

Exploring the Prospects of the Language Education Industry for Young Children (Grade 1-3) in Mainland China Based on the Perception of Chinese Parents

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ABSTRACT

This research paper, based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, explores the idea that economic capital and cultural capital are interconvertible. In other words, individual with higher incomes can use their economic resource to invest private education for their kid, and thus enhancing their chances of educational success. The aim of this study is to explore the views of parents in mainland China on their children's participation in extra-curricular language tutoring classes in Grade 1 to 3. By understanding the desires and their perception, the study seeks to predict the trends and prospects of the industry. The research was conducted through online questionnaire and interviews. The survey results indicate that most of parents believe that extracurricular classes have positive effect on kids' development no matter academically or personally, especially in subjects like Mathematics, Science and Technology field. This might imply the potential roadmap for the development of extracurricular language tutoring industry.

KEYWORDS

Language education; Young kids' education; Extra-curricular classes; Parents' perception

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1 Introduction

The 'rat race' phenomenon has been intensifying in Chinese labor market during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was reported that the competition has become even more brutal, with the unemployment rate among young age group reaching nearly 20% in 2022. Furthermore, the overall national unemployment has been higher compared to previous years. It has also been reported that even graduates from prestigious Chinese universities are facing challenges in finding suitable employment opportunities^[1]. Fewer job opportunities have created significant labor redundancy, Chinese parents are experiencing increased anxiety about how to raise their kid to success in severe competition^[2].

In such scenario, Chinese parents from different social class respond to fierce social competition via spending significant amount of money on kids' education^[3]. Regular education service provided by public school are no longer meet Chinese parents' demand, they are interested in the services offered by profitable education companies, and they are willing to pay for expensive tutoring classes given by 'Xin Dong Fang'^① (one of the leading lucrative education companies)^[3]. From Chinese parents' perspective, spending money on child's education is not regarded as mere consumption but as a strategic investment. They firmly believe that such educational investment has a certain positive

relationship with their kids' academic performance: they believe that the more they invest, the better educational outcomes their kids will achieve ^[2]. Chinese parents view educational consumption as a mean to 'purchase hope', this has resulted in a notable trend where numerous Chinese parents are crazy about enrolling their kids' in extra classes provided by those for-profit corporations ^[2].

The 'Double Reduction Policy', advocated by Chinese government, with the objective to reduce study pressure faced by primary and secondary school children (or students in compulsory education), and to promote children's physical and mental health ^[4]. To be more specific, the policy targeted at reducing the burden of excessive homework and the prevalence of off-campus tutoring courses, and decreasing pressure and leaving more time for kids to self-development. ^[4]. The policy stipulates that students are not allowed to attend any remedial course during statutory holidays, summer/winter vocation, weekends. As a result, a plethora of for-profit institutions or education center that mainly sell remedial courses, tutoring classes and language classes disappeared due to the huge loss of students.

Extensive research has established a clear link between regular participation in extracurricular courses and enhanced academic achievement among students. Specifically, students who frequently participate in extracurricular courses demonstrate a notable 2% improvement in Math and science test results; besides, students with regular involvement in extracurricular courses indicate 10% increase in their aspiration of reaching a college degree ^[5].

2 Research Gap

Even though there have been some western literatures regarding children's participation in extracurricular classes, it is important to note that extracurricular activities in western countries are quite different from that in China. In China, most of extracurricular classes, provided by profit-oriented organizations, are external to regular schools; whereas in Western culture, extracurricular classes mostly are organized within schools, typically free of charge. Therefore, attempting to glean insights from Western parents' perception on their children's participation in extracurricular classes may not accurately reflect how Chinese parents perceive their children's engagement in such classes. There is very little Chinese literature research on the perception of extracurricular foreign language training industry, particularly in the field of foreign language education in early childhood. Lots of existing Chinese literature research either focuses on overall language training industry or explores extracurricular tutoring for older children, with limited research in the field of early childhood education. Although there are some studies have delved into the perception of Hong Kong parents regarding their young children's participation in extracurricular tutoring, it remains essential to conduct additional research specifically targeting mainland China due to its distinct political background. Furthermore, the demand for and importance of extracurricular foreign language education for young children in mainland China should not be underestimated. Additionally, based on personal experience as an early childhood English teacher, I have found that many Chinese parents are dissatisfied with their kids' learning outcomes of English. For example, many Chinese children may have studied English for a long time in school but are unable or reluctant to speak it out. This dissatisfaction reflects Chinese parental anxiety on their children's foreign language abilities. Some parents feel that the language atmosphere in regular schools is not strong enough, and thus they are generous with money to send their kids to off-campus language education center and believe that their kids would get a better language environment through extracurricular classes. This phenomenon demonstrates Chinese parents' concerns and emphasis on their children's language development. They are not merely satisfied with leaning a new foreign language but also aim to build up other skills

