impact student engagement in English classrooms and if so, how?

It is possible that the students' involvement in *Symposium* was already enough for them to develop their work within English lessons further. *Symposium* represented a source of their further research. Nine of the students either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that *Symposium* provided them with more background information that they could apply in their English lessons. This is further exemplified by the fact that all of the students expressed how much more they enjoyed what they learnt in English during the interviews.

This finding is especially significant because six of the students were initially 'neutral' about the content they learnt in English.

Q: *Since Symposium, would you say you enjoyed what you learn during your English lessons more or less?*

**YR7 Anna:** 'More! We seem to know what they are about more'

**YR7 Deborah:** 'We feel higher than everyone else –'.

**YR7 Malachi:** 'Yeah; more experienced'.

**YR9 Paul:** 'I think because when we do the sessions we can take a lot of that and put it into our English lessons, so more'.

**YR9 Ruth:** 'I would say more, because I feel I get involved more after *Symposium*'

It is interesting to see that the year seven students speak about themselves as a collective to further solidify their social connection. Additionally, this idea of feeling 'higher than everyone else' is interesting, because they have access to knowledge that makes them feel superior and powerful. This sense of power is significant in relation to a students' cultural capital, because it is the knowledge and the skills that helps individuals (especially those of high SES) to access 'high-brow' culture.

Student involvement in Symposium seems to have had an adverse effect on two students' perception of *how* they learn in English lessons. During the interviews, both Malachi and Paul admitted (although rather reluctantly) that they preferred the way they learnt in *Symposium* more. Only five students chose to respond to this question during the interview. It is possible they would have viewed this as a judgement on the teacher and therefore remained silent.

Q: *Since Symposium, would you say you enjoyed how you learn during your English lessons more or less?*

**YR7 Malachi:** 'I found Symposium better, because we got to do thing, but the thing with normal English lessons, when we are copying from the board, I start not to think well'.

**YR9 Paul:** '...I think because in lessons we normally do questions, but in *Symposium* we did groups and individual and reading and creative writing and so I enjoy that variety more'.

This finding is also significant, because it stimulates further creativity in curriculum design as a way to initiate student engagement in English lessons. It has become clear that developing student engagement within the classroom is more complex than considering the impact of one external factor.

When students were asked to 'name one aspect of *Symposium* in particular that pushes [them] to recommend it to other students', the students responded in relation to their enjoyment, interest and the impact on English lessons:

**YR7 Deborah:** 'Teaches you things and it is fun'.

**YR7 Anna:** 'You can explore other things based on your ideas'.

**YR9 Ruth:** 'It increases your confidence when you're writing and speaking'.

**YR9 Paul:** 'It gives you a better understanding of what you're learning in class'.

Ruth's response does not seem to only be in relation to her engagement within the English class, but in general, which may suggest that their improved engagement in English lessons, has a positive effect on their engagement within other subjects.

In relation to student engagement within the classroom, since *Symposium* students generally report that their writing, listening and speaking within the classroom has improved. Seven students 'agree' that 'since *Symposium* I feel more confident about completing my written work to a high standard and I always do'. Unlike the other students, Abraham who reported a 'neutral' perspective to writing in the classroom is the only student who submitted a piece of writing that directly combined his ideas shared during the philosophy lecture and the literature text being studied in English lessons. Even though

*Symposium* did not have an impact on his approach to writing within the classroom, it helped to develop his interest in the topics studied within the English lessons.

Students also reported an improvement in their speaking and listening skills. Seven students also 'agreed' that '*Symposium* has helped to improve my active listening during class discussion - I listen to both students and my teacher more.' Additionally, eight students either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that '*Symposium* has helped them to feel more confident about asking or answering questions in class discussions.'

Overall, students reported a development in their academic engagement (Finn, 1989). Due to their developed interest in the subject and the wealth of knowledge shared, the students were able to engage more frequently in their English lessons and with greater confidence. The year seven students were able to make a closer connection with one another, which is significant in this situation where their friendships in secondary school are yet to be fully established. Their involvement in *Symposium* also established a sense of pride in their written and their verbal work. Even though it is difficult to translate in this assignment, the students' sheer enthusiasm during the interview, two months after their involvement with the project, is evidence that *Symposium* is an effective extracurricular programme to support HPA students.

## 2. To what extent can *Symposium* be considered an effective academic extracurricular activity?

### *Academic benefits*

After attending all of the sessions, *Symposium* was celebrated by more students.

After *Symposium*, 7 students 'strongly agreed' that they were 'pleased' to have been given the opportunity to be involved in the programme. This is an increase in comparison to the 5 students who 'strongly agreed' that they were 'pleased' to have been nominated for the programme. Deborah, who initially selected 'neutral' in response to being nominated, responded 'strongly agree' in the following questionnaire. This pride may also be a symptom of the selective nature of the programme, which is discussed above. However, it cannot be denied the students enjoyed the content and the structure of the programme itself. This feedback establishes *Symposium* as a useful way for students to spend their time (see Cooper et al., 1999). Furthermore, students were particularly positive about spending more time doing this project. In the post questionnaire, 5 students considered more sessions and more time for each session a viable 'improvement'. With closer inspection, Dorcas (LPA student) may have desired more time for each session, so that the pace could be slowed down, enabling her to cope with the work. Although a 1.5 hour session may seem a little disconcerting at the end of a long school day, the students were enthusiastic about the activity taking place after school, so that they were able to 'learn so much in the day, but not miss anything' (**Yr7 Anna**). This also reiterates the fact that there is a desire among the students to engage with extracurricular activities.

