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The impact of robotics clubs on K-12 students' interest in STEM careers

Oyebola Olusola Ayeni [1, *], Chika Chioma Unachukwu [2], Nancy Mohd Al Hamad [3], Onyebuchi Nneamaka Chisom [4] and Ololade Elizabeth Adewusi [5]

[1] *Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria.*
[2] *Ministry of Education, Lagos, Nigeria.*
[3] *Bridge the Gap, Dubai, UAE.*
[4] *National Examinations Council, Nigeria.*
[5] *Independent researcher, UK.*

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformative impact of robotics clubs on K-12 students' interest in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) careers. Through a comprehensive review, we delve into the experiential learning environment, critical thinking skills, and collaborative dynamics fostered by these clubs. Despite their potential, challenges such as accessibility, gender disparities, and resource constraints are identified. The recommendations provided offer strategic insights to optimize the effectiveness of robotics clubs. These recommendations aim to create inclusive, sustainable, and impactful STEM engagement by emphasizing equitable access, diversity, and integration with the formal curriculum. By addressing challenges and implementing recommendations, educators and policymakers can harness the full potential of robotics clubs in shaping the STEM trajectories of K-12 students.

Keywords: Robotics Clubs; STEM Education; K-12 Students; Experiential Learning; Inclusivity

1. Introduction

In contemporary education, fostering an early interest in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) has become paramount. The global shift towards an increasingly technology-driven society places a premium on cultivating a workforce adept in STEM fields (Boss & Krauss, 2022). Within K-12 education, where foundational knowledge is imparted and career aspirations begin to take shape, the role of extracurricular activities, particularly robotics clubs, has garnered substantial attention (Gomoll, Hmelo-Silver, Šabanović, & Francisco, 2016; Sneider & Ravel, 2021). This paper undertakes a comprehensive review to explore and analyze the impact of robotics clubs on K-12 students' interest in pursuing careers in STEM disciplines.

The imperative for cultivating STEM interest at an early age cannot be overstated. As the world becomes more interconnected and reliant on technological innovations, the demand for a skilled STEM workforce continues to surge (National Academies of Sciences & Medicine, 2016). Recognizing this, educational institutions and policymakers alike have sought innovative approaches to engage students in STEM subjects beyond the traditional classroom setting. Robotics clubs have emerged as a noteworthy avenue, providing students with hands-on experiences that bridge theoretical knowledge with practical applications. Understanding the dynamics of how participation in such clubs influences students' perceptions, preferences, and eventual pursuits in STEM careers is pivotal for shaping effective educational strategies (Byars-Winston, Estrada, Howard, Davis, & Zalapa, 2010; Sithole et al., 2017).

* Corresponding author: Oyebola Olusola Ayeni

The journey toward understanding the impact of robotics clubs on K-12 students' STEM interests begins with exploring the broader context of STEM education. This introduction sets the stage by delineating the significance of STEM disciplines in the contemporary world and the critical role of education in nurturing the next generation of STEM professionals. The subsequent sections will delve into the historical evolution of robotics in education, examining how robotics clubs have become integral components of extracurricular initiatives aiming to stoke the flames of curiosity and ambition among young minds.

While prior research has provided valuable insights into the positive outcomes of extracurricular STEM activities, a specific focus on robotics clubs is warranted. This review seeks to consolidate existing knowledge, drawing from an extensive body of literature, to elucidate how robotics clubs contribute to shaping students' attitudes and interests in STEM fields. Through an exploration of theoretical frameworks, practical considerations, and empirical evidence, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the impact of robotics clubs on K-12 students, informing educators, policymakers, and researchers alike in their efforts to design and implement effective STEM education initiatives.

2. Robotics Clubs in K-12 Education

The integration of robotics clubs into K-12 education represents a transformative approach to engaging students in STEM disciplines. Often situated within the extracurricular landscape, these clubs serve as dynamic spaces where theoretical knowledge converges with hands-on, experiential learning. This section explores the multifaceted nature of robotics clubs in K-12 education, elucidating their defining characteristics, the diversity of activities they encompass, and the demographic nuances that shape their impact.

Within the K-12 educational context, robotics clubs are collaborative, student-centred platforms designed to immerse participants in robotics, automation, and problem-solving (Amante, Souza, Quintas-Mendes, & Miranda-Pinto, 2023). These clubs go beyond traditional classroom settings, offering an environment where students can explore, design, and build robotic systems. Their ethos emphasizes teamwork, creativity, and applying STEM principles in a practical context (Chang & Chen, 2023). The key characteristics of robotics clubs include providing a supportive community where like-minded individuals converge to share a passion for technology. Club activities often involve designing and constructing robots, programming them to perform specific tasks, and participating in competitions that foster friendly competition and camaraderie. Technology's fluid and evolving nature ensures that robotics clubs remain dynamic spaces, mirroring the fast-paced advancements in the field (Miller et al., 2018).