upon the foundation of foreign language, achieving multiple benefits simultaneously. Considering the 'rat race' in the education for young kids, it is necessary to explore relevant areas. From a micro perspective, this exploration may reflect the future development of the foreign language education industry; while from a macro perspective, it may reflect the future direction and policies of education in the country.

This paper is based on relevant literatures from Asian regions (China, Hong Kong SAR, and South Korea), exploring the perception of mainland Chinese parents in children's participation in extracurricular activities. The paper aims to provide insights into the future prospects of early age foreign language education industry. The paper will also provide a comprehensive summary in the 'Discussion' section, and offering recommendations. The goal is to reach some achievements: for instance, identifying factors that influence parents' decisions to enroll their children in foreign language courses and understanding their expectations for future foreign language classes. Ultimately, this research aims to provide references for the future foreign language education industry in mainland China.

3 Literature Review

The students in East Asia all face an important examination in their lives - the college entrance examination (*Gaokao*), a large-scale screening test that determines which university students can enter after the secondary school stage. For many East Asian families, the college entrance examination (known as '*gaokao*') is seen as a crucial turning point in their kids' destiny since Asian parents associate it with a promising future. Most parents in East Asia believe that only by achieving outstanding results in the *gaokao*^[6] exam and gaining admission to top-tier universities can their kids acquire high-quality social connections (for instance, making friends that are equally outstanding), secure good jobs, and lead a decent life; Otherwise, their kids cannot get into the top-tier university, this means their kids cannot find a good job, get out of the ruck and achieve enviable life. However, the acceptance rate of top-tier university is below 2 %, the extremely low acceptance makes the competition highly intense^[6]. All in all, Good academic results are considered crucial for success in the '*gaokao*'. Due to the highly competitive nature of the *gaokao* and the limited number of spots available in top universities, Chinese often believe that achieving excellent grades is essential for securing a bright future. The academic performance bears the expectation of Chinese parents regarding their kids' future.

Due to Eastern culture and brutal screening mechanism, students in East Asia suffer burden academically. For instance, many Chinese students start their day early, immersing themselves in a pile of books to study. After long hours of high pressure and intense study at school, what waits for them when they return from school is not relaxation or having fun but intensive study for exams in cram school. This arduous and monotonous routine repeats days after day^[7, 8]. This situation is not unique to China, but also suffered by students in other East Asia countries such as Japan, Korea, etc. Many students, unable to cope with such heavy academic workload and negatively impacted by poor academic performance, commit suicide^[7, 8]. Chinese parents deeply aware that it is unavoidable for their kids to face excessive academic pressure and undergo such brutal selecting mechanism when entering middle school. Hence, Chinese parents have their children to learn English or other foreign language at earlier age as young children have more leisure time. This would alleviate kids' academic pressure in the middle school since they can allocate more time on other subjects.

4 Methodology

(1) Participants

The participants chosen for inclusion in study A completed the online survey on their demographic characteristics and questions regarding children's participation in after school classes. Since the survey has no region lock within mainland China, participants from all over China can participate the survey. Majority of participants come from Southern China, such as Fujian province, Guangdong province, Jiangsu province and etc. Only 16% of participants come from northern province, such as Shandong, Liaoning. The completed surveys were collected from 238 parents of grade 1 to grade 3 students (6 to 8 years old kids) in mainland China. As shown in Table 1, the majority of parents aged between 31-40 (46%). Besides, majority of participants own one kid (61%), 39% of parents have more than one kids. This might due to One-child policy implemented in mainland China during 1979-2015 to decrease Chinese population growth. In terms of education, 79% of participants had completed bachelor degree, and 13% with master degree, less than 10% did not enter college; and nearly 60% had family income per month within RMB10,001-RMB20,000 range. The parents participating in study B comprised four mothers. It is claimed that mothers are key determiners of kids' extra-curricular classes^[9]. This fact has been proven by the data shown in table 1, indicating that Chinese mothers tend to have more decision power over kids' extra-curricular classes than fathers do, the percentage is 36%. The ages of mother involved in Study B spanned from thirty to fifty, their median educational achievement is bachelor