All of the students either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the fact that they had gained interesting knowledge from the variety of lecturers involved in *Symposium*. Half of the

students both found themselves working independently or researching further into topics taught by the *Symposium* lecturers. Of course, this might have been due to the fact that these students had to complete the questionnaire *before* the presentation as opposed to after and so they could have been referencing that preparation, as opposed to a completely independent pursuit of further knowledge. With closer inspection though, during the student group interviews with both the year seven and year nine students, some students have consciously explored their developed interest and creativity since the presentation evening:

**YR7 Deborah:** 'I wrote a poem': *hands the poem describing rain to me to read during the interview.*

**YR7 Miriam:** 'I am branching out and reading other stuff, not just Harry Potter and Percy Jackson and I wrote a speech about equality for no reason'.

**YR7 Malachi:** 'I picked up [a book written by one of the *Symposium* speakers] and read it'.

**YR9 Paul:** 'I now write monologues and stories. Some general and some linked to the piece I did about refugees on the presentation evening'.

Miriam's expression of the fact that she created a written piece for no reason is significant, since the purpose of *Symposium* was to encourage the students to become more exploratory with their learning and taking more responsibility for their learning beyond homework tasks set by the teacher. Esther also identified the students' enthusiasm to share their extra work and she considered it to be the most rewarding aspect of running *Symposium*. This is evidence of the extracurricular activities having an impact on the students' beyond the confines of the programme (Stearns and Glennie, 2010; Besjes-de Bock and Ruyter, 2011).

Apart from the complaints about parking availability and wanting to explore the place in its entirety, both the year seven and the year nine students found that holding their presentation evening at an Oxford University College really beneficial:

*Q: What do you consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of holding the Symposium presentation evening in an Oxford University college?*

**YR7 Deborah:** 'Since it is in a college and in another place, it makes us focus; we don't know where we are and so we wanted to look awesome'.

**YR7 Malachi:** 'It seemed like an important place and it feels like we need to be better'.

**YR9 Abraham:** 'It made it feel formal for me, like I was important'.

**YR9 Paul:** 'It makes me feel more proud, because you get to present what you've done at an important place rather than a small classroom'.

All of the students above seemed to associate their formal behaviour and academic focus on the status of the venue. But they also established a sense of pride from being in another location. Especially for students from deprived backgrounds, the ability to have access to these prestigious spaces may help to enhance their academic identity. The role of the school in this instance is significant (Covay and Carbonaro, 2010), since we are able to give the students purposeful opportunities to inhabit these 'important places'. Also, the fact that they were sharing their work also gave them and their work a sense of importance and significance also, like Abraham states above. This sense of pride is inspiring; it raises questions about the need to give students the opportunity to feel this pride amongst their peers within the school as well. An award ceremony in school after the presentation evening might be something to consider in the future, since this celebration can also raise the profile of academic extracurricular activities in schools (Chan, 2016).

David and I considered *Symposium* could be a forum for the students to develop their confidence and empower them to feel capable of attending Russell Group universities. In his interview, David said, 'One of the things we want to give the students is access to social

mobility and wider opportunities. State school students should not feel second rate about applying to top universities'. Based on the pre and post questionnaires, it can be argued that this purpose was partially achieved. In the post questionnaire, six students selected 'nothing has changed' in response to the statement: 'Since Symposium, I have considered studying English at university', only Malachi had remained 'neutral' throughout the process. This might be because he is yet to make any explicit decisions in relation to his future aspirations, which is reasonable for an eleven year old.

Anna's own experience outright challenges Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory. Anna is the only student who selected 'neutral' initially and 'agreed' in the final questionnaire. During the interview, Anna gave me deeper insight into how *Symposium* influenced her perception of pursuing English in further education so significantly:

*Q: Did you discuss Symposium with anyone other than the students on the course this year?*

[Miriam, Deborah and Malachi all said 'My mum' and Anna followed with this response]

**YR7 Anna:** 'My parents didn't understand it and my brother, but they said it was great. None of them finished school, so none of them get it. But they want me to carry on school to get a better job than what they have. I think *Symposium* helped me to [carry on school and get a better job] because I know much more than I used to. I have a wider selection of information to choose from.'

This is a significant finding that would have been very difficult to establish in a purely quantitative study. Even though I cannot make a generalisation about all students who may share the same socioeconomic context with Anna, I am able to establish an understanding of the impact *Symposium* could potentially have and the reasons for this. Even though Anna's parents are encouraging, their inability to understand and discuss the content shared in a programme like *Symposium* suggests that Anna also needs the school's commitment in order to 'get a better job'. This idea of having a 'wider selection' of

knowledge also comes across very empowering for a student like Anna, who does not have to be bound by the knowledge her parents do not have (Kisida, Greene and Bowen, 2014).

### ***Social benefits***

Interestingly, Malachi has a special educational need (Asperger's Syndrome) and his mother was concerned that he would struggle to engage with other students. However, here, he highlights that his highlight of the programme was the fact that he was able to make friends. This extracurricular provision has had an impact on his social development. Esther and I both agreed that his improvements were both obvious and comforting, since he was no longer walking around school alone, but he had found real friendship in Miriam and Deborah – 'he talked to more students'. It is possible that the process of planning and practising the presentation was also a significant moment in solidifying their bond. This activity has had a positive impact on the students' ability to choose friends with similar interests. This might have been easier for the year seven students, because their friendship groups were not a fully developed as they may have been for the year nine students.

The students also wanted to establish inter-school projects:

**YR9 Paul:** 'It was quite stressful. Especially because we were meant to do it in a group. I never would have done it on my own.'

