

Extracurricular activities for children in China have limited practicality

August 11 2021, by Stephanie Koons



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In the United States, parents commonly enroll their children in extracurricular activities with the goal of helping them enhance their personal and academic achievements. However, according to researchers

at Penn State and Shandong Normal University in China, investing resources in extracurricular activities is not an effective strategy for Chinese families due to an educational system that favors high-stakes college entrance exams over the development of interpersonal skills.

"The biggest difference (between Chinese and American attitudes toward [extracurricular activities](#)) stems from an educational system that is designed fundamentally differently," said Katerina Bodovski, professor of education (educational theory and policy) in Penn State's College of Education.

Bodovski has spent a substantial portion of her career studying parental practices and [cultural capital](#) in the context of education systems in the United States, Eastern Europe, and particularly Russia. In the field of sociology, cultural capital refers to the soft skills, attitudes, beliefs, style of speech, style of dress, etc. that promote social mobility in a stratified society. Research has shown that by participating in [cultural activities](#)—e.g. art, music and structured extracurricular activities—students derive opportunities to accumulate cultural capital that facilitates their [social mobility](#).

"My research fits into the body of scholarship that examines not just the role of social status or family income but softer skills/knowledge that play a role in shaping various education outcomes," said Bodovski.

In a new paper, "An active investment in cultural capital: structured extracurricular activities and educational success in China," Bodovski worked with lead author Minda Tan, an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at Shandong Normal University, and Liangliang Cai, another faculty member at Shandong Normal University, in employing a set of techniques to investigate the mechanism through which participation in structured extracurricular activities affects students' academic performance. The researchers used data from the China

Education Panel Survey (CEPS) that is administered by the National Survey Research Center at Renmin University of China. The database is designed to investigate the influence of family, school and community on middle school students' educational outcomes.

"This is the same conceptual framework I've been using for almost 20 years," said Bodovski. "And now we have this opportunity to test this model in a different national context."

The paper published recently in *Journal of Youth Studies*.

Tan, who graduated from Penn State in May 2020 with a dual doctoral degree in comparative and international education, said he was inspired to pursue research on the role of extracurricular activities in the Chinese educational system partly by reading an assigned book in one of Bodovski's classes: "Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life," a 2003 ethnographic study by Annette Lareau that examines the impact of social class on parenting and family life.

"It was the first time that I seriously thought about the impact of social stratification and family differences on children's educational experiences," said Tan.

In their paper, Tan, Cai and Bodovski cite research from the Annual Report on Chinese Children's Development showing that in 2018, over 60% of Chinese primary and secondary students participated in structured activities after school and that average student expenditure on those activities was 9,211 yuan, which accounted for 12.84% of parental income.

"The existing literature increasingly recognizes that structured after-school extracurricular activities can promote a 'whole child' education by improving children's soft skills and facilitate their academic

development," the authors wrote in their article.

Analyzing the CEPS data, the researchers found that consistent with previous findings in the Chinese context, high family socioeconomic status and high school rank increase eighth-grade students' likelihood of participating in extracurricular activities. However, unlike results from studies conducted in Western contexts, the researchers found that engagement in organized after-school extracurricular activities does not benefit students' academic performance directly or indirectly.

Furthermore, the researchers found that "engagement in extracurricular activities appears to have little direct or indirect relationship with students' social relationships, including frequently received teacher praise and supportive friendships."

According to Bodovski and Tan, the utility of extracurricular activities in China is limited due to cultural factors and the structure of the educational system. To begin with, the popularity of extracurricular activities may reinforce educational inequity because families of limited means may not be able to afford them.

"Parents should be cautious about being involved in this 'arms-race' among families because children may neither academically benefit from participating in extracurricular activities nor feel happy in the process," said Tan.

Rather than putting money into extracurricular activities, he added, he thinks that a more effective strategy for families with limited financial means is investing financial resources in supplemental educational activities after school.

Additionally, said Bodovski, most of the existing research that has demonstrated a positive association between an active investment in

cultural capital and educational success has been conducted in a Western context. In countries such as China, Russia and South Korea, educational systems are distinguished by high-stakes college entrance exams, where test scores are the main determining factor in college admission. Participation in extracurricular activities does not tip the scale in favor of a student's admission to a university.

According to Bodovski, the East-West differences in college admissions criteria are not simply cultural or philosophical but rather a result of opposing institutional paradigms. In Eastern nations such as China, school systems are highly centralized and China's central government guides educational standards. The U.S., on the other hand, "doesn't have the capacity to instate regulations because states, school districts and even schools to a certain extent have autonomy on what's being taught and how (knowledge) is being tested."

The highly competitive entrance exams present another hurdle to participation in extracurricular activities in the form of time management, the researchers cited in their article. Chinese secondary schools are characterized by a long school day and a heavy academic burden.

"The increasing participation and family investment in extracurricular activities indicate that the trade-off between children's limited leisure time and non-academic skills is regarded to bring relatively high returns to students," the authors wrote. "However, little empirical evidence supports its positive impact in an [educational system](#) vastly different from those in the Western contexts."

Tan said that due to mass media and an increased awareness of American culture, many Chinese parents may have been influenced to adopt Western parenting practice such as enrolling their children in extracurricular activities. In addition, Chinese parents tend to be

particularly interested in using education as a means to help their children advance their social status. That anxiety is heightened by the fact that unlike the United States, there are relatively few highly rated universities and thus individuals have limited pathways to success.

"Chinese parents and students believe that they can take advantage of education to keep or promote their current social status," said Tan. "That's why they are willing to invest in their children's education regardless of cost sometimes."

Bodovkski and Tan emphasized that a myriad of cultural practices impacts differing attitudes toward extracurricular activities, including a limited role of athletic scholarships in non-Western cultures. They added that parents with considerable financial resources and interest in cultivating their children's cultural capital in countries such as China and South Korea may choose to bypass the highly competitive testing systems in their native countries by sending their children to universities in the U.S. or Europe.

More information: Minda Tan et al, An active investment in cultural capital: structured extracurricular activities and educational success in China, *Journal of Youth Studies* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2021.1939284](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.1939284)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Extracurricular activities for children in China have limited practicality (2021, August 11) retrieved 2 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-08-extracurricular-children-china-limited.html>

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