Table 1. Demographic information for participants in Study 1 (valid per cent)

Number of child that each participant has (total: 238)		
One	144	61%
Two	79	33%
More than two	15	6%
Age of participant (total: 238)		
30 years old or below	50	21%
31-40 years old	110	46%
41-50 years old	62	26%
51 years old or above	16	7%
Who has decision making power over kid's extra-curricular classes (total: 238)		
Father	60	25%
Mother	85	36%
Father & mother	90	38%
Other	3	1%
Highest education level (total: 238)		
Junior high school or below	6	3%
Senior high school	14	6%
Bachelor's	188	79%
Master's or above	30	13%
Family income per month (total: 238)		
Less than RMB10,000	23	10%
RMB10,001– RMB20,000	140	59%
RMB20,001– RMB40,000	57	24%
More than RMB40,000	18	8%
RMB: Chinese Yuan.		
1 Chinese Yuan = 0.14 US Dollars (cited from Yahoo. Com on Sept 5 th , 2023). N equal to 238		

(2) Procedure

The research is based on survey and interview. In the beginning, I searched and read large number

of reliable literatures through google scholars and school library, then I picked some articles with survey questions that are close to my research topic. After that, I imitated the questionnaire used from reliable resource, then make some changes on questions to make it more relative to my research background and topic. I sent my questions to my guiding teacher to gain some advice before putting the questions on survey websites. The survey website I used named 'Survey Star', which make my questionnaire easily accessible and clearly visible to other people. The survey comprised inquiries about participants' demographic characteristics, together with two interview questions related to their children's participation in after-school classes. After a week, my survey respondents reached to 238, which is much higher than my predicted number. This is good for my research as it reduces the bias to somewhat extent.

After some shallow questions in study A to help me acquire basic information, I set out to my study B in order to delve deeper in the field of the research. I conducted individual interviews with a smaller group of parents to discover their perspectives on their children's engagement in extra-curricular classes. To ensure a diverse sample, I employed stratified random sampling and invited four parents from Shanghai, Xiamen, Beijing to participate in the interviews. The reason why I picked these four cities are simply because they are relatively more developed and iconic regions in South and North of China. Of four parents, one from Shanghai, one from Beijing, one from Xiamen, and one from Shenzhen. later their statement will be used for my research analysis; with their consent, my interviews are able to proceed. I conducted a total of four individual interviews, all of which were conducted via mobile phone and in Mandarin (The administrative spoken language in mainland China). Each interview lasted for five to ten minutes. The interview focused on two major questions, as follow: 1. What kind of achievement you want your kids to reach after taking extra-curricular classes? 2. Is there anything unable to reach your expectations when selecting extra-curricular classes? (or something that you want the educational institutions to improve?). Participants' voice messages are translated from Chinese to English, the excerpts are provided in 'Results' section.

5 Results

Majority of participants indicate that low-school age students (grade one to grade three) should be ideally enrolled in one extra-curricular class (51%), while nearly 36% of parents show that 6–8-year-old kids should ideally engage in two extra-curricular classes. Not much parents want their kids attend more than two extra-curricular class when their kids are 6-8 years old (5%). There is minimal difference between parents' ideal number of extra-curricular classes they desire for children and actual number of classes their kids are currently enrolled in. When asked about the actual number of extra-curricular classes in which their kids participate at present, 47% of participants respond with one activity; while 29% of participants respond with two activities. Only small proportion of parents indicate that their kids are either not enrolled in any activity (19%) or are participating in more than two activities (9%).

