

TOPIC FOCUS

This inquiry project explores how extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, FFA, and ASB can influence student success in rural high schools. These activities aren't part of the standard curriculum, but they often help students grow socially, emotionally, and academically.

Rural high schools, like St. John where I completed my student teaching, face challenges such as low attendance, fewer extracurricular options, and limited resources. However, I observed that students involved in extracurriculars often performed better than their peers attending school more consistently and showing higher levels of engagement.

This raised key questions:

- Do extracurriculars actually cause these outcomes?
- Or are academically successful students just more likely to join these programs?
- Or is it a mix of both?

By examining existing research and applying theoretical frameworks like Self-Determination Theory and Social Constructivism, this project aims to understand how student engagement through extracurriculars can be a powerful tool for improving rural education outcomes.

Rationale

During my student teaching placement at St. John High School, a rural school with low attendance and test scores, I observed that students involved in extracurriculars defied these trends. This prompted me to explore how these activities might support broader student success, especially in under-resourced environments.

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

This project seeks to find out how involvement in extracurricular activities impacts academic success in high school, what factors contribute to student engagement in rural high schools, and in what ways social support systems, such as peer networks, influence academic achievement.

- To find out the extent of these impacts, this project was driven by these inquiry questions
- "How do extracurricular activities impact academic success in rural high schools?"
- "What factors contribute to student engagement in rural communities?"
- "How do peer/social networks support student achievement?"



Photo of St. John Endicott-Copperative High-School in 2021

WHAT IS A RURAL HIGH SCHOOL?

Rural high schools are located in less densely populated areas and often have limited resources, fewer extracurricular options, and greater challenges with student engagement, attendance, and achievement.

Rural high schools serve about 19% of U.S. public school students but receive less funding per student than urban schools. These schools often have fewer extracurricular options and outdated infrastructure (Showalter et al., 2019).

However, they often benefit from tight-knit communities, which, if leveraged well, can promote a strong sense of belonging and student purpose.

TPEP CRITERION

The Washington State Teacher and Principal Evaluation Program (TPEP) emphasizes the importance of setting high expectations for all students. Criterion 1 specifically evaluates a teacher’s ability to center instruction on these expectations.

Extracurricular programs are a natural extension of this principle. Activities like ASB, FFA, and athletics set high standards for commitment, leadership, and performance. These programs create environments where students are expected to show up, participate actively, and contribute meaningfully—skills that transfer directly into academic settings.

In rural schools, where student engagement is often lower, extracurriculars can elevate expectations by offering structured, goal-oriented challenges. For example, St. John’s FFA program requires strong attendance and active involvement, reinforcing a culture of responsibility.

By supporting and integrating extracurriculars into the broader school mission, educators can raise the bar for academic achievement and cultivate student confidence, motivation, and ownership of learning

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Self-Determination Theory
Extracurriculars help meet students’ psychological needs for:

- **Relatedness** (feeling connected to peers)
- **Competence** (developing skills)
- **Autonomy** (having a voice)

Social Constructivism
Learning is social. Extracurriculars, especially group-based ones like ASB or sports can help students co-construct knowledge through collaboration.

RESEARCH

- **Extracurricular participation improves academic outcomes.**
Students involved in extracurriculars have higher GPAs, better attendance, and increased school engagement. These benefits extend across diverse student populations.
(Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Eccles & Barber, 1999)
- **Involvement promotes psychological well-being.**
Participation is linked to reduced risk of depression and increased self-esteem—factors crucial for learning and motivation.
(O’Flaherty et al., 2022; Eccles & Barber, 1999)
- **Activities foster important life skills.**
Students develop leadership, time management, and teamwork skills, which carry over into classroom success.
(Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012; Holloway, 2002)
- **ASB promotes student voice and school leadership.**
A strong ASB program can connect students to their school’s mission, create a sense of agency, and enhance the school climate.
(Mitra, 2004; Barley & Beesley, 2007)
- **Rural schools face unique barriers.**
Rural schools often lack funding, extracurricular variety, and infrastructure—challenges that can hurt student engagement unless addressed.
(Showalter et al., 2019; Missouri Association of Rural Education, 2023)
- **Programs like FFA help bridge gaps.**
FFA programs require reliability, attendance, and effort—creating structure and expectations in rural environments where those can be lacking.
(Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Finn & Zimmer, 2012)
- **Engagement is the real key to success.**
Engagement—not just academics—drives student achievement. Extracurriculars foster engagement through collaboration, challenge, and connection.
(Finn et al., 2012; Jenkins, 2012)
- **Low engagement is a predictor of low achievement.**
Instructional Practices Inventory (IPI) research in Missouri rural schools found that schools with lower student engagement had lower performance outcomes.
(Schroeder, 2011)

ACTION PLAN

Extracurriculars are not just “extras.” In rural schools, they may be one of the few tools available to build student engagement, belonging, and motivation. Programs like FFA and ASB help foster a culture of participation, self-worth, and purpose. When students feel connected and empowered, academic success often follows.