The repertoire of activities within robotics clubs is diverse, catering to various interests and skill levels. Fundamental to these activities is the integration of robotics kits, programming languages, and various hardware components (Dautenhahn, 1995). Participants may build simple robots using Lego Mindstorms or explore more complex projects involving custom-designed robotic systems. Competitions are pivotal in many robotics clubs, providing students with a tangible goal and a platform to showcase their skills. Events such as robot battles, maze-solving challenges, and collaborative projects enhance technical proficiency and instill a sense of achievement and resilience in participants. Beyond competitions, robotics clubs often extend their reach into community outreach programs, where students apply their knowledge to address real-world problems, fostering a sense of social responsibility (Mosley, Ardito, & Scollins, 2016).

Understanding the demographic landscape of robotics clubs is crucial for gauging their accessibility and inclusivity. Traditionally, participation in STEM-related activities has shown disparities along gender and socioeconomic lines (Gardner-McCune, Washington, Dillon, Washington, & Payton, 2020; Yang et al., 2019). However, robotics clubs have demonstrated a capacity to transcend these barriers by creating inclusive environments celebrating diversity. Research indicates that participation rates in robotics clubs vary across regions and school settings. Factors such as school resources, teacher encouragement, and community support influence the prevalence of robotics clubs. Efforts to increase diversity and inclusion often involve targeted outreach programs, mentorship initiatives, and partnerships with local industries (Anwar, Bascou, Menekse, & Kardgar, 2019; Hinchliffe, Saggers, Chalmers, & Hobbs, 2016; Hughes-Roberts et al., 2019; Ribeiro, de FG Trindade, Palácios, & Todt, 2023).

In conclusion, robotics clubs in K-12 education serve as catalysts for cultivating STEM enthusiasm among students. Through their unique blend of collaboration, hands-on projects, and competitive events, these clubs enhance technical skills and contribute to developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork. The subsequent sections of this review will delve into the impact of such clubs on students' interest in pursuing STEM careers, shedding light on their role as transformative agents within the educational landscape.

3. Impact of Robotics Clubs on STEM Interest

The integration of robotics clubs into K-12 education has emerged as a pivotal force in shaping students' interest and enthusiasm for STEM disciplines. Beyond the tangible outcomes of building robots and participating in competitions, these clubs profoundly influence students' perceptions, motivations, and aspirations. This section delves into the nuanced ways robotics clubs impact STEM interest, exploring this transformative process's psychological, educational, and sociocultural dimensions.

At the heart of the impact lies the experiential learning environment that robotics clubs provide. Unlike traditional classroom settings, where theoretical concepts are often presented in abstraction, robotics clubs offer a hands-on approach that allows students to apply STEM principles in real-world scenarios (Holmquist, 2014; Juškevičienė, Dagienė, & Dolgopolovas, 2021; Ntemngwa & Oliver, 2018). Designing, building, and programming a robot transforms theoretical knowledge into tangible, functional creations. This experiential learning fosters a deep understanding of STEM concepts, making the subjects more relatable and inspiring curiosity (Barker, 2014).

The multidisciplinary nature of robotics projects necessitates a holistic approach to problem-solving. Students in robotics clubs encounter challenges requiring analytical thinking, creativity, and adaptability. From troubleshooting technical issues to optimizing robot performance, participants develop a problem-solving mindset that transcends the realm of robotics. This cultivated aptitude for critical thinking becomes a transferable skill applicable to a myriad of STEM-related challenges, laying the groundwork for future academic and professional pursuits (Colley, 2020; Siekmann & Korbel, 2016).

Collaboration is an inherent aspect of robotics clubs, mirroring the collaborative nature of many real-world STEM professions. Students work in teams to conceptualize, design, and execute their projects, fostering interpersonal skills, effective communication, and the ability to work synergistically towards a common goal. The collaborative environment of robotics clubs enhances the overall learning experience and prepares students for the collaborative dynamics inherent in STEM careers. Participation in robotics clubs profoundly impacts shaping students' perceptions of STEM careers. By providing a tangible link between their efforts and the functioning of a robot, students gain a clearer understanding of the practical applications of STEM disciplines. This clarity often catalyzes crystallizing career aspirations. Robotics clubs play a crucial role in demystifying STEM professions, especially for underrepresented groups, and contribute to developing a STEM identity wherein students see themselves as potential contributors to the field (Baber et al., 2019; Charleston, 2012).