The majority of parents (approximately 37%) stated spending between RMB 501 and RMB 1500 per month on their children's extra-curricular activities. Nearly 14% of participants reported that they spend RMB 500 or less monthly on their children's extra-curricular participation, while the second-largest group (34%) spent between RMB 1500 and RMB 3000 per month on their children's extra-curricular activities, the remainder (around 15% in total) spent more than RMB 3000. Most of parents enroll extra-curricular classes that purely teach foreign language for their kids (around 62%), while 38% of parents enroll extra-curricular classes that teach foreign language along with other fields. As shown from the table 3, majority of participants want to combine foreign language classes with Mathematics/Science and Technology; in other words, they expect that when their kids learn foreign

language, they can learn Mathematics/Science and Technology at the same time. In this case, it is not hard to find that Chinese parents strongly value education in Mathematics/Science and Technology area. Participants hold the nearly same degree of tendency in remaining field: Arts (63%), Chess (67.75%), Physical activities (65.55%). While 69% of parents suggested that the desire 'To cultivate children's skills/To prepare for the transition to primary school/To increase children's competitiveness' was the major reason for kids' enrollment in extra-curricular classes, some other motivations were described by participants, including 'Children's interest/To enhance children's all-round development' – these motivations were mentioned by approximately 67.65% of the parents. It indicates that many parents believe that enrolling their children in extra-curricular activities is beneficial for their overall growth and development, driven by the child's own interests and passions. 'To provide opportunities for social interaction' (55.04%), and 'other' (0.42%); the option 'other' was detailed, one of the participants mentioned that 'to spend less time on looking after child'. When asked about average time that participants' kids spend on learning foreign language daily, most of the participants respond with '30 minutes to one hour' (38.66%). The second largest group respond with 'less than 30 minutes' (32.77%), the remainder suggest the average time were 'one hour to two hours' (21.43%) and 'more than two hours' (7.14%).

Table 2. Participants' responses regarding children's extra-curricular activities

Ideal number of extra-curricular activities ($n = 238$)		
0	20	8.4%
1	121	50.8%
2	85	35.7%
More than two	12	5.04%
Actual number of extra-curricular activities ($n = 238$)		
0	45	18.91%
1	111	46.44%
2	69	28.99%
Monthly expenditure on extra-curricular foreign language classes organized by non-school for-profit corporation ($n = 238$)		
RMB 500 or below	34	14.29%
RMB501– RMB1500	89	37.39%
RMB1500– RMB3000	81	34.03%
RMB3001– RMB5000	26	10.92%
RMB5000 or more	8	3.36%
The type of extra-curricular foreign language classes the kids currently enroll		
Purely learn foreign language	147	62.18%
Learn other fields in foreign language	91	37.82%
Types of extra curricular classes that participants want to combine with foreign language (may choose more than one) ($n = 238$)		
Arts (Music, Dance, Drama, 'Little host' (story-telling)...))	150	63.03%
Chess	161	67.65%
Physical activities	156	65.55%
Mathematics/Science and Technology (mental arithmetic, programming, 'little scientists' (Science for kids))	178	74.79%
Other	1	0.42%
Reason for enrolment (may choose more than one) ($n = 238$)		
Children's interest/To enhance children's all-round development	161	67.65%
To cultivate children's skills/To prepare for the transition to primary school/To increase children's competitiveness	165	69.33%
To provide opportunities for social interaction	131	55.04%
Other	1	0.42%
Average time that Child of participants spend on foreign language each day		
Less than 30 minutes	78	32.77%
30 minutes to one hour	92	38.66%

One hour to two hours	51	21.43%
More than two hours	17	7.14%
RMB: Chinese Yuan		

Study B: parents' perception of extra-curricular foreign language classes

Table 3. Demographic information for participants in study B

Region	Relationship with child	Age	Education	No.of children	Child's grade
Shanghai	Mother 1	50	Bachelor	2	Secondary school (older) grade three (younger)
Xiamen	Mother 2	46	Associate	2	Senior high school (older) grade one (younger)
Beijing	Mother 3	38	Bachelor	2	Grade three (older) grade one (younger)
Shenzhen	Mother 4	40	Bachelor	2	Grade three (older) kindergarten (younger)

The first parent indicated the effectiveness of extracurricular foreign language classes and the need for more availability of non-English foreign language training courses in Xiamen. From her statement, we can know that the Shanghai mother were satisfied with the positive outcome that extracurricular classes brought to her older kid; plus, she recognized that acquiring second or third language at an early age will significantly enhance their children's sense of language. The statement implied the trend that English no longer meet the requirement of Chinese parents for their children; instead, they expect their children to learn more than one foreign language; also, some Chinese parents' requirement for teacher is not limited on teaching English itself but teaching kids other skills in English.

