Extracurricular participation and young children’s outcomes in Hong Kong: Maternal involvement as a moderator

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ABSTRACT

In Hong Kong’s competitive society, most children take part in extracurricular activities (ECAs) before or after school. Early childhood lays the foundation for development of intelligence, personality, social behaviour and learning capacity, and ECAs can, therefore, be expected to enrich a child’s learning experience. But there has been relatively little research on the effects of extracurricular participation on young children. This study examines the relations between extracurricular participation and young children’s school readiness and psychosocial outcomes in a Chinese cultural context. Sixty-four Hong Kong upper kindergarten class children (aged five years and two months to six years and ten months old), their mothers and class teachers participated in a quantitative study where parent, teacher and child reports were collected. The results showed that children’s extracurricular participation was positively associated with better school readiness and social competence and negatively associated with a child’s liking of ECAs. The level of extracurricular participation was defined as the number of ECAs a child has been participating in during the month that the study was conducted. This was a pioneering study that found maternal involvement moderated the association between the number of ECAs and a child’s school readiness and cognitive competence. In general, children from family with low maternal involvement were more likely to benefit from their participation in a higher number of ECAs. The results from this study will inform educators, parents and policymakers and are intended to inspire further research exploring ECAs and early childhood.

1. Introduction

Most Hong Kong children aged three to six regularly attend kindergarten and also take part in extracurricular activities (ECAs). ECAs are regular and structured activities that are not part of the school curriculum to help children develop particular skills (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Lau & Cheng, 2016). Extracurricular participation is popular and exposes children all over the world to an environment and social network other than school and home. Convergent evidence shows a positive association between extracurricular participation and indicators of children’s cognitive and social development, including academic success (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Im, Hughes, Cao, & Kwok, 2016; Shulruf, 2010) and psychological well-being (Fredricks & Eccles, 2010; Molinuevo, Bonillo, Pardo, Doval, & Torrubia, 2010).

Yet, despite strong empirical grounds, important research gaps in the literature remain. First, the majority of studies used samples of school-aged children or adolescents. In particular, a study by Côté (1999) on children’s development of talent in sport suggested that younger children, for example primary school aged children, tend to participate in a wider range of sports activities as they focus on having fun and trying new things. This study demonstrated the preferences and pattern of which children participate in activities, however, it did not address children aged younger than six years old. The small number of studies on preschool-aged children and extracurricular participation have focused on studying the impact of ECAs on academic outcomes, such as reading and mathematics skills (Dumas, 2006; National Institute of Child Health & Human Development Early Child Care Research [NICHD], 2004). Few studies have focused on the relations between extracurricular participation and children’s psychosocial outcomes. Second, although the contribution of ECAs and maternal involvement has been examined separately, no attempt has been made to explore their interaction effect on young children’s outcomes. In other research, it has been suggested the effect of extracurricular participation was moderated by other family factors. During early childhood, parental involvement is viewed as an important social resource that helps children cope with different challenges in their learning and development (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Third, culturally responsive research conducted to understand the features of extracurricular participation in...
different societies is important for enhancing learning opportunities for children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Relatively little is known about extracurricular participation in non-Western cultures. Therefore, more studies are needed to examine the impact of extracurricular participation on young children’s development beyond the academic skills, especially in a cultural context where extracurricular participation is very common.

The current study was designed to address this gap in the literature by investigating the relations between extracurricular participation and child school readiness and psychosocial outcomes as well as how maternal involvement may moderate the relations, using a sample of Hong Kong upper kindergarten children.

1.1. ECAs and child academic and psychosocial outcomes

Studies have found that among elementary school-aged children in Western societies, greater participation in ECAs is associated with higher academic motivation, academic grades and academic competence as well as better emotional and behavioural adjustment (Fletcher, Nickerson, & Wright, 2003; Im et al., 2016; Molinuevo et al., 2010; Schumacher Dimech & Seiler, 2011). In studies with adolescents, extracurricular participation is positively associated with academic performance in English, mathematics and cumulative grade point average, higher academic track enrolment, university aspirations, school belonging and civic engagement, and negatively associated with skipping school and drug and alcohol use (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Bright, 2015; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006, 2010; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003).

