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Learning beyond the classroom: A qualitative study of Student Clubs in Greek Model and Experimental High Schools

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Abstract: This study examines the learning processes developed within student clubs in Greek Model and Experimental High Schools (MEHS), a category of public secondary schools assigned an institutional role in piloting and disseminating innovative educational practices. Although MEHS clubs are formally embedded in the public education system, their pedagogical functioning as structured learning environments remains largely undocumented in educational research and policy discourse. The study aims to analyse the pedagogical characteristics of learning in MEHS clubs and assess their relevance to improving teaching and learning practices in formal upper secondary education. A qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 27 teachers and focus

group discussions with 72 students from seven MEHS in the Attica region. The data were analysed using thematic qualitative content analysis, supported by methodological triangulation across data sources and participant groups. The findings reveal systematic differences between club-based learning and conventional classroom instruction. Learning in clubs is organised around collaborative, inquiry-based, and experiential practices, with limited emphasis on curriculum coverage and examination-oriented assessment. Students assume active roles in planning, decision-making, and task implementation, while responsibilities are primarily shaped by voluntary engagement and collective goals. Teachers adopt facilitative and coordinating roles, supporting horizontal interaction and shared ownership of learning processes. Both teachers and students identify clubs as learning communities that enhance student participation, agency, and engagement. The study demonstrates that MEHS clubs function as structured non-formal learning settings within public secondary education. Its scientific contribution lies in providing empirical evidence on the pedagogical operation of MEHS clubs. From a policy perspective, the results indicate that selected features of club-based learning — particularly collaborative inquiry, student initiative-taking, and facilitative teaching roles — can inform the design of pedagogical innovation and support curriculum and school-level reform, subject to institutional constraints.

Keywords: extracurricular school activities, clubs, learning process, learning communities, educational innovation.

Introduction

In contemporary educational theory and practice, increasing emphasis is placed on learning approaches that extend beyond the boundaries of formal classroom instruction and content transmission. International educational discourse highlights the importance of experiential, learner-centred, collaborative, and inquiry-based learning for the development of transversal and life skills, student agency, and lifelong learning competences. Within this context, schools are increasingly expected to function as learning organisations capable of fostering innovation and responding to students' diverse learning profiles and interests.

Extracurricular school activities (ESAs) constitute learning environments that align closely with these policy orientations. Research indicates that such activities provide adolescents with opportunities to explore their identities, experiment with new roles, and develop social, personal, and cognitive skills through active participation (Darling et al., 2005). Highly structured ESAs, in particular, have been described as organised environments of participation coordinated by responsible adults, characterised by clear objectives, sustained engagement, and systematic feedback (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

Despite their distance from the formal academic curriculum, many extracurricular activities — such as school theatre groups, student radio stations, and school magazines — function as co-curricular learning environments that enhance autonomy, motivation, and student engagement (Eccles et al., 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008). International research consistently confirms the educational value of participation in such activities, both in terms of academic outcomes and socio-emotional development (Mahoney et al., 2003; Zaff et al., 2003; Kort-Butler & Hagewen, 2011). Moreover, participation in ESAs has been associated with stronger attachment to school, lower dropout rates, and the promotion of lifelong learning dispositions (Darling et al., 2005; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Peck et al., 2008).

In the Greek educational context, extracurricular school activities are organised within public schools and are institutionally distinct from private or local authority initiatives for the use of adolescents' leisure

time. These co-curricular activities are conducted outside regular school hours and aim to develop soft skills, taking into account students' individual learning profiles, interests, and abilities. They typically employ pedagogical approaches such as collaborative, inquiry-based, and experiential learning, project-based learning, differentiated instruction, and interdisciplinary or cross-thematic methods.

A particularly relevant institutional case is that of Model and Experimental High Schools (MEHS), which operate under a special legislative framework and are explicitly tasked with the experimental implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of innovative teaching and learning practices. Within MEHS, student clubs are organised as structured extracurricular activities focusing on elective thematic areas, creativity, collaboration, and student agency.

From a policy perspective, MEHS clubs represent a potentially valuable but underexplored resource for evidence-informed educational reform. While their institutional mandate aligns closely with internationally promoted priorities concerning innovation and student-centred learning, limited empirical evidence exists regarding how learning is organised within these clubs and what pedagogical practices they actually generate.

Although international literature provides substantial evidence on the benefits of extracurricular participation, ESAs are often conceptualised as supplementary or peripheral to formal schooling rather than as structured learning environments embedded within public education systems. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to the pedagogical processes through which learning occurs in such contexts and to their potential relevance for informing classroom-based instruction and curriculum reform.