The parent quoted in second excerpt believed that the involvement in extracurricular classes in early age can enhance children's future academic performance and their learning abilities; and she mentioned that the qualification of teachers is the key factor that she would take into consideration when picking classes: I currently enroll English and programming classes for my child. The purpose of signing up extracurricular classes is to improve academic performance. My older child did not attend any tutoring classes at his early age, me and my husband do not have good educational background, thus we unable to provide assistance to help the older one on his study, so now he failed to enter university. Then we aware the importance of extracurricular classes. My younger child has been attending English and LEGO classes since kindergarten. When picking courses, I mainly consider the qualification of teachers, including their level of expertise and dedication. I hope these exam-oriented courses can improve my kid's overall English ability, including listening, speaking, reading and writing. When children enter secondary school, if he could perform outstanding in a particular subject, this would not only allow for more spare time to study other subjects but also enhance self-confidence. (Mother 2, Xiamen)

The third respondents suggested that extracurricular classes enhance children's ability in various domain, this is helpful for children's learning in the future. She also indicated that it is important to consider the quality and stability of teachers when picking courses; and the teaching materials should be more standardized and aligned with regular school exam requirement:

It is undoubtful that English learning should start at early age, that is the golden age of learning a new language. It is important to establish a strong foundation to reduce future academic burdens. I sign my kids up for Chinese handwriting classes, aiming at developing their endurance and concentration. This would not only improve their confidence but also extra bonus points for future college entrance exams (students with beautiful Chinese characters in essay part of 'gaokao' exam will get extra mark). I also enroll piano lessons for my child, the aim is to enhance artistic skills while also benefiting cognitive development via finger movements, this is helpful in mathematics learning.

(Mother 3, Beijing)

I do not plan to send my kids abroad; all extracurricular classes are targeted at laying the foundation for future college entrance exams. (Mother 3, Beijing)

When picking courses, it is important to consider both qualification of teacher and the tuition fees. Plus, it is preferable to pick courses with high-quality and stable teacher workforce since high teacher turnover would harm students' academic achievement. In the field of English education for young children in China, there is a noticeable variation in the quality and proficiency of these education centers; and the teaching materials exhibit a significant degree of arbitrariness. It is desirable that teaching materials can be more exam-oriented and integrate with examination requirements well (Mother 3, Beijing)

Some parents are busy with work and cannot squeeze time to be involved in their kids' education; and thus, extracurricular classes are the best choice. When picking courses, they take convenience and interest into consideration

My eldest child is in third grade, and my young kid is in preschool. They are both enrolled in the same education center for English and drawing classes. Because my busy schedules and the absence of grandparents to help with childcare, it would be convenient to have both kids attend same class at the same time. The qualification and proficiency of teacher and the convenience are the primary consideration. I enroll my kid's extracurricular classes for academic purposes; no matter it's for future entrance exams or studying abroad, a strong foundation in English is required. As for drawing classes, it is not only for interest but for the consideration of art-related exam (mother 4, Shenzhen)

In general, Chinese parents generally have a positive attitude towards extracurricular tutoring, regardless of their motivation (eg, go abroad or attend college entrance exam). Most parents' emphasis education on kid's foreign language. In addition to language subjects, most Chinese parents also enroll kids in courses related to Mathematics and Science. When selecting courses, parents prioritize the quality and stability of teachers; and some parents specifically focus on the content of teaching materials and believe that aligning teaching materials with exam requirements can better prepare their children for success.

6 Conclusion and Suggestions

The 'Double Reduction Policy' has reduced in the duration of extracurricular classes; however, due to the reduced available time of extracurricular courses, this leads to the decrease in extracurricular teachers' total income; to compensate for total income deduction, the price per class has increased. However, the increased prices have discouraged customers, leading to the closure of many for-profit language education center. To address this issue and improve cost-effectiveness of extracurricular courses, several solutions can be considered: (1) without reducing the price of classes, it is important to demonstrate to customers that the courses are valuable and worth the price (2) during time period when extracurricular courses cannot be taught, efforts can be made to improve kid's foreign language level through non-academic learning (3) parents actually have a demand for second foreign language education, so it is important to consider offering other courses to meet their needs (4) enhancing the qualifications of teachers

About the Author

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Notes

- ① Xin Dong Fang: One of Chinese famous for-profit Education center provide various types of tutoring classes
- ② *Gaokao*: the college entrance examination, a large-scale screening test that determines which university students can enter after the secondary school stage

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