In explaining the benefits associated with extracurricular participation, Fredricks (2012) suggested that extracurricular participation leads to improvement in task persistence, independence and compliance, which facilitates children’s academic success. On the other hand, Blomfield and Barber (2010) found that the positive association of extracurricular participation and academic success was mediated by peer attributes. Specifically, these researchers found that adolescents who participated in ECAs reported having more friends who encouraged them to do their best in school than those who did not participate, which in turn influenced their higher attainment of academic achievement. It is possible that ECAs provide a social platform with opportunities for contact with supportive adults and peers, increase a sense of belonging and commitment to school, develop interpersonal competence and set goals (Metsäpölt & Pulkkinen, 2014). Fredricks and Eccles (2010) also stated that extracurricular participation increased adolescents’ affiliation with a non-deviant peer group, provided opportunities to gain support and mentoring by tutors to help avoid risky behaviours and lowered the desire to drink alcohol or use drugs. Consistently, Mahoney, Lord, and Caryl (2005)’s longitudinal study on Grade 1 to 3 students found that afterschool programme, which provided new social opportunities for the participants, is associated with significant increases in peer acceptance over time. In sum, the above studies highlighted the importance of the social environment in helping to improve socioemotional well-being and learning outcomes in children by providing a wide variety of experiences and quality interaction among the children as well as between adults and children. The above-mentioned studies on benefits associated with extracurricular participation targeted mainly school-aged children and early adolescents. The applicability of these findings on preschool children is unknown as there is insufficient research on the impact of extracurricular participation on young children. Early childhood lays the groundwork for the development of intelligence, personality, social behaviour and learning capacity and hence, participation in ECAs can enrich a child’s early learning experience and promote all-round development (Powell, Peet, & Peet, 2002). The few studies that have investigated preschoolers’ extracurricular participation have found ECAs to have a positive influence. For example, in a study by NICHD (2004), it was shown that extracurricular involvement in kindergarten and first grade was associated with better mathematics skills at age seven. Moreover, in the longitudinal study by Dumas (2006), the number of ECAs kindergarten children took part in was found to have a positive effect on their reading and on teachers’ evaluation of their mathematics skills when they are in elementary school. However, there is a lack of research examining the influence of extracurricular participation on young children’s psychosocial outcomes. The present study is the first to consider the relations between extracurricular participation and a range of child outcomes such as school readiness, psychosocial outcomes and children’s liking of ECAs.

1.2. Maternal involvement as a moderator

Parental involvement is defined as parenting behaviours that mobilise the resources of parents to maximise the benefits for their children (Hill & Taylor, 2004). During early childhood years, young children primarily learn basic adaptive skills from their parents and thus, children of parents who are highly involved show better development in various aspects. For instance, previous studies agree parental involvement has a significant influence on young children’s cognitive and psychosocial development and is negatively associated with problem behaviours (Barbot, Crossman, Hunter, Grigorenko, & Luthar, 2014; Barnard, 2004; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2007; Powell, Son, File, & San-Juan, 2010). While the individual positive effects of ECAs and parental involvement on children’s development have been documented, we know less about their interaction effect on young children’s outcomes.

In the only study examining the moderated pathways to young children’s well-being from interactions between parental involvement and extracurricular participation, Lagacé-Séguin and Case (2010) revealed there was a significant interaction between parental involvement and extracurricular participation in predicting children’s overall well-being. Their study found that for students who participated in a high number of ECAs, there was detrimental impact from parental pressure, which is defined as parental control of the child’s activity participation that imposes performance standards on their well-being. The authors attributed such negative correlation to children’s wish to please the parents on one hand, and the stress of their performance in ECAs on the other, leading to a decrease in children’s well-being. On the other hand, for students who participated in low numbers of ECAs, the study found a significant positive correlation between parent support, which refers to parental facilitation of the children’s activity participation, and students’ well-being and academic competence. It was explained that students who participated in fewer ECAs would turn to their parents for encouragement, which helped to enhance their sense of well-being. While the study highlighted the moderating effect of parental involvement in ECAs on the influence of extracurricular participation on children’s outcomes, they focused on extracurricular participation as a moderator and failed to capture the moderating effect of parental involvement in cultural contexts where the involvement of parents is highly encouraged (Kim, Wang, Orozco-Lapray, Shen, & Murtuza, 2013). In this study, maternal involvement is defined as the home learning activities that mothers carry out with children. The present study examines the effect of home-based maternal involvement in moderating the relations between extracurricular participation and child outcomes using a Hong Kong sample.

1.3. The Hong Kong context

Hong Kong is a competitive city. Virtually all children start kindergarten at the age of three (Rao & Li, 2009). Kindergartens in Hong Kong provide services for children from three to six years old. The Hong Kong Guide to the Pre-primary curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2017) emphasised on play based learning and focuses on whole-person education. It also states that quality Pre-primary education should provide a firm foundation for children’s learning in primary and secondary education. This type of preschool education is regular on
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