To develop *Symposium* further, we need to establish a more effective form of communication between the young people across the schools, so they too can benefit from a more collaborative approach to the presentation evening. Esther also agreed that even though the teachers had successfully collaborated to conduct the project effectively, we did not support the students with their own collaboration process. Combining these two contexts and giving the students a platform to explore common interests has been

instrumental in their developed engagement. However, more can be done to increase the impact this inter-school programme has.

### **3. How does the design of *Symposium* begin to address barriers to participation in extracurricular activities in schools?**

#### ***The challenges to student participation***

*Symposium* is a selective group. It would be difficult to run a programme of this kind with great numbers, because the students need that university tutorial style learning environment, so that they get the attention they need, while engaging with more challenging work. However the greatest challenge of participation is commitment. Both Esther and Naomi highlighted that selecting students who were committed was the greatest challenge for students in Eden High. Naomi attributed this difficulty to their 'lack of discipline and structure at home'. It is not enough to conclude on this evaluation though; a student's failure or reluctance to initially participate or commit, does require further investigation (Feldman and Matjasko, 2005).

Firstly, it is difficult to control the events that occur during the school day. The school's behaviour policy tends to override the extracurricular activities carried out after school. Therefore the one area that Esther and I could not control was the consequences of the students' behaviour during the school day. Out of the six sessions, Dorcas was only able to attend four. Dorcas' misbehaviour during her lessons meant that she had to attend her detention after school and miss *Symposium*. This is particularly significant, because Dorcas may have been unable to fully engage with the sessions in the first place, because of her prior attainment status as an LPA student.

Based on Dorcas' reflections on the blob tree, she did not confidently report much understanding or learning during the sessions. Firstly, she consistently selected the figure with the question marks and a look of confusion (Appendix B). More specifically, at the end of the first session, she confessed that she felt 'confused' and by the end of the final session, she thought she 'might' write and present a speech on postmodernism. Furthermore, she is the only student who said 'nothing has changed' in response to the statement:

'*Symposium* has provided me with more background information I can apply within my English lessons'. Her inability to apply the new knowledge may have been because she could not understand it, thus making it difficult to form coherent connections between her extracurricular and her class work.

It is possible that Dorcas' absences may have exacerbated this feeling of confusion, since she was unable to maintain a consistent connection with the level and pace of the learning or with the ability of this group of students. It can also be argued that although she was performing at a higher level than her peers within her English lessons according to her English teacher, the fact that she is an LPA student may have prevented her from being able to access the content shared during the sessions so she was less able to apply it to lessons, since both the MPA and EAL students seemed to thrive in this environment. It also seemed to have an adverse effect on her perception of English for further study, because in the post questionnaire she disagreed with the prospect of reading English at University. It is difficult to generalise, since there was only one LPA student within the cohort, but it may be possible to suggest that due to the nature of the course, it may not be suitable for LPA students at all, since it is appropriately challenging for the HPA students and therefore too challenging for them.

In addition to pupil ability, a pupil's interest in the academic subject explored in the academic extracurricular activity is significant for student commitment. It is certainly not enough to select a student to partake in an academic programme, because they are good at the subject. When asked whether he would pursue English in further education, Joseph 'disagreed' both in the pre and post questionnaires. Although his ability was proficient, his interest in English Language, Literature and Media was not strong enough from the outset to remain committed to the activity. While he considered *Symposium* to be 'already good' and therefore not requiring any improvements, his participation in the sessions did not have the power to stimulate his interest in English.

Another challenge to student participation is their commitment to external extracurricular provision. Students' other commitments also have the potential to interfere with the student's ability to engage with the activity. Since students are unable to have access to adequate extracurricular provision within the school, parents are likely to enrol students into various external activities: uniformed activities like Cadets or sports activities like swimming. Both Abraham and Paul missed one session, because they had other extracurricular commitments. Paul specifically reiterated in the interview that the greatest challenge for his involvement with *Symposium* was that it 'clashes with other activities'.

Further to this, since these students are academically able, they are more likely to be asked to take on extra roles during lesson time or after the school day, to support promoting the school, for example open evenings and transition days with the primary school students and parents. These commitments also have the potential to interfere with the students' participation. Naomi observed that this year, when Paul thought another school responsibility might interfere with his attendance to *Symposium*, he was 'disappointed' and asked to leave early and attend *Symposium*. We need to be mindful of keeping the

communication with the school clear, so that students are not being over-burdened with too many roles, responsibilities and activities. Of course, there needs to be an increase in activities, but we as a school need to make sure these opportunities are distributed evenly, so that an excessive load of commitments are not placed on a select few students, stifling their academic development and creativity (Camacho and Fuligni, 2015).

Despite these absences (including another one due to illness), Esther evaluates the encouraging the students to be held accountable for their involvement in these activities may help to resolve this issue of commitment. As argued by Stearns and Glennie (2010), students need to attend regularly in order to reap the results of academic development. Therefore, we as teachers need to be committed to following students up in regards to their attendance. Training them in becoming more committed is especially significant in Eden High while we are still trying to develop a culture of student participation in extracurricular activities.