I will prioritize inclusive extracurriculars that promote leadership, social support, and student voice. In my classroom, I’ll connect learning to students’ interests and offer real-world relevance. Challenges such as low funding or limited staff support will be met with creativity—building community partnerships, advocating for equitable funding, and ensuring all students feel represented and supported.

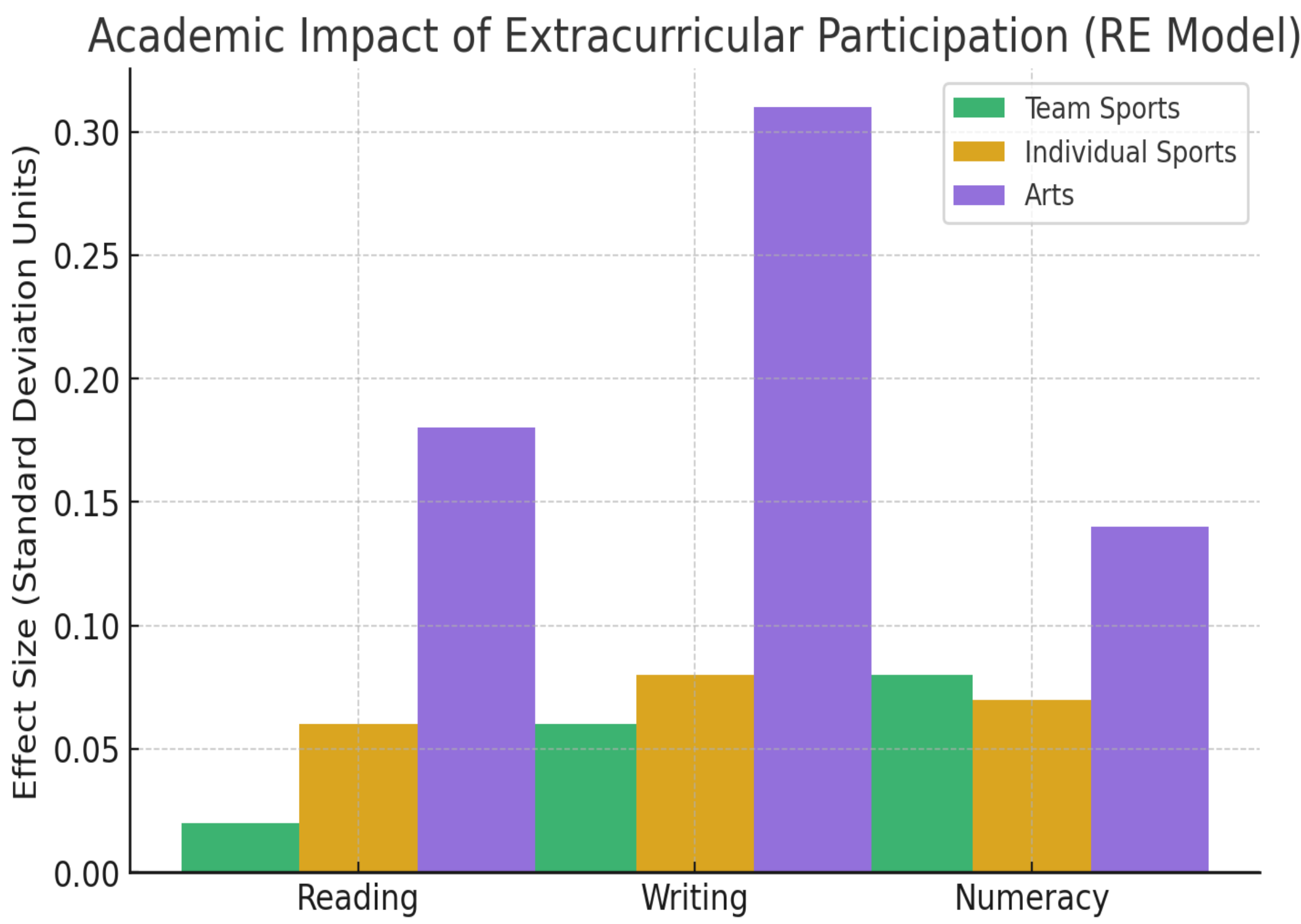


Figure 1. Rates of extracurricular participation by age group (12–13 vs. 14–15) across three activity types: team sports, individual sports, and arts. Participation generally declines with age, particularly in arts activities.
*Source: O’Flaherty, M., Burton, L., & Daniel, L. (2022). Do extracurricular activities contribute to better outcomes for Australian adolescents? Journal of Adolescence, 93, 857–864.**