In Greece, empirical research on innovative school practices remains limited, and systematic studies focusing specifically on MEHS clubs are scarce. Only a small number of studies address related aspects of innovation in school settings (Spyropoulou et al., 2008; Kyriakodi & Tzimogiannis, 2015; Theodoropoulos, 2019). In particular, there is a lack of qualitative research examining the learning processes developed within MEHS clubs, the distribution of roles and responsibilities, and the forms of student participation and initiative-taking that emerge. This gap constrains policymakers and educational leaders' capacity to draw on MEHS clubs as empirically grounded reference points for pedagogical innovation.

Against this background, the present study aims to examine the learning processes developed within student clubs of Greek Model and Experimental High Schools and to assess their relevance for pedagogical innovation and policy-informed improvement in formal secondary education. The study forms part of a broader research project investigating the organisation, functioning, and educational significance of MEHS clubs (Vasileiou, 2024), with a specific focus on learning processes.

The following research questions guide the study:

1. What pedagogical characteristics define the learning processes developed within MEHS student clubs?
2. What forms of learning (e.g. collaborative, experiential, inquiry-based, project-based) are promoted in these clubs?
3. How do students and teachers perceive participation, responsibilities, and initiative-taking within club-based learning environments?
4. To what extent can learning practices developed in MEHS clubs contribute to the transformation of learning culture and pedagogical practices in the formal classroom?

The scientific contribution of this study lies in its systematic qualitative analysis of MEHS clubs as structured non-formal learning environments embedded within public secondary education. By drawing on empirical data from both teachers and students, the study addresses a significant gap in Greek educational research concerning school-based pedagogical innovation.

From an educational policy perspective, the findings provide analytically grounded insights into how institutionalised extracurricular structures can function as laboratories of innovation within existing system constraints. The study contributes evidence relevant to policy debates on curriculum flexibility, teacher roles, student agency, and the development of schools as learning organisations, informing discussions on how pedagogical innovation can be integrated into formal education in a sustainable and system-relevant manner.

Literature Review

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in pedagogical approaches that conceptualise learning as a social, experiential, and transformative process. The theory of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and the concept of the learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991) emphasise interaction and collaboration as fundamental elements for the construction of knowledge. Participation in communities of practice fosters active engagement, a sense of belonging, and the creation of meaning through experience.

The concept of non-formal learning is highlighted as particularly effective when linked to personal interests and freedom of experimentation (Colley et al., 2003). At the same time, experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), inquiry-based learning (Keselman, 2003), and project-based learning (Thomas, 2000; Katz & Chard, 1999) provide teaching frameworks based on active participation, experimentation, practice, and reflection. The philosophy of New Learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013) aligns with these perspectives, presenting learning as a process grounded in authentic experiences and collaborative knowledge construction.

The perspective of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) adds a dimension of critical reflection, through which learners reinterpret their experiences and redefine their relationship with knowledge and society. Clubs, as alternative learning environments, can support this process by fostering active participation, collaboration, and creativity, thereby highlighting the significance of collaborative, inquiry-based, and experiential learning.

Finally, examples of extracurricular activities from other countries demonstrate their contribution to the cultivation of socio-emotional and metacognitive skills (Larson, 2000; Schusler et al., 2009). This theoretical background supports the view that MEHS clubs can serve as models of educational innovation, offering experiences that enhance not only cognitive development but also democratic participation, empathy, and personal empowerment.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate for exploring pedagogical practices and learning processes as they are experienced and interpreted by participants within specific educational contexts (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2017). The focus on learning phenomena that develop within extracurricular school settings necessitates an in-depth investigation of meanings, interactions, and roles from the perspectives of those directly involved. The research design follows clearly defined stages,

including purposive sampling, data collection through multiple qualitative instruments, and systematic qualitative data analysis.

Sampling constitutes a fundamental aspect of qualitative research, as it directly affects the credibility and analytical depth of the findings (Patton, 2015). In the present study, purposive sampling was employed to select participants with direct, sustained involvement in student clubs at Model and Experimental High Schools (MEHS).

The sample consisted of 27 teachers and 72 students drawn from seven MEHS located in the Attica region. Teachers were selected for their active role in organising and facilitating student club activities. In contrast, students were selected for their participation in clubs during the data collection period. The inclusion of participants from different schools, grades, class sections, and club types aimed to capture variation in pedagogical practices and learning experiences across institutional contexts.

Data were collected using two qualitative research instruments: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, allowing for methodological complementarity and triangulation (Flick, 2017).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 27 teachers (coded T1–T27). The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on teaching practices, pedagogical principles, student participation, and perceptions of learning processes within the clubs. This format ensured comparability across interviews while allowing flexibility for probing and in-depth exploration (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Focus group discussions were conducted with students to explore collective experiences, interactional dynamics, and shared interpretations of learning in the clubs (Morgan, 1997). Two types of focus groups were organised, following Flick's (2017) recommendation to combine heterogeneity and homogeneity. In the first stage, seven heterogeneous focus groups (G1–G7) were conducted, each drawing students from different grades, class sections, and clubs across seven schools. In the second stage, five homogeneous focus groups were conducted within a single school, each consisting of six students from the same class section and grade. Each focus group constituted a distinct unit of analysis.

Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis within the framework of qualitative content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tsiolis, 2018). All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. Coding was conducted iteratively, combining inductive coding with theoretically informed categories derived from the study's conceptual framework.

Analytical procedures included constant comparison within and across data sources (teachers and students) to identify recurring themes, divergences, and patterns related to pedagogical practices, learning processes, roles, responsibilities, and initiative-taking. Illustrative excerpts from the data are incorporated into the presentation of findings to enhance analytical transparency and empirical grounding.

The credibility and dependability of the findings were strengthened through methodological triangulation, combining different data collection instruments (semi-structured interviews and focus groups) and different participant groups (teachers and students) (Flick, 2017). Analytical decisions were systematically documented throughout the research process.

While reproducibility in qualitative research does not imply identical replication of results, it refers to the transparency and systematic documentation of the research process, enabling other researchers to follow the same analytical steps in comparable contexts (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2017). By providing a detailed account of sampling criteria, data collection procedures, and analytical strategies, the present

study ensures methodological reproducibility in accordance with established qualitative research standards.

The study was conducted in accordance with established principles of research ethics. Formal approval was obtained from the Ministry of Education and the Ethics and Deontology Committee of the University of the Peloponnese. All participants were informed of the aims of the study and provided informed consent voluntarily.

During data collection, particular attention was paid to interviewer conduct, following the guidelines proposed by Verma and Mallick (2004), including clarity in presenting research objectives, respectful questioning, careful recording of responses, and appropriate management of interpersonal dynamics. Throughout all stages of the research process, an atmosphere of trust, confidentiality, and mutual respect was maintained, consistent with ethical qualitative research practice (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Results

The findings of the study are organised into three thematic axes: (a) teaching practices, (b) student responsibilities, and (c) the development of student initiatives. The presentation of results is based on the comparison and synthesis of narratives from teachers and students.

1. Teaching Practices: From Instruction to Participatory Learning

Teachers describe the learning processes in the clubs as fundamentally distinct from those in conventional classroom instruction. Their accounts emphasize collaborative teaching (T6, T15, T17, T18, T20, T2), experiential learning (T2, T3, T6, T17, T27), inquiry-based/discovery learning (T1, T18, T20, T23, T24), and problem-solving approaches (T16, T22). For example, teacher T18 explained: *“Here, students necessarily work in groups, take initiatives, negotiate, collaborate, and investigate. In other words, both inquiry-based and collaborative learning are implemented, and students discover things.”*

Other references highlight the use of communicative strategies such as argumentation (T4, T7), open discussion (T8), dialogic interpretation (T5), and exploratory conversation (T9). Teacher T7 stressed: *“Argumentation is, in itself, a process of inquiry-based learning.”* These methods align with the principles of socially mediated learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and the model of the learning community (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and engagement.

Teachers, therefore, portray clubs as spaces of active learning where students work collaboratively, research, assume roles, and utilise their experiences. Eight of the fourteen teachers (T2, T3, T6, T10, T11, T17, T23, T24) explicitly attributed this pedagogical differentiation to the distinct logic underpinning club activities. Teacher T23 noted: *“The truth is that things are freer in the club. Discovery learning exists in the classroom as well, but the process is entirely different. In the classroom, the aim is coverage of the syllabus. In the club, learning is not tied to examinations but to exploration. They are two different things.”*

Students confirm this shift, underscoring their active involvement, co-constructing content, and focusing on areas of genuine interest. Their statements echo experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and self-directed learning, linked to personal meaning-making (Mezirow, 1991). Students highlighted differences between club-based and classroom-based learning in terms of content, methodology, atmosphere, and assessment. As one student (G1b) commented, *“In class, the teacher has to teach us specific things to cover the syllabus. In the club, it’s about creating something at the end — we learn to produce.”*

Overall, both students and teachers emphasised that club practices align more closely with the principles of “New Learning” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013) and collaborative learning models (Johnson & Johnson, 2008), which prioritise participation, experimentation, dialogue, and authentic knowledge production.