### ***Costs - academic and economic***

The dismissal of extracurricular activities as an 'extravagance' cited in Stearns and Glennie (2009), due to the need for students to remain focused on their exams is considered here. This academic cost is a particular concern for teachers and schools, especially those with similar contexts to Eden High because the results within the school are published nationally and they are a major contributing factor for judging the overarching performance and of the school. The presentation evening element of *Symposium* does begin the process of equipping students with knowledge and skills to cope with the stress and the standard of work required in GCSE examinations. During the interview, I asked Deborah 'How did you find the process of preparing for the presentation evening, even though there were no specific guidelines detailing what you should do?':

**YR7 Deborah:** 'It was fun and stressful – mostly stressful for me anyway.'

I also asked:

*Q: 'Do you think that it was worth even having a presentation evening?'*

**YR7 Miriam:** 'It was worth it, but it was a lot of pressure on me.'

**YR9 Ruth:** 'Yes, there should be a presentation evening, but I always thought it weren't good enough.'

It can be argued that the students' stress is evidence of their regard for the importance of the presentation evening. Thus, they are learning to meet deadlines, prepare for their projects using information given by experts and they are doing so with rather challenging topics, as conveyed in the list of sessions named in the introduction. This short-term experience of stress for a final project can also be viewed as an experience that will help the students' mental health, which is in line with Greening's (2017) intentions to support students developing a 'healthier lifestyle'. Contained experiences of stress has the potential to help them with the way they cope with future life experiences, such as high stakes exams at the end of secondary school or a dissertation at the end of University. This presentation evening inadvertently seems to prepare the students for the Speaking and Listening GCSE unit.

The term 'extravagance' is also in reference to the cost of the projects and since Eden High had some real budget deficiencies, we had to be conscious of the expenditure. In total the project cost just over £400. This is one quarter of the cost of *The Brilliant Club* (over £1,600). Further research needs to be put into making closer connections with Universities who might be willing to support with schools with these academic extracurricular ventures. This has the potential to reduce the cost further and increase the influence of the university presence on these students' lives.

### ***Teacher timetabling***

A teacher's timetable is a common aspect that prevents teachers from engaging with extracurricular provision (Whiteley and Richard, 2012). Esther presents collaboration as a solution for managing the workload this creates:

Q: 'In terms of a project of this kind, how much time do you spend organising and running it?'

**Esther:** Because we have been working together, the process is more streamlined... Also, because we start in January Term, we have time to make the appropriate resources beforehand. I would say I spend about 3 hours on average every other week over a long term. It's fun, I really enjoy it.

This collaborative nature of the project helped to provide a solution for this barrier concerning the time teachers spend providing these activities. It is also true however, that teachers should manage the time frame in which these activities are offered – especially those teaching core subjects, so that they are not overworking during peak times in the school calendar. Also, now that the course structure has changed to a two year course, it can be argued that there are a few less pressure points from the exam classes. Even though the teachers who prepared the presentations to deliver to the students also commented on the fact that they spent longer planning for the session than they would spend planning an ordinary lesson, they were very enthusiastic about the process. Timothy found that preparing for these high ability students was an opportunity for him to 'stretch [his] own knowledge' and the process reminded him of 'why he loves English'.

It was difficult to engage with the students in relation to the barriers to participation, but other extracurricular commitments seems to be a feasible reason why. Student involvement in *Symposium* has exposed some of the student barriers to commitment. It is a common assumption that students from deprived areas do not have supportive parents

who have trained them to be disciplined. However, these students challenge this deprivation discourse and actually provide a little more clarity to express why they are unable to attend regularly. This year's cohort also only had two drop outs at the final stage, before the presentation evening and five absences out of sixty. Thus, in context, *Symposium* successfully helps to address the barriers to student commitment. In relation to staff involvement, the structure of the programme and the opportunities for collaboration seem to ease the potential pressure teachers can have.

## Limitations, Conclusions and Implications

### Limitations

During the early stages of the project, I intended to use five minute structured observations per child, before and after their involvement in *Symposium*. Due to changes to the timetable at Eden High to accommodate the KS4 students' examination preparation in English, this method could not be carried out. Even though the students are capable of evaluating their own engagement, it may have helped to increase the validity and reliability of the data. It is difficult to anticipate the student timetable changes, especially due to the turbulent climate in English during the 2016/17 examination year, because of the national changes. Despite my inability to do formal observations of the students, my collaboration with Esther helped to gain another perspective on the developments in the students' engagement.

Another limitation to this study is the fact that only ten students were involved in the research itself. It has prevented me from posing generalised conclusions, because the participant group is too small to be representative of the school's HPA student population. However, the project itself would have been ineffective if there was a large group of students involved. Since the students needed to be appropriately challenged, it was important that they were in a smaller group, so they could receive the support they required to engage with the challenging content during each session, but also form a forum where they were comfortable to share their academic ideas and form strong social bonds.

Furthermore, this intervention only lasted from January to May, it is possible that my ability to find out from these students during KS4 how *Symposium* has supported their progress and engagement at that stage may also give me more clarity on the efficacy of the programme. This is an eventuality that can never fully be measured, so it's absence from

this project does not affect the validity of my evaluation concerning the efficacy of *Symposium*.

Finally, using a model, which explored the various types of engagement would have helped me to frame my literature and my findings within a tighter structure. Even though the quantitative methodological approach cannot report findings with the same depth I would need in order to consider specific elements of *Symposium* that could be improved with clear reasons, the surveys are taken with such a clear structure. An example of this would be student engagement styles established by Coates (2007). However, I was also mindful about giving the students too much information about engagement as I might influence the way they respond. Possibly, I should have asked two separate questions: 'Do you want to go to University?' and then 'Do you want to go to University to read English?' this might have given me more insight into the reasons why they were unaffected by the decision about going to university.

## **Collaboration**

Collaboration within the school has been a very important element of this research project. Leading the programme and collecting the data was quite a task, especially because I wanted to reduce my influence on the students' perspective. Managing the workload was much easier with Esther. Furthermore, it was important to maintain a fluid discussion about the way students were developing in confidence, their interest in English and their engagement in English lessons.