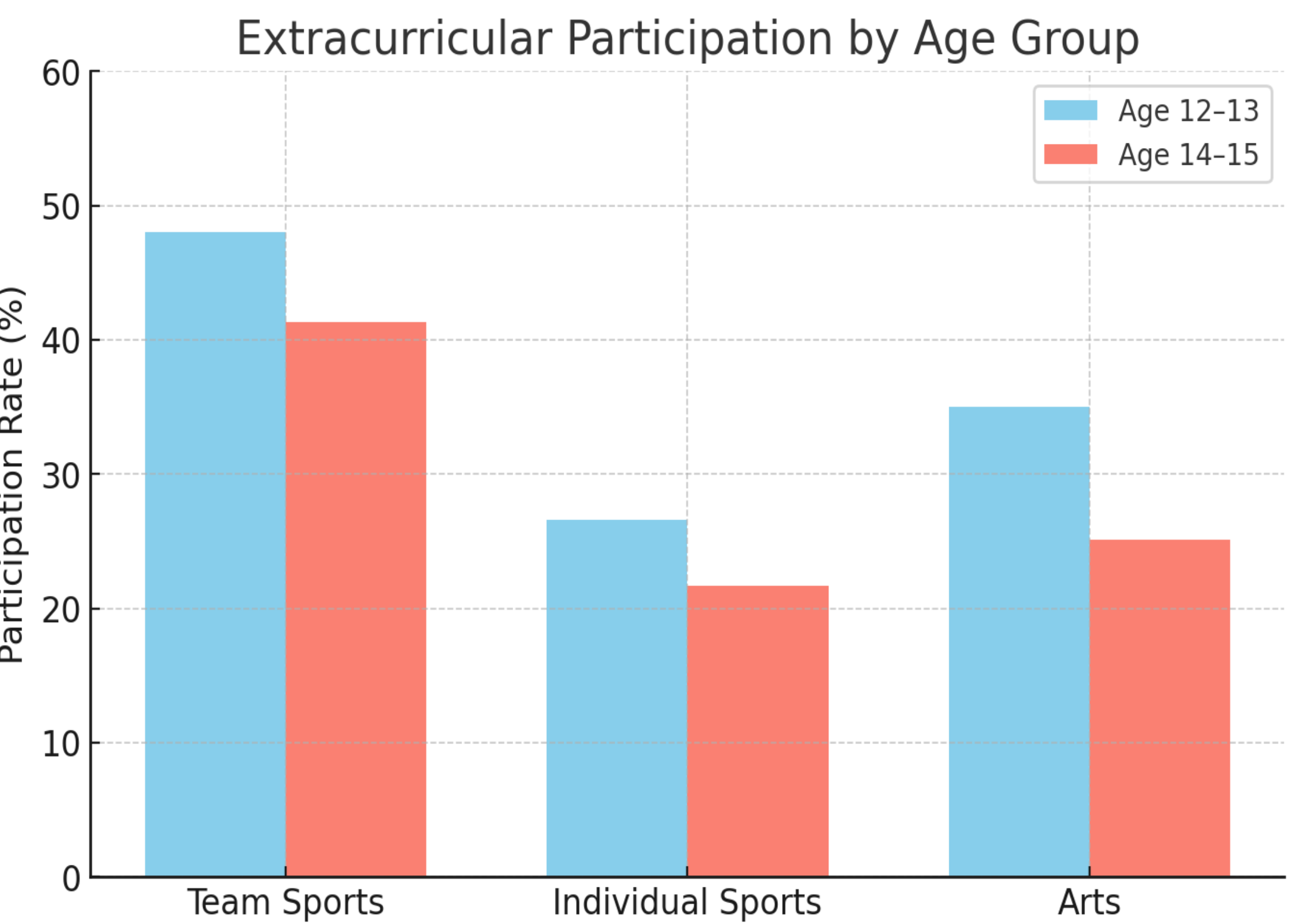


Figure 2. Estimated impact of extracurricular participation on NAPLAN academic outcomes (reading, writing, and numeracy) using a random-effects model. Arts participation shows the strongest positive correlation with literacy scores.
*Source: O’Flaherty, M., Burton, L., & Daniel, L. (2022). Do extracurricular activities contribute to better outcomes for Australian adolescents? Journal of Adolescence, 93, 857–864.**

SOURCES