One notable aspect of the impact of robotics clubs is their potential to address gender disparities in STEM. Historically, STEM fields have faced challenges related to gender diversity (Cheryan, Ziegler, Montoya, & Jiang, 2017). However, robotics clubs have demonstrated an ability to create inclusive spaces where both male and female students can thrive. These clubs' collaborative and hands-on nature helps break down stereotypes (Davila Dos Santos, Albahari, Díaz, & De Freitas, 2022; Witherspoon, Schunn, Higashi, & Baehr, 2016). It fosters an environment where diverse perspectives are valued. The iterative process of designing and refining robots in a club setting instills students a sense of resilience (Eguchi, 2017). They learn to embrace challenges, iterate on designs, and persist in the face of setbacks. This resilience not only enhances their capacity to tackle complex STEM problems but also bolsters their confidence. The sense of accomplishment derived from overcoming obstacles contributes to a positive feedback loop, reinforcing a belief in their capabilities.

4. Challenges and Limitations

While robotics clubs in K-12 education are crucial in sparking interest and enthusiasm for STEM disciplines, their effectiveness is not without challenges and limitations. This section comprehensively explores the various obstacles educators, policymakers, and students encounter in leveraging robotics clubs as instruments for STEM engagement.

One of the primary challenges lies in ensuring equitable access to robotics clubs (Kitano et al., 1997). Disparities in school resources, funding, and geographical location can result in unequal student opportunities (Pedro, Subosa, Rivas, & Valverde, 2019). Schools in economically disadvantaged areas may lack the necessary infrastructure, mentors, or financial support to establish and maintain robotics clubs, exacerbating educational inequalities. While robotics clubs have shown promise in breaking gender stereotypes in STEM, gender disparities persist. Female participation in robotics clubs is often lower than male participation. Addressing this challenge requires targeted efforts to create an inclusive and welcoming environment that encourages girls to join and actively participate in robotics activities (Dasgupta & Stout, 2014; Schmader, 2023; Sullivan, 2019).

The implementation of robotics programs often demands significant financial resources. Acquiring robotics kit technology and maintaining a suitable workspace can strain school budgets (Liu, Guo, Zou, & Duffy, 2022; Pauliková, Gyurák Babeľová, & Ubárová, 2021). This limitation can hinder the scalability of robotics clubs, limiting their reach and effectiveness, especially in underfunded schools. The success of robotics clubs relies heavily on educators who may lack the necessary training and expertise in robotics and programming. Inadequate professional development opportunities for teachers can impede the quality of instruction and mentorship provided in these clubs, affecting the overall experience for students (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005).

Not all students thrive in the same learning environment. While robotics clubs emphasize hands-on, experiential learning, some students may prefer alternative approaches (Eguchi, 2016; Mosley et al., 2016). Ensuring inclusivity for diverse learning styles is a challenge as educators strive to create an environment that caters to the diverse student body's varied needs and preferences. The integration of robotics clubs with the formal K-12 curriculum can be challenging. Schools often face time constraints and standardized testing pressures, leaving limited room for extracurricular activities. The challenge lies in finding a balance that allows robotics clubs to complement formal education without creating additional burdens for students and educators (Pope, 2008).

Maintaining long-term engagement in robotics clubs can be challenging. Students may initially join out of curiosity but face distractions or competing priorities over time (Resnick, 2017). Sustaining interest requires continuous innovation, varied activities, and strategic planning to ensure the club remains a dynamic and relevant component of a student's educational journey. The activities conducted in robotics clubs may sometimes lack diversity, focusing predominantly on competitive events or specific projects. This limitation may exclude students with different interests or skill sets, hindering the club's ability to cater to a broad spectrum of students and potential STEM enthusiasts (Godec, Archer, & Dawson, 2022; Howarth & Scott, 2014).

Measuring the impact and effectiveness of robotics clubs poses a challenge. The traditional metrics used in formal education may not capture the full range of skills and attitudes developed through participation in these clubs (Leonard et al., 2016). Developing robust evaluation methods beyond quantitative measures is essential for understanding the holistic impact of robotics club involvement (Šabanović, 2010; van Gemert-Pijnen et al., 2011). Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from educational stakeholders, including school administrators, teachers, policymakers, and the broader community. Overcoming these limitations will create more inclusive, accessible, and effective robotics clubs that can genuinely foster STEM interest and engagement among K-12 students.

Recommendations

Navigating the complexities surrounding the integration of robotics clubs into K-12 education for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics engagement presents a challenge for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders. To enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of these programs, a set of targeted recommendations serves as a comprehensive guide. These suggestions address vital areas to overcome challenges and maximize the positive impact of robotics clubs.

Firstly, providing financial support is paramount. Allocating resources and funding, especially to schools in economically disadvantaged areas, ensures equitable access to robotics kits, technology, and essential training. Additionally, establishing grant programs or partnerships with industry and community organizations can further support schools in initiating and sustaining robotics clubs. Outreach programs are essential to foster inclusivity. These initiatives should target underrepresented groups, encouraging girls to participate in robotics clubs. Collaboration with organizations promoting diversity in STEM fields can amplify these efforts. Diversifying activities within robotics clubs is equally crucial to cater to all students' varied interests and talents.

Continuous professional development opportunities for educators focusing on robotics, programming, and effective mentoring strategies are vital. Creating a community of practice that facilitates collaboration, resource sharing, and the exchange of best practices contributes to the overall success of robotics education. Integrating robotics club activities with existing curriculum standards aligns them with formal education. Advocating for flexible scheduling and curriculum adaptations ensures the seamless integration of robotics activities within the school day. Establishing clear progression pathways for students and encouraging alumni involvement through mentorship are critical components.

Expanding evaluation methods beyond traditional academic metrics and implementing longitudinal studies are necessary to assess the long-term impact of robotics club participation on students' academic and career trajectories. To address geographical and logistical barriers, exploring virtual platforms and providing online resources enhance accessibility and flexibility. Establishing partnerships with local industries, businesses, and STEM professionals creates

mentorship opportunities. It provides real-world context for robotics club activities. Collaboration with industry partners to organize challenges and competitions aligned with real-world STEM applications motivates students with authentic experiences. Soft skills development within robotics clubs, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, is essential. Emphasizing the transferability of acquired skills to various academic and professional settings highlights their broader applicability.

Transparent communication channels between educators, students, parents, and the community are crucial for the success of robotics clubs. Regular updates through newsletters, social media, or school events showcase the positive impact of these programs on students. Implementing these recommendations requires a collaborative effort from educators, administrators, policymakers, and the broader community, ultimately enhancing robotics clubs as practical tools for nurturing STEM interests and preparing the next generation for success in STEM-related fields.

5. Conclusion

In the ever-evolving landscape of K-12 education, integrating robotics clubs has emerged as a dynamic force, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world applications in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics disciplines. Through a comprehensive exploration of the impact, challenges, and recommendations associated with robotics clubs, this review underscores their transformative potential in shaping the STEM trajectories of K-12 students.

The journey began by recognizing the profound importance of early STEM engagement and acknowledging education's pivotal role in nurturing the skills and interests that fuel future STEM professionals. The introduction set the stage by emphasizing the critical need for innovative approaches, with robotics clubs as beacons of experiential learning and practical application. As we navigated through the literature, the significance of robotics clubs in K-12 education became increasingly apparent. These clubs, characterized by their collaborative ethos, hands-on projects, and competitive events, serve as crucibles where students forge robots and the essential skills and attitudes that underpin success in STEM fields. From fostering critical thinking and problem-solving to promoting teamwork and inclusivity, robotics clubs embody the multidimensional nature of STEM engagement.

However, this transformative journey is not without its challenges. Access disparities, gender imbalances, resource constraints, and the need for sustained engagement pose formidable obstacles that demand collective attention and strategic solutions. The recommendations outlined in the preceding section provide a roadmap for stakeholders to optimize the impact of robotics clubs, ensuring that they become accessible, inclusive, and sustainable catalysts for STEM interest. In conclusion, the transformative power of robotics clubs in K-12 education lies not only in the robots constructed but in the minds ignited and the futures shaped. These clubs, as dynamic learning environments, have the potential to democratize access to STEM, break down gender stereotypes, and equip students with the skills and confidence needed to thrive in a rapidly advancing world. By embracing the recommendations and addressing the challenges head-on, educators, policymakers, and the broader community can unlock the full potential of robotics clubs, propelling the next generation toward fulfilling and impactful STEM careers. As we look ahead, the journey continues. The impact of robotics clubs on K-12 students' interest in STEM careers is an evolving narrative, one where each participant plays a crucial role in shaping the future narrative. Through collective effort and a steadfast commitment to innovation, inclusivity, and educational excellence, robotics clubs stand poised to be transformative agents, inspiring a new generation of STEM enthusiasts who will undoubtedly leave an indelible mark on the world.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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