Collaboration between Zion and Eden High has also been refreshing. Primarily, like the sports activities, this approach provides a way for students to meet new people who are passionate about the same subject. David and I were also able to share the planning of the

project itself in relation to finding the speakers and organising the rooms and coach journeys. Dividing this workload is also important. Ultimately, *Symposium* is important to use all, so the shared passion and workload makes it easier to manage.

Both David and Esther supported with organising and conducting the final presentation evening, which was significant for the students to see these two very different schools united. There is still a lot of work to do to successfully embed this activity into the school culture, which includes holding CPD sessions for leaders from different departments to discuss how they could incorporate this into their own departments. By conveying this information through CPD sessions, Esther and I will be able to quality assure the rigour of the projects being offered across different subjects.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

*Symposium* did impact the students' engagement in English. Even though I was unable to do the observations, the fact that Esther taught the year seven students and I the year nine, we were able to see the improvement in their engagement before and after the project. Again, the most interesting find is that *Symposium* provided a safe and interactive space for the students to validate their creative voice and helped them to feel empowered to contribute and share their ideas. When asked 'How does the students' attitude to learning differ from the typical response you get from HPA students in an English classroom', Jacob noticed that 'top set are quite quiet whereas these students wanted to answer'. This sense of the students finding their voice within the classroom is significant. In relation to my own classroom, I think I could have done more to allow the *Symposium* sessions to overflow into my English lessons. Possibly to allow the students to present the knowledge they learnt during the sessions, to help the other students in top set gain new knowledge. Or even

consider inviting speakers into English to increase the level of engagement among the students as a whole.

*Symposium* is an effective academic extracurricular activity, because the students are able to engage with challenging content that they feel empowered to use within their English lessons. This expanse in their knowledge base seems to have given them more confidence to express themselves creatively through reading and writing. Even though the collaboration between the two schools is important, so that the students can learn with a fresh group of students who share the same interests, Esther, David and I could have done more to forge these links between the students more. On reflection, one way we could do this is by setting up a Google platform that the students can access both inside and outside of school, so they can continue to share the work they've done and the ideas they have.

*Symposium* did not seem to have an impact on students' aspirations to attend university. To address the lack of impact the programme had on their decision to attend university, it may be necessary for me to return to the design of the project and suggest that one of the tutorials be done in a university tutorial room. This way they can have a tour, but also have a learning experience the space.

*Symposium* does begin to address the barriers, but there would need to be a version of the programme for a variety of subjects offered within the school, so that students can engage with the programme from a point of personal interest. Also, it might be worthwhile celebrating the students who were involved in *Symposium* at the school as well as at the University. The design of *Symposium* ensures that the teachers are not spending an inordinate amount of time planning and strategising per week. Since the activity only involves KS3 students, there does not seem to be any direct interference with the exam pressure and preparation. The cost of the programme is much cheaper than other programmes on offer and the positive impact it has had on these students is clear. Even

though the students are not working towards a final assessed piece as they would in *The Brilliant Club* model, the content the students engage with is significantly challenging. It is important to note that LPA students cannot really engage with this programme, since it was not intended for them and also the level of challenge associated with the undergraduate lecture style is generally inaccessible for these students.

Altogether, it would be an honour to continue to conduct *Symposium* within the school and across the county, because in the UK, as the research above has already highlighted, state schools could benefit from an academic programme embedded within the school culture – one that does not just benefit the advantaged high ability students, but recognises and develops the disadvantaged high ability students also.