2. Responsibilities: From Assignment to Collective Commitment

Student and teacher testimonies converge on the perception that club responsibilities are not externally imposed tasks but outcomes of voluntary involvement and belonging within the group. Teachers indicated that responsibilities vary according to the club's theme and the group's dynamics, often taking creative forms that build skills (T7, T10, T20, T25, T26, T27). Importantly, they are rarely compulsory; instead, they emerge as shared commitments intended to advance the group's objectives rather than to serve evaluation purposes.

Students reinforced this perspective, stressing that club responsibilities were manageable, engaging, and rarely perceived as burdensome. One student (G4d) reflected: *“I didn't experience it as a burden — on the contrary, I enjoyed it. It felt more like a personal initiative. You are allowed to intervene and do things you actually like.”* Another noted: *“All the work is done essentially during club time. We don't have homework, it's more like voluntary involvement”* (G4b).

This ethos resonates with the theoretical framework of non-formal learning (Colley et al., 2003), where role-taking is self-regulated and intrinsically motivated. It also aligns with principles of social and emotional learning, fostering responsibility and cooperation (Zins et al., 2004).

3. Initiatives: The Student as Co-Creator of Learning

The opportunity for students to assume initiatives emerges as one of the most distinctive differences between clubs and the formal classroom. Initiatives frequently involve designing and implementing activities, selecting topics, and even modifying the club's agenda. Teachers underlined that student initiatives thrive in contexts of trust, encouragement, and freedom, particularly in artistic clubs where students often take responsibility for directing performances, designing sets, composing music, or choreographing dance (T17).

As teacher T14 explained: *“During the first semester, students needed time to become familiar with the process. Now they are ready to propose their own texts, suggest approaches, and lead interpretive work themselves.”*

Students confirmed this, emphasising the sense of ownership and agency. A film club participant (G3d) noted: *“After the theoretical part, everything depends on our own initiatives — from which the film itself emerges.”*

This empowerment contrasts sharply with the entrenched culture of passive learning in the Greek educational system. Importantly, the cultivation of initiatives mirrors the notion of schools as learning organisations (Stoll & Kools, 2017), in which students and teachers alike co-construct knowledge.

Triangulation of Results on Learning Processes and the Significance of Clubs

As outlined in the methodological framework, to ensure the validity and reliability of conclusions, methodological triangulation was applied “within the method,” using different tools (semi-structured interviews and focus groups) and different participant categories (teachers and students) (Flick, 2017:

210). In this study, triangulation was used to validate the findings by combining data from teachers' interviews and students' focus group discussions.

The following synthesis presents the core findings across thematic axes, highlighting convergences and divergences between the two groups of participants:

Table 1

Thematic Axis	Teachers' Perspectives	Students' Perspectives
Teaching methods	Use of collaborative, inquiry -based, and experiential approaches. Clear departure from teacher- centered instruction.	Active and participatory learning. Sense of freedom and engagement. Students create rather than merely execute tasks.
Student responsibilities	Non-examination-oriented, creative, and group-focused tasks. Responsibilities are not imposed but voluntarily assumed to serve the goals of the club.	Perceived as voluntary and interest-driven, not obligatory. Sense of ownership and personal involvement.
Initiative-taking	Recognized as important, though requiring time, guidance, and trust to develop.	Strong desire for active involvement. Students co-shape the agenda of the club. Initiatives connected to thematic interest and group dynamics.
Relationship to classroom learning	Clubs provide pedagogical freedom, though this cannot be fully replicated in the formal classroom context.	In contrast to exam-driven classroom culture, clubs are experienced as "spaces of personal development."
Role of the teacher	Acts as facilitator, coordinator, and group member rather than authoritative instructor.	Teacher is perceived as collaborator and supporter — someone who participates rather than simply transmits knowledge.

Overall, triangulation indicates a strong alignment between teachers' and students' perspectives, both of whom view the clubs as environments that foster participatory learning, collaborative engagement, and student agency. At the same time, structural barriers within the formal school system make it challenging to transfer these practices into regular classroom instruction.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Model and Experimental High School (MEHS) clubs constitute distinct learning environments that systematically promote experiential, collaborative, and participatory forms of learning. Unlike dominant classroom practices shaped by curriculum coverage and examination-oriented assessment, learning within clubs is organised around active student involvement, creativity, and shared ownership of knowledge.

Analysis of interviews and focus group discussions revealed three interrelated thematic areas that characterise learning processes within MEHS clubs. First, experiential and collaborative learning emerged as a core feature of club-based activities. Teachers and students consistently described learning as a process of exploration, inquiry, and collective meaning-making rather than content transmission. These practices align with theoretical perspectives on socially mediated learning, where knowledge is constructed through interaction and participation (Vygotsky, 1978), as well as with the concept of communities of practice, in which learning occurs through mutual engagement in shared activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Second, participation in clubs was found to contribute significantly to the development of personal, social, and metacognitive skills, including initiative-taking, responsibility, communication, and autonomy. Students' narratives emphasised increased self-confidence and willingness to take risks, reflecting key dimensions of experiential learning theory (Kolb & Fry, 1974; Kolb, 1984) and the reflective processes central to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). The emphasis on intrinsic motivation, voluntary engagement, and learner agency resonates with non-formal learning frameworks that highlight autonomy and creativity as central educational values (Colley et al., 2003).

Third, MEHS clubs function as learning communities characterised by more egalitarian relationships between teachers and students. Teachers' roles shift from authoritative knowledge transmitters to facilitators and co-learners, while students actively shape both content and learning processes. Such dynamics reflect principles of collaborative learning, distributed leadership, and shared responsibility, reinforcing the collective construction of meaning and the development of democratic learning cultures (Frydaci, 2009). Practices associated with inquiry-based and project-based learning — such as dialogue, experimentation, peer collaboration, and reflection — were consistently observed (Katz & Chard, 1999; Thomas, 2000; Han & Bhattacharya, 2011; Pedaste et al., 2015).

From a policy-oriented perspective, these findings suggest that MEHS clubs operate as institutionalised spaces of pedagogical innovation embedded within the public education system. They provide fertile ground for the development of socio-emotional competences, responsibility, empathy, and self-regulation (Larson, 2000; Schusler et al., 2009), while modelling alternative forms of teaching and learning that are often absent from formal classrooms.

At the same time, the study confirms that the transfer of club-based practices into formal classroom settings remains constrained by systemic factors. Centralised curricula, examination-oriented assessment, limited pedagogical autonomy, and large class sizes restrict the scaling of innovative practices. Teachers highlighted that, in the absence of broader institutional support, clubs often function as compensatory mechanisms rather than as drivers of system-wide pedagogical change. As previous research suggests, without alignment between innovative practices and enabling policy frameworks, such initiatives risk remaining fragmented and marginal (Bagakis & MacBeath, 2008; MacBeath, 2012).

Overall, MEHS clubs can be understood as intermediary policy spaces: embedded within the education system yet operating with relative pedagogical autonomy. As such, they generate valuable empirical evidence on how innovation can emerge within existing institutional constraints, offering insights relevant to evidence-informed educational policy and reform.

Conclusions

This study examined the learning processes developed within student clubs at Greek Model and Experimental High Schools, focusing on their pedagogical characteristics and potential contributions to innovation in formal secondary education. Drawing on qualitative evidence from teachers and students, the findings highlight that MEHS clubs function as structured non-formal learning environments that promote participatory, experiential, and collaborative forms of learning, as well as enhanced student agency and responsibility.

The innovative character of MEHS clubs lies in their capacity to operate as laboratories of pedagogical experimentation within public education. Their organisational structure — often inspired by project-based approaches — combined with differentiated strategies, inquiry, and shared ownership of learning, bridges the divide between formal and non-formal education. In this respect, clubs offer a practical illustration of

how schools can evolve into learning communities characterised by collaboration, reflection, and collective meaning-making, as envisaged in contemporary theories of New Learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2013).

From an educational policy perspective, the findings underscore the potential of institutionalised extracurricular structures to contribute to evidence-informed reform. Practices observed within clubs — such as experiential learning, student voice, collaboration, and facilitative teaching roles — address dimensions of learning that are often marginalised in examination-driven systems. However, the study also demonstrates that the sustainability and scalability of such practices depend on broader systemic conditions, including curriculum flexibility, assessment reform, and enhanced school autonomy.

Strengthening MEHS clubs as sites of pedagogical innovation requires systematic documentation of practices, institutional recognition, and stronger integration with formal curricula. Without such alignment, innovative practices risk remaining isolated rather than informing system-level change. Supporting schools as learning communities, with active participation of all members, may enhance both the impact and longevity of club-based innovation.

Several directions for further research emerge from the present study. First, comparative studies involving other types of secondary schools could examine whether similar learning processes develop in different institutional contexts and under varying degrees of autonomy. Second, longitudinal research could investigate the long-term impact of participation in MEHS clubs on students' academic trajectories, socio-emotional development, and civic engagement. Third, mixed-methods approaches could complement qualitative findings with quantitative indicators related to student engagement and learning outcomes. Finally, future research could explore the professional learning of teachers involved in clubs and the conditions under which club-based practices influence classroom teaching and school-level leadership for learning.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in the conduct and reporting of this research.

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