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# Appendices

## A: Ofsted Report of Eden High, December 2014

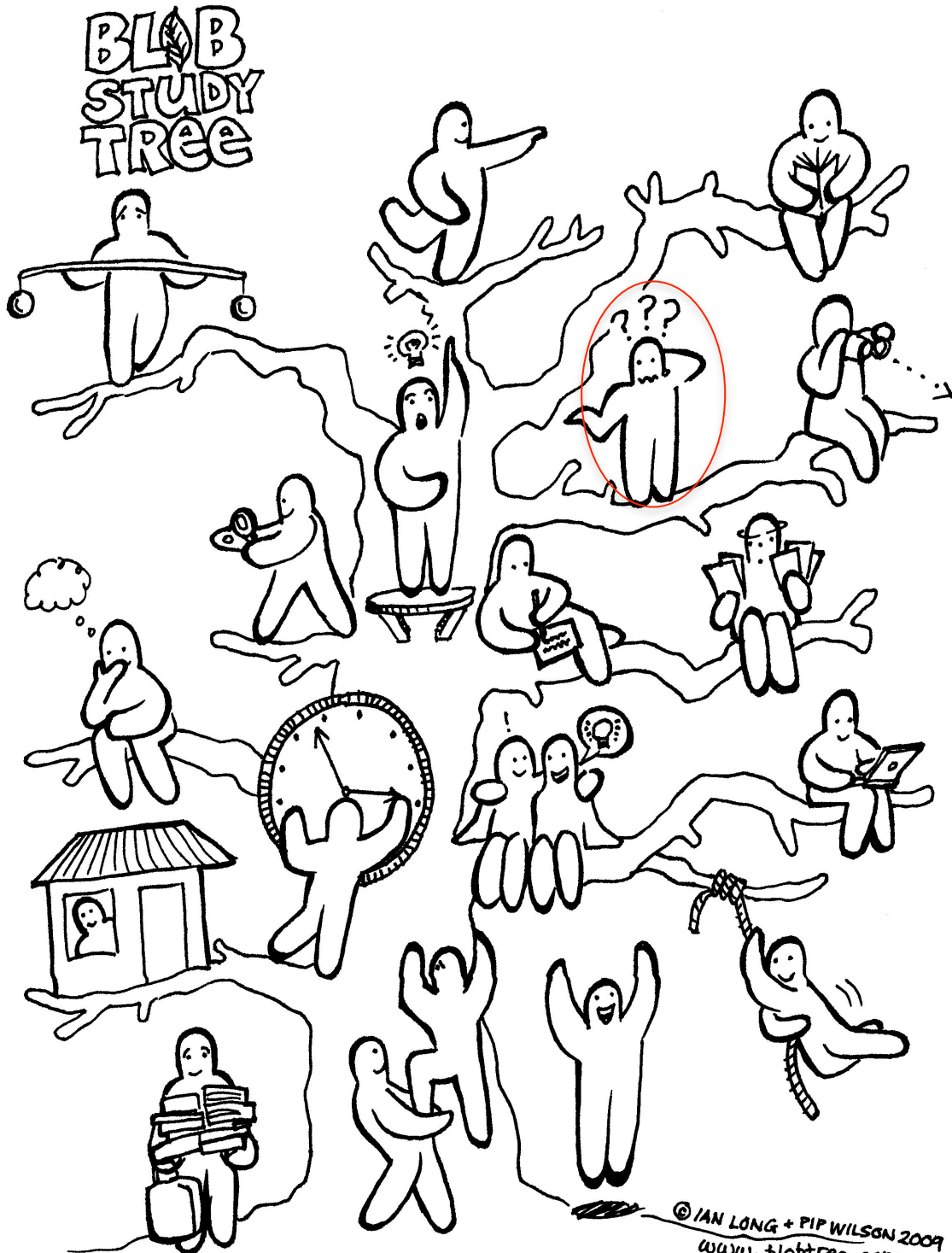
<b>Inspection dates</b>		9–10 December 2014	
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	Previous inspection:	Inadequate	4
	This inspection:	<b>Requires improvement</b>	<b>3</b>
Leadership and management		Requires improvement	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Requires improvement	3
Achievement of pupils		Requires improvement	3
Sixth form provision		Good	2

### Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

#### This is a school that requires improvement. It is not good because

- Too few students gain a grade C or above at GCSE in both English and mathematics.
- The large number of changes in leadership and staffing in mathematics has hindered students' progress. Students are not making as much progress in mathematics as they do in English.
- Development of students' literacy skills is not well supported in lessons by all teachers, and is inconsistent across different subjects.
- Improvements in the quality of teaching have not yet enabled all students to make good enough progress.
- The most able students are not making as much progress as their peers. Teachers are often not ambitious enough for these students and do not give them work that is sufficiently challenging.
- The interim academy board relies overmuch on the considerable expertise of a few members. It does not yet have its full complement of members.
- The academy does not currently have a mechanism for collating the views of parents and feeding back to them on how any concerns are dealt with.
- Sometimes, there is not enough for students to do in lessons and the work is not stimulating or sufficiently challenging. Students then have time to chatter and their progress slows.

B: The Blob Tree Resource



<p>The beginning of the session</p>	<p>The end of the session</p>
<p>Circle the blob that best represents how you feel in anticipation for the session. Give reasons to explain your choice:</p>	<p>Circle the blob that best represents how you feel after having the session. Give reasons to explain your choice:</p>

## C: Pre-questionnaire

Based on your experience in English Lessons up to this point in your secondary school career, please answer these questions honestly:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I really enjoy <b>what</b> we learn in English					
I really enjoy <b>how</b> we learn in English					
I always feel confident about sharing my ideas in class discussions					
I actively listen to other students and my teacher during class discussions					
I always complete my English written work to a high standard					
I was pleased when I was nominated to get involved in <i>Symposium</i>					
I always do further research into topics studied in English lessons that I don't understand					
I would like to carry on studying English after GCSEs					

Name your favourite topic covered in English so far:

## D: Post-questionnaire

	Strongly agree	Agree	Nothing has changed	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<i>Symposium</i> has provided me with more background information I can apply within my English Lessons					
I gained interesting knowledge from the variety of lecturers involved in <i>Symposium</i>					
Since <i>Symposium</i> , I have done some independent research in relation to a topic/topics covered by a <i>Symposium</i> lecturer					
Since <i>Symposium</i> , I have done some independent work in relation to a topic/topics covered by a <i>Symposium</i> lecturer					
Since <i>Symposium</i> , I have developed more confidence in my public speaking					
Since <i>Symposium</i> , I have developed new ways to plan and prepare a presentation					
Since <i>Symposium</i> , I have begun to do further research into topics studied in English lessons to improve my understanding					
<i>Symposium</i> has helped me to feel more confident about sharing my ideas in class discussions					
<i>Symposium</i> has helped to improve my active listening during class discussions – I listen to both students and my teacher more					
Since <i>Symposium</i> , I always complete my written work to a high standard					
I am pleased that I was given the opportunity to attend <i>Symposium</i> this year					
Since <i>Symposium</i> I have considered studying English at University					

Name your favourite topic covered in *Symposium*:

Name your favourite topic covered in English so far:

Please write any further comments in relation to what you enjoyed about *Symposium*:

Please write any further comments in relation to the way we can improve *Symposium* in the future:

Would you promote *Symposium* to other students: Yes

No

## **E: Interview questions for the teachers from Eden High who ran a *Symposium* session**

1. What caused you to want to be involved in leading a session in *Symposium*?
2. What advantages can involvement in *Symposium* have? Would you recommend it to other schools? Why or why not?
3. How does your involvement in *Symposium* and leading a session differ from your role as a classroom teacher?
4. How do you decide the topic to explore with the students in this undergraduate style?
5. How does the students' attitude to learning differ from the typical response from students in English classrooms?
6. In what ways can *Symposium* improve?

## F: Interview questions for Naomi

1. How do you think the higher ability students' engagement has improved in the school as a whole?
2. Since the 2014 OFSTED report and the subsequent focus on the HPA pupil, how do you think support and challenge for HPA pupils has developed?
3. What do you believe to be the benefits of *Symposium*?
4. What challenges did you anticipate before *Symposium*?
5. How could *Symposium* improve?

## G: Interview questions for David

1. What was the specific need within Zion High\* that caused you to meet with Eden High\* and eventually create *Symposium*?
2. How did *Symposium* impact the first cohort of students?
3. How do you advertise *Symposium* to your future cohorts?
4. How did being a Deputy Head influence your ability to promote *Symposium*?
5. What impact do you think having a mix of external and internal speakers has on the students?
6. Do students of this cohort discuss their ideas for their final project with you during the school day?
7. What would you say is the best aspect of *Symposium* and why?
8. How do you think we could make *Symposium* better?

\* These school names are pseudonyms.

## H: Interview questions for Esther

1. What made you initially want to be involved in running *Symposium*?
2. How do you think *Symposium* has changed over the course of the year?
3. In terms of a project of this kind, how much think do you spend organising and running it?
4. What have you identified about the impact the programme has had on the students as a whole and did these changes meet your expectations?
5. What would you say is the greatest challenge of running a programme of this kind?
6. What would you say is the rewarding aspect of running a programme of this kind?
7. Do you think *Symposium* should only be made available to HPA students?
8. What are your views on the impact of our collaboration with another school?
9. How do you think we can improve *Symposium*?

## I: Interview questions for the year seven students

1. Since *Symposium*, would you say you enjoyed what you learn during your English lessons more or less?
2. Since *Symposium* would you say you enjoyed how you learn during your English lessons more or less?
3. Deborah: How did you find the process of preparing for the presentation, even though there were no specific guidelines detailing what you could or should do?
4. Miriam: As the course drew to a close, your responses on the blob tree seemed less enthusiastic about the sessions and more focused on the presentation evening. Do you think the presentation evening was pressurising? Do you think that it was worth even having a presentation evening?
5. Anna: How did the presentation evening help you?
6. Malachi: How did your relationship with other students and staff evolve over the duration of *Symposium*?
7. Did you discuss *Symposium* with anyone other than the students on the course this year?
8. What do you consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of holding *Symposium* after school?
9. What do you consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of holding the *Symposium* presentation evening in an Oxford University college?
10. Which session do you believe should be on the schedule next year?
11. Which session do you believe should not be on the schedule next year?
12. A month has passed since *Symposium*, have you done any further research or work inspired by *Symposium* discussions?
13. Name an aspect of *Symposium* in particular that pushes you to recommend it to other students.

## J: Interview questions for the year nine students

1. Since *Symposium*, would you say you enjoyed what you learn during your English lessons more of less?
2. Since *Symposium* would you say you enjoyed how you learn during your English lessons more or less?
3. Abraham: You produced and submitted extra work after a *Symposium* session, what urged you to do that?
4. Abraham: If at all, how did the third session influence your final presentation (after the presentation you wrote 'CHALLENGED' on the blob tree reflection)?
5. Ruth: I have observed you doing extra revision for all subjects; did *Symposium* influence you decision to do this in any way?
6. Ruth: You repeatedly refer to 'learning a lot of things' – please share one of the ideas from any of the sessions that you did not know before.
7. Paul: During a *Symposium* session, you explicitly asked me to give you a detention if you did not ask or answer at least one question during a lesson, what urged you to do this?
8. Paul: When you use the word 'fun' to reference your feelings after a session, what are you referring to exactly?
9. Paul: How would you say *Symposium* influenced your confidence with your work and expressing yourself?
10. Ruth: Why did you decide to base your *Symposium* presentation on a text you had learnt in English before?
11. Did you discuss *Symposium* with anyone other than the students on the course this year?
12. What do you consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of holding *Symposium* after school?
13. What do you consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of holding the *Symposium* presentation evening in an Oxford University college?
14. How did you find the preparation process for the presentation evening? Do you think it is worth having a presentation evening?
15. Which session do you believe should be on the schedule next year?
16. Which session do you believe should not be on the schedule next year?
17. How did your involvement in *Symposium* influence your interactions with teachers?
18. A month has passed since *Symposium*, have you done any further research or work inspired by *Symposium* discussions?
19. Name on aspect of *Symposium* in particular that pushes you to recommend it to other students.

## K: Letter of approval to the Head teacher

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Mr X  
Eden High School  
XXX  
XXX  
09/11/2016

Dear Mr X

I am writing to enquire about conducting research in school this academic year. I am very thankful your commitment to supporting me through my Master's in Learning and Teaching at Oxford University, supervised by Dr. YYY at Oxford University. In my final research project "The impact of Extra-Curricular Activities on Student Engagement: In what ways does participation in Symposium affect Higher Prior Attaining students' engagement in English?" I will explore the impact the new project I initiated with David at Zion High School in 2015/16 on Year 7 and 8 students' engagement in English lessons.

The research will take place during every session including the presentation evening at an Oxford University. There will be 15 HPA students selected across the two year groups and I will also collect data from my colleagues concerning their engagement in lessons before and after the project. I am developing ways that the English department and possibly other departments can support students in developing deeper subject knowledge. Esther, Jacob and David have agreed to collaborate with me on this.

By participating in the research, the school would be contributing to a project that will deepen our understanding of the impact of extra-curricular activities on student engagement, and so contribute towards developing ways to improve the standard of extra-curricular activity provision across subjects. It also has the potential to contribute to developing closer links with other schools and families in the Oxfordshire community.

I hope to conduct this research between December and September of 2016/17. I would observe the students who are involved in *Symposium* during their English lessons, I will interview their English teachers, photocopy some of the students' written work, engage the students in responding to questionnaires and indicative scales to assess their interest and their engagement in *Symposium* and their English lessons. I also hope to receive feedback from parents during the presentation evening about how they feel the project has helped support their child with their knowledge and engagement in English.

Oxford University has strict ethical procedures on conducting ethical research, consistent with current British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines. As practitioner research however, the University recognises that schools have the highest ethical standards in any event. Therefore only your formal consent as head teacher is necessary, and not that of individual parents or staff. However, throughout the research, students and other teachers will be able to refuse to participate in any research activities at any time.

All participants, including students, teacher and the school, would be made anonymous in all research reports. The data collected would be kept strictly confidential, available only to

my supervisor (Dr. YYY) and me, and only used for academic purposes. It will be kept for as long as it has academic value.

If you feel you would like to take part in the study, or need more information about what is involved, please contact me or my supervisor. Further, if you have any questions about this ethics process at any time, please contact the chair of the department's research ethics committee.

I look forward to hearing from you.

## L: Student Opt Out Form

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



The impact of Extra-Curricular Activities on Student Engagement: In what ways does participation in Symposium affect Higher Prior Attaining students' engagement in English?

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am writing to invite your child to take part in my research study, with the rest of his or her peers involved in *Symposium*. You may be aware that your child's school has agreed to take part in a research study.

As a teacher and the lead teacher of Higher Prior Attaining students, I have formed an extra-curricular project called *Symposium* with a colleague from the partnering school 'Zion High School'. This is based on the belief that students, especially those that have the potential to achieve high grades at the end of the secondary study, are exposed to more challenging content. In this project, I intend to explore, the extent to which extra-curricular projects contribute to the students' engagement and interest in English.

I have chosen to work with your child because they have been identified as a Higher Prior Attaining student in Year 7 or 8 and their English teacher has agreed to be a part of the project – supporting the extra-curricular activity and my exploration of the impact it has had on the students. The research will help to develop future extra-curricular projects offered to students within the school and possibly help to initiate a stronger academic connection between Oxfordshire schools.

I hope that your child will want to take part in the research, but before you decide, it is important that you understand what it will involve. Please take some time to read through the information on this pamphlet.



***What will your child be asked to do?***

If you decide to take part in the research, your child will be asked to:

- Indicate on a blob tree how they are feeling at the beginning and end of each lecture of *Symposium*
- They will be asked to respond to an indicative scale about their engagement and interest in English as a subject and their lessons.
- They will be asked to respond to a questionnaire based on their whole experience participating in *Symposium*.
- If your child is selected for further discussions, they will be asked to have a 5-10 minute interview about the programme during a break time of their choice in the Break Out space
- As parents, you will be asked to respond to this question on a post it note during the final presentation evening in May: **How do you think *Symposium* has affected your child's interest and engagement in English Language, Literature and Media as a subject?**
- There will not be any further follow up visits after this.

***Who is running the research?***

I am a research student at the Department of Education, University of Oxford. I am studying to complete my Master's degree in Education and I am also a fully qualified and experienced secondary English teacher. A more experienced researcher, Dr YYY, supervises my research.

***Are there any potential risks in taking part?***

Research with teachers needs to be conducted with care and sensitivity as their work involves students. Students will also be observed during this project, because both their actions and their responses are key to understanding the impact of *Symposium* on their engagement in lessons. Students however, will not be videotaped during this process.

My research will be consistent with the strict guidelines required by Oxford University. The Headteacher has agreed to participate in the research. Taking part in this research is completely voluntary. You and your child are free to say you do not want to participate. Your child will be free to withdraw from the research at any point, without giving any reason. This would not affect your child's education in any way.

### ***Confidentiality***

I will make the data I collect in the study anonymous. I will also maintain confidentiality consistent with current UK law, nobody, other than my Supervisor and Headteacher would have access to the data I collect. If I wanted to use the data for any other purpose, I would have to contact you and obtain your permission. At the end of the study, all of the personal data will be destroyed.

I am happy to share a brief report on the impact of *Symposium* upon request at the end of the project. However, I will not identify the school, teacher or any students in any reports of the research.

This study has received ethics clearance through the University of Oxford's ethical approval process for research involving human participants.

### ***What do you need to do next?***

Please fill in the enclosed form and return it to me if you do not want your child to take part in this study. Should you have any further questions about the project before or during the study, please contact me. I will be happy to talk with you in more detail.

### ***Contact details:***



**The impact of Extra-Curricular Activities on Student Engagement:  
In what ways does participation in Symposium affect Higher Prior Attaining students<sup>1</sup>  
engagement in English?**

**OPT OUT FORM**

If you **DO NOT** want your child to participate in the research, [**The impact of Extra-Curricular Activities on Student Engagement: In what ways does participation in Symposium affect Higher Prior Attaining students<sup>1</sup> engagement in English?**], please fill out the form below and return it to the school by [12/01/2017]. If we do not receive an opt-out form from you, your child may be invited to take part in this study, as described in the accompanying information sheet.

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**I, the undersigned, hereby DO NOT give permission for my child to take part in the above study.**

Name of child: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of parent/guardian: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of researcher: