How Students Perceive the Value of Extracurricular English Activities: A Mixed-Methods Study in China

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While extensive research has documented quantitative outcomes of extracurricular activities (ECAs), there remains a gap in understanding how students themselves perceive the value of these experiences. This study addresses this gap by exploring how student participants evaluate the impact of English-focused enrichment programs in their lives. This mixed-methods study employed a sequential explanatory design with interviews (n=32) and surveys (n=120) of students aged 13-17 from two fee-paying English programs in urban China: PingGo (conversation-focused) and Ivy Dad (test-preparation). Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data; quantitative analysis included independent t-tests, ANOVA with post-hoc tests, and chi-square tests of independence ($\alpha = 0.05$). Decision-maker significantly predicted motivation patterns: parent-driven students reported higher instrumental motivations (test scores: $M = 4.2$ vs. 3.2, $p < .001$; university applications: $M = 3.9$ vs. 2.8, $p < .001$), while self-driven students reported higher recreational motivation (fun: $M = 4.3$ vs. 2.4, $p < .001$). Among parent-driven students, older adolescents (16+) showed greater internalization of parental goals than younger groups ($F(2,69) = 13.42$, $p < .001$). Among self-driven students, females were significantly more likely than males to report university applications motivation (58% vs. 25%, $\chi^2 = 5.48$, $p = .019$). Student agency, age, and gender intersect to shape how participants construct the meaning and significance of enrichment activities. The findings complicate static extrinsic/intrinsic motivation binaries by revealing developmental internalization processes and gendered expressions of autonomy. However, the focus on two fee-paying programs in urban China and small subgroup sizes substantially limit generalizability. The research offers tentative insights for educators, policymakers, and parents while highlighting the need for larger, longitudinal, and more representative investigations.

Keywords: extracurricular activities, student agency, motivation, China, English education, mixed-methods, Self-Determination Theory

Introduction

Background and Context

Education and psychology researchers have extensively documented the contributions of extracurricular activities (ECAs) to student development, with results demonstrating benefits for academic performance, social skills, and career readiness[1,2]. Longitudinal studies have consistently linked ECA participation with higher GPAs and improved college attendance rates[1]. Other scholars have highlighted ECAs' role in fostering pro-social behaviors, suggesting they may function as protective factors in youth development[3]. International ECA research has identified additional factors shaping student engagement, including activity type[4], implementation quality[5], and cross-cultural variation in how students attach meaning to activities[6].

In the Chinese context, scholars have documented "English fever"—the intense societal pressure to achieve English proficiency as a gateway to educational and economic opportunity[7]. The case of China's "double reduction" policy, introduced in 2021, further illustrates the contemporary relevance of this research. This government policy sought to ease student academic burden by curbing excessive homework and private tutoring, while simultaneously expanding school-run extracurricular offerings. This shift reshaped the dynamics of enrichment activities: programs that were once optional suddenly became central to school day norms[8].

Problem Statement and Rationale

While existing studies have provided valuable insights into measurable outcomes of ECA participation, they have primarily focused on quantitative metrics such as test scores and attendance rates. This emphasis on quantifiable data establishes a foundation for understanding broad effects but leaves a critical gap: we know little about how students themselves perceive the value of these activities. Studies demonstrating positive effects often stop at correlation, failing to explore how

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students themselves perceive these connections. Research on China's "double reduction" policy has examined shifts in parental attitudes but has yet to investigate how students experience newly promoted school-run activities[9]. Furthermore, Lareau's[10] concept of "concerted cultivation" has been applied to understand how Chinese middle-class parents strategically invest in enrichment activities, but this literature often positions students as passive recipients of parental strategy rather than active agents with their own perspectives.

Notably absent from much of this literature are sociological perspectives on youth agency. While psychological frameworks like Self-Determination Theory illuminate individual motivation processes, they pay less attention to how agency is socially structured—how students' capacity to make choices is enabled or constrained by their position within families, educational systems, and broader social structures. Sociological work on "youth agency"[11] emphasizes that young people's decisions are not merely expressions of internal motivation but are shaped by available cultural scripts, institutional arrangements, and power relations with adults.

Significance and Purpose

By collecting student voices, this research aims to uncover how young people interpret the role of English enrichment activities in their academic and personal growth. Understanding students' perspectives is critical for making these programs work in both theory and practice. Theoretically, this knowledge enriches future program design by moving beyond models that only measure external outcomes. Practically, understanding students' points of view provides educators and policymakers with nuanced insights for designing more responsive, engaging, and impactful programs that resonate with students' own goals and perceptions.

Objectives

This study addresses the following overarching research question: How do student participants in English-focused enrichment programs perceive the significance of their involvement? This question is examined through four analytically distinct sub-questions that guide the mixed-methods design:

- **Descriptive sub-question:** What motivations and perceived outcomes do students report regarding their participation in English enrichment programs?
- **Comparative sub-question:** How do these motivations and perceived outcomes differ based on who made the initial decision to participate (parent versus self)?
- **Developmental sub-question:** To what extent do students in parent-driven participation internalize these external goals as they mature?
- **Gendered sub-question:** Are there gender differences in how self-driven students articulate the value of their participation?

Based on the theoretical framework and literature reviewed, this study posits the following hypotheses for the quantitative phase. For each hypothesis, both the null (H_0) and alternative (H_a) are specified:

Hypothesis 1 (Decision-Maker and Motivation):

- H_{10}: There is no relationship between decision-maker and primary motivation; any observed differences are due to chance.
- H_{1a}: There is a relationship between decision-maker (parent-driven vs. self-driven) and primary motivation, such that parent-driven students report stronger instrumental motivations while self-driven students report stronger recreational motivations.

Hypothesis 2 (Age and Internalization):

- H_{20}: There is no difference in goal internalization between older and younger parent-driven students; any observed differences are due to chance.
- H_{2a}: Age moderates the relationship between decision-maker and goal internalization, with older parent-driven students (16+) reporting higher levels of personal adoption of parental goals compared to younger parent-driven students (13-15).

Hypothesis 3 (Gender and Motivation Expression):

- H_{30}: Among self-driven students, there is no association between gender and motivation expression; any observed differences are due to chance.
- H_{3a}: Among self-driven students, gender is associated with motivation expression, with females more likely than males to articulate hybrid motivations combining enjoyment with academic purpose.

Scope and Limitations

The programs examined here, PingGo (conversation-based) and Ivy Dad (test-preparation focused), operate outside of formal schooling and charge fees for participation. These two programs represent a specific segment of the enrichment market: fee-paying, English-focused, and serving families with the financial resources to invest in supplementary education. The findings presented here cannot be generalized to the diverse landscape of extracurricular activities in China, which includes school-run programs, community-based activities,

sports, arts, and activities serving students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, generalizing these findings to fee-paying enrichment programs outside of China would require a thorough understanding of the Chinese enrichment market and its cultural context.

Terminology

A brief note on terminology is necessary to clarify what this study examines. Traditional extracurricular activities refer to organized programs outside formal curriculum that develop students' interests and skills through sports, arts, and clubs [12]. Enrichment has emerged as a broader term encompassing both extracurricular activities and academically-oriented supplementary programs [13]. As Matsangos [13] notes, " 'enrichment' has replaced the expression 'extra-curricular' activities—a change in educational nomenclature perhaps for euphony, as well as to heighten the basis for schools and colleges to offer more than just a diet of qualifications."

The programs in this study also relate to shadow education, a term coined by Bray [14] describing fee-paying supplementary tutoring in academic subjects that mimics school curricula. Under this classic definition, Ivy Dad (test-prep) clearly qualifies as shadow education, while PingGo (conversation-focused) resembles traditional extracurriculars. However, recent scholarship recognizes that even recreational programs can function as "positional goods" [14] in competitive educational environments. Following Park and colleagues [15], we understand both program types as part of a broader "enrichment industry" where students and families invest in English proficiency as cultural capital. We therefore use "English enrichment programs" throughout this manuscript as an umbrella term that encompasses both academic and recreational English-focused activities, acknowledges that both offer structured learning beyond the formal curriculum, and reflects our empirical finding that for students, boundaries between "academic" and "recreational" engagement with English are fluid and often shift over time.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [16,17], one of the most extensively validated frameworks for understanding human motivation. SDT provides a nuanced lens for examining why students participate in enrichment activities and how they experience that participation.

SDT's fundamental distinction is between intrinsic motivation (engaging in an activity for its inherent satisfaction) and extrinsic motivation (engaging for separable outcomes) [16]. This distinction is directly relevant to understanding how students frame the significance of their ECA participation—whether they emphasize enjoyment and interest versus grades and future opportunities.

Crucially, SDT conceptualizes extrinsic motivation not as a unitary construct but as a continuum reflecting different degrees of internalization:

- External regulation: Behavior controlled by external contingencies (rewards, punishments)
- Introjected regulation: Behavior driven by internal pressures (guilt, shame, contingent self-worth)
- Identified regulation: Behavior consciously valued as personally important
- Integrated regulation: Behavior fully assimilated with one's values and identity

Furthermore, SDT posits that autonomy, the experience of behavior as volitional and self-endorsed, is a fundamental psychological need [16]. When students experience autonomy in their activity choices, they are more likely to show sustained engagement and well-being. This framework directly informs the study's focus on decision-maker (parent vs. self) as a key variable.

While SDT was developed primarily in Western contexts, extensive cross-cultural research supports its applicability while also revealing cultural variations in how autonomy operates [18]. In collectivist contexts like China, the relationship between parental influence and student autonomy may take different forms, with internalization potentially occurring through different pathways. This study contributes to understanding these cultural nuances.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design [19], consisting of two phases:

- **Phase 1 (Qualitative):** Semi-structured interviews exploring how students perceive and articulate the significance of their English enrichment activities.
- **Phase 2 (Quantitative):** A survey administered to a larger sample to test the prevalence and consistency of categories identified in the qualitative phase and to test the specific hypotheses.

The sequential explanatory design was chosen for three specific reasons. First, the research aimed to center student voices and allow meanings to emerge inductively before imposing predetermined categories through surveys. Given limited prior

research on how Chinese students qualitatively experience enrichment activities, beginning with interviews ensured that survey items would reflect students' own framings rather than researcher assumptions. Second, the qualitative phase was necessary to identify the specific dimensions of motivation and internalization that mattered to students, which could then be operationalized as Likert items. Third, the design allowed qualitative findings to illuminate the "why" behind quantitative patterns. For instance, not just whether parent-driven students differ from self-driven students, but how they narrate those differences.

Participants

Participants were recruited from two distinct types of English enrichment programs operating in a major metropolitan area in eastern China:

- **PingGo:** A conversation-focused program emphasizing recreational interaction with native English speakers through discussion groups, games, and cultural exchange activities.

- **Ivy Dad:** A test-preparation academy focused on standardized exams including TOEFL and SAT, operating outside school hours.

These programs were purposively selected to represent variation in activity focus (conversational versus academic) while holding constant the subject matter (English) and fee-paying status. Both programs serve families with the financial means to pay for supplementary education; participants predominantly came from middle-class and upper-middle-class urban backgrounds.

Interview Sample: From the pool of students who consented to participate, 32 interview participants were purposively selected to maximize variation on key dimensions. The selection process involved stratifying by program (PingGo vs. Ivy Dad), age (13-15 vs. 16+), and gender, with random selection from each stratum until thematic saturation was reached. The final interview sample consisted of 32 students aged 13-17: 27 middle school students (ages 13-15) and 5 high school students (ages 16-17); 17 males and 15 females; 17 from PingGo and 15 from Ivy Dad.

Survey Sample: The survey was distributed to all consenting students from both programs (approximately 180 students), with 120 complete responses received (80% response rate). The survey sample comprised 72 students from PingGo and 48 from Ivy Dad, with similar age and gender distribution to the interview sample.

Data Collection

Phase 1: Qualitative Interviews Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually in private spaces at program facilities or via secure video call, based on participant preference. Interviews lasted 30-60 minutes and were conducted in Mandarin Chinese to ensure comfort and authentic expression. The interview protocol included:

- **Opening Questions:**
  - Can you tell me about how you first heard about this program?
  - What does a typical session look like for you?
- **Core Questions:**
  - Who was involved in the decision to join this program? Could you tell me about how that decision happened?
  - What were your reasons for participating when you started? Have those reasons changed over time?
  - What does "significance" mean to you when you think about this activity? What makes it matter in your life?
  - Can you describe a time when you felt this activity was particularly valuable—or particularly not valuable?
  - How, if at all, does this activity connect to other parts of your life—school, friendships, family, future plans?
- **Probing Questions:**
  - You mentioned [specific reason]. Could you tell me more about that?
  - How did that make you feel?
  - Can you give me an example?

All interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

Phase 2: Quantitative Survey A digital survey was developed based on themes emerging from interview analysis and constructs from SDT. The survey was pilot-tested with 10 students (excluded from final sample) to check clarity and timing, resulting in minor wording adjustments. The full survey is included in the Appendix.

Specific themes from interview analysis directly informed survey development:

Interview Theme	Corresponding Survey Items
Distinction between parent-initiated and self-initiated participation	Section B (Decision-Making), Items 7-8
Instrumental motivations (test scores, university)	Section C, Items 9, 12, 15, 17
Recreational motivations (fun, friends)	Section C, Items 10, 11
Confidence as a perceived outcome	Section D, Item 20
Internalization of parental goals over time	Section E, Items 26-30

Variables and Measurements

A critical variable in this study is whether participation is "parent-driven" or "self-driven." Based on pilot interviews that revealed nuanced decision-making processes, I established the following operational definitions:

- **Parent-driven participation:** The student reports that parents made the initial decision to enroll, with the student having little or no say in the choice, OR parents strongly influenced the decision such that the student felt they had no realistic alternative. This includes situations where parents enrolled the student without consultation, presented the activity as non-negotiable, or strongly pressured agreement.
- **Self-driven participation:** The student reports that they made the initial decision to enroll, with parents supporting but not directing the choice. This includes situations where the student initiated interest, researched options, and made the final decision, even if parents provided input or approval.
- **Ambiguous cases:** During interviews, when students described mixed scenarios (e.g., "My parents suggested it and I agreed" or "I chose from options my parents approved"), follow-up probes assessed who exercised ultimate agency. Students who felt they could have refused without significant consequence were classified as self-driven; those who felt refusal was not a realistic option were classified as parent-driven.

Motivation and Outcome Measures: All motivation and outcome items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). For chi-square analyses, responses were dichotomized as "high" (4-5) versus "low" (1-3).

Reliability Testing: Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha: Motivation items (Section C, 9 items): $\alpha = 0.78$ (acceptable); Outcome items (Section D, 8 items): $\alpha = 0.82$ (good); Internalization scale (Section E, 5 items): $\alpha = 0.71$ (acceptable).

Procedure

After negotiating permission from program administrators, information sheets and consent forms were distributed to all eligible students and their parents/guardians. All participants and parents provided written informed consent. Interviews were conducted first, followed by analysis and survey development. The survey was then administered digitally to the larger sample. Data collection occurred over a three-month period from August to October 2025.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's[20] six-phase approach: familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Analysis proceeded in both Mandarin and English, with selected quotes translated for publication. A codebook was developed iteratively, documenting each theme, its definition, inclusion criteria, and exemplars. To establish reliability, two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts (n=10, 31% of sample). Inter-rater agreement was 84% at the code level; discrepancies were discussed and resolved, leading to codebook refinement.

Quantitative Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. The following statistical tests were employed:

- **Descriptive statistics:** Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations summarized sample characteristics and item responses
- **Group comparisons:** Independent samples t-tests compared motivation and outcome means between parent-driven and self-driven groups
- **Age group comparisons:** One-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey tests examined age differences in internalization scores
- **Gender comparisons within self-driven subsample:** Chi-square tests of independence compared proportions rating each motivation as high (4-5) versus low (1-2)

Statistical significance was set at $\alpha = 0.05$ (5%). For each test, conditions for inference were checked and reported (independence, approximate normality for t-tests and ANOVA, homogeneity of variance for ANOVA, expected frequencies ≥ 5 for chi-square).

Integration: Qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated during interpretation through a "weaving" approach[21], where both types of evidence are presented together thematically.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the researcher's high school's institutional review board. Several specific ethical considerations guided the research process:

- **Power Dynamics:** As an adult researcher studying adolescents, careful attention was paid to power imbalances. Interviews were conducted in student-selected locations to create comfortable environments. I emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers, that students could skip any question, and that participation would not affect their standing in the program.

- **Vulnerability:** Given that interviews touched on family relationships and potential conflict with parents, particular care was taken to ensure students felt safe expressing dissenting views. I monitored student comfort throughout interviews and offered breaks or termination if distress appeared.

- **Confidentiality:** All data were anonymized using participant codes (e.g., PG_M_14). Identifying information was stored separately from data. Parents were informed that their children would be interviewed privately and that individual responses would not be shared with them or program staff.

- **Informed Consent:** Both parental consent and student assent were obtained. Information sheets explained the study purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and confidentiality protections in language accessible to adolescents. Students were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

- **Researcher Positionality:** I am a Chinese-English bilingual educated in both Chinese and Western educational systems. This background provided linguistic and cultural access but also shaped interpretation. To mitigate bias, I engaged in reflexive journaling throughout data collection and analysis. Member checking with a subset of participants (n=8) confirmed that summarized themes resonated with their experiences.

Discussion

Restatement of Key Findings

This study examined how students perceive the significance of English enrichment activities in China, revealing patterns suggesting that value is shaped by the intersection of decision-maker, age, and gender. The key findings are:

- **Decision-maker predicts motivation:** Parent-driven students reported significantly higher instrumental motivations (test scores: $M = 4.2$ vs. 3.2, $p < .001$; university applications: $M = 3.9$ vs. 2.8, $p < .001$), while self-driven students reported significantly higher recreational motivation (fun: $M = 4.3$ vs. 2.4, $p < .001$). These patterns were consistent across both interview narratives and survey data.

- **Age moderates internalization:** Among parent-driven students, older adolescents (16+) showed significantly higher internalization of parental goals ($M = 4.5$) compared to 13-14 year-olds ($M = 2.9$) and 15 year-olds ($M = 3.4$) ($F(2,69) = 13.42$, $p < .001$). Post-hoc tests confirmed that the oldest group differed significantly from both younger groups.

- **Gender shapes motivation expression:** Among self-driven students, females were significantly more likely than males to report university applications motivation (58% vs. 25%, $\chi^2 = 5.48$, $p = .019$), suggesting a "hybrid motivation" pattern where enjoyment is blended with strategic academic purpose. No significant gender difference was found for test scores motivation ($p = .145$), and fun motivation could not be reliably tested due to sample size limitations.

- **Perceived outcomes align with motivations:** Parent-driven students reported higher academic gains (test scores improved: 82% vs. 58%, $p < .001$; helps university applications: 89% vs. 62%, $p < .001$), while self-driven students reported higher social-emotional gains (confidence: 85% vs. 61%, $p < .001$; made friends: 90% vs. 45%, $p < .001$; look forward to sessions: 92% vs. 35%, $p < .001$).

Connection to Objectives

The study's four sub-questions were addressed as follows:

- **Descriptive sub-question:** Students report diverse motivations ranging from instrumental (test scores, university applications) to recreational (fun, friendship, cultural interest). Perceived outcomes align with these initial motivations.

- **Comparative sub-question:** Decision-maker strongly predicts both motivations and perceived outcomes, with parent-driven students focused on instrumental goals and self-driven students on recreational benefits. All three null hypotheses for Hypothesis 1 were rejected.

- **Developmental sub-question:** Among parent-driven students, internalization of parental goals increases with

age. The null hypothesis for Hypothesis 2 was rejected, with the 16+ group showing significantly higher internalization.

- **Gendered sub-question:** Partial support was found for gender differences. The null hypothesis for university applications motivation was rejected, but I failed to reject the null for test scores motivation, and fun motivation could not be reliably tested.

Implications and Significance

Contribution 1: A Developmental Lens on the Extrinsic-Intrinsic Binary

Self-Determination Theory[16] and much Western ECA research frame motivation in a relatively static dichotomy: extrinsic versus intrinsic. Studies in China often stop at identifying high levels of parental, extrinsic pressure[7]. This research tentatively suggests that this binary may not be fixed but potentially developmental. Older students (16+) in the parent-driven cohort demonstrated what SDT terms "integrated regulation"—they had internalized parents' external goals and adopted them as their own. The 16-year-old at PingGo reframing conversational practice as "strategic" for university exemplifies this process. The significant age differences in internalization scores provide preliminary quantitative support for this pattern, suggesting that in high-pressure, collectivist contexts, extrinsic motivations can evolve into more self-endorsed forms over time.

Contribution 2: Decentering Parental Influence Through Student Agency

Literature on Chinese education, particularly following the "double reduction" policy, emphasizes "concerted cultivation" and parental hegemony in shaping children's out-of-school lives[9]. The student's perspective is often absent or assumed aligned with parental objectives. This research identifies a significant self-driven cohort (37.5% of the sample) and demonstrates that student agency is a potentially important variable. Students' narratives, centered on fun, social connection, and personal interest, contrast with the instrumentalism of the parent-driven group. The significant differences in enjoyment (92% vs. 35% looking forward to sessions) suggest that decision source may meaningfully shape experiential outcomes. This finding forces recalibration of models viewing students as passive recipients of parental strategy, arguing instead for more complex models where child agency interacts with, and sometimes resists, parental influence.

Contribution 3: Gendered Expression of Autonomy

Research on gender and education often focuses on broad outcome gaps. In ECA research, gender is typically used as a control variable rather than an analytical lens. This study uncovers a suggestive but tentative gender pattern: among self-driven students, females were significantly more likely to report strategic academic motivations alongside enjoyment for university applications (58% vs. 25%; $\chi^2 = 5.48$, $p = .019$), though not for test scores. This could reflect differential socialization regarding future planning, with young women internalizing pressure to connect present activities to future outcomes. This adds a layer of complexity to understanding student voice and autonomy, suggesting that even when students exercise agency, they do so within gendered social structures that shape how they articulate the value of their choices.

Contribution 4: Integrating Sociological Perspectives on Youth Agency

While psychological frameworks like SDT illuminate individual motivation processes, this study's findings also speak to sociological questions about how agency is socially structured. The substantial parent-driven cohort (62.5%) reveals how students' capacity to make choices is constrained by their position within families and educational systems. Yet the self-driven cohort (37.5%) demonstrates that young people actively navigate these constraints, constructing meaning and exercising agency even within limited choice architectures. The finding that internalization increases with age suggests that agency is not a fixed capacity but develops through engagement with institutional structures and timelines. These insights align with sociological work on "youth agency"[11], which emphasizes that young people's decisions are shaped by available cultural scripts and power relations with adults.

Recommendations

For educators and program providers: The significant differences in enjoyment between self-driven and parent-driven students suggest value in conducting brief "motivation check-ins" to understand why students are participating and adjust programming accordingly. For parent-driven participants, particularly younger ones, creating opportunities for authentic engagement within instrumental contexts might facilitate eventual internalization. Programs might consider flexible structures that accommodate both instrumental skill-building and recreational engagement.

For policymakers: The substantial parent-driven cohort suggests that policies promoting ECA access should attend not only to availability but also to student agency in selection. The "double reduction" policy's expansion of school-run activities presents opportunities to study whether different access models shape student agency. However, policy recommendations would require much broader, representative research.

For parents: The finding that self-driven students report higher enjoyment suggests value in supporting children's genuine interests when possible. For parents whose children initially resist participation, the internalization pattern(where older students more fully adopt parental goals) might offer

some reassurance that resistance does not preclude eventual acceptance.

For researchers: This study suggests several directions for future research. First, longitudinal studies tracking the same students over time are needed to establish whether age differences reflect genuine developmental internalization or cohort effects. Second, comparative research across different activity types (school-run programs, sports, arts, community-based activities) would reveal whether the decision-maker patterns observed here generalize beyond fee-paying English enrichment. Third, studies incorporating parent and teacher perspectives could triangulate student self-reports and illuminate how decision-making unfolds within families. Fourth, larger samples with adequate statistical power for subgroup analyses are essential to confirm the tentative gender patterns identified here. Fifth, cross-cultural comparative research could examine whether the internalization processes observed in urban China operate similarly in other educational systems. Finally, qualitative research examining how students narrate their agency over time could enrich understanding of how young people make meaning of their participation as they move through educational transitions.

Limitations

Several substantial limitations qualify these findings:

- **Sample Constraints:** The sample was drawn from two fee-paying English programs in an urban Chinese setting, serving predominantly middle-class families. This severely limits generalizability to other activity types, other subjects, other geographic regions, and other socioeconomic contexts. Students from lower-income families unable to afford such programs might experience entirely different decision-making dynamics and perceived outcomes.
- **Subgroup Size:** Critical subgroups were very small: only 5 interview participants aged 16+; only 24 self-driven students per gender for gender analysis; only 22 parent-driven students aged 16+ for internalization analysis. These small sizes mean that findings may be unstable, reflect sampling error, or be driven by a few influential cases. The violation of expected frequency assumptions for one chi-square test underscores this limitation.
- **Cross-Sectional Design:** The study cannot establish whether age differences reflect developmental change or cohort effects. Longitudinal research following students over time is essential for understanding internalization processes.
- **Self-Report Data:** All data are based on student self-report, which may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly regarding sensitive topics like parental pressure. The absence of triangulation with parents, teachers, or observational data means we cannot verify or contextualize student accounts.
- **Correlational Design:** The study identifies associations but cannot establish causation. The relationship between decision source and outcomes may reflect selection effects (different types of students choose differently) rather than effects of decision source per se.
- **Researcher Positionality and Interpretive Bias:** I am a Chinese-English bilingual educated in both Chinese and Western educational systems. This background provided linguistic and cultural access but also shaped interpretation in ways that require explicit acknowledgment. I hold assumptions that student agency is inherently valuable and that Chinese educational contexts involve unique pressures on young people. These assumptions may have influenced questioning during interviews, attention to particular themes during analysis, and framing of findings. For example, the positive valuation of "self-driven" participation over "parent-driven" participation in the research questions and discussion reflects a cultural bias toward autonomy that may not be universally shared by participants themselves. Additionally, as an adult researcher studying adolescents, there is an inherent power imbalance that may have influenced what students felt comfortable sharing, particularly regarding sensitive topics like conflict with parents. While I engaged in reflexive journaling throughout data collection and analysis to document how personal experiences might shape interpretations, and while member checking with a subset of participants (n=8) confirmed that summarized themes resonated with their experiences, the possibility of interpretive bias cannot be eliminated. Future research should employ multiple analysts from diverse backgrounds and more extensive participant validation to mitigate these concerns.
- **Cultural Specificity:** Findings are embedded in the specific cultural context of urban, middle-class China in the early 2020s. Transferability to other cultural contexts should not be assumed.
- **Ethical Considerations in Research with Minors:** While the study received ethical approval from the institutional review board and obtained both parental consent and student assent, several ethical considerations merit discussion. First, power dynamics between the adult researcher and adolescent participants may have influenced the research process. Despite conducting interviews in student-selected locations and emphasizing

that there were no right or wrong answers, students may have perceived me as an authority figure and tailored responses accordingly. This is particularly relevant when discussing potentially sensitive topics such as disagreement with parents. Second, vulnerability was addressed through several safeguards: I monitored student comfort throughout interviews, offered breaks if distress appeared, and reminded students they could skip any question or withdraw at any time without consequence. No students exhibited significant distress, though several became animated when discussing disagreements with parents—these moments were handled with empathy and normalization. Third, confidentiality procedures were clearly communicated to both parents and students. All data were anonymized using participant codes (e.g., PG_M_14), identifying information was stored separately from data, and parents were explicitly informed that individual responses would not be shared with them or program staff. However, the very presence of parental consent procedures may have influenced which students agreed to participate and how openly they spoke, as some may have worried about parental access to their responses despite assurances. Future research should consider additional measures such as offering more distal interview locations, using youth researchers as interviewers, and implementing more extensive confidentiality protections to further mitigate power imbalances and vulnerability concerns.

Closing Thought

This study demonstrates that understanding student voices is essential for comprehending how enrichment activities function in young people's lives. Even within the constrained context of Chinese educational pressure(intense parental involvement and high stakes) students exercise agency, construct meaning, and experience their activities in diverse ways. The finding that who makes the decision to participate predicts not only what students say they gain but how much they look forward to attending tells us that learning is not just about outcomes, but about the experience of showing up. As enrichment activities expand globally under various policy frameworks, attending to student voices could be essential for creating programs that genuinely serve young people, not just as future university applicants, but as present-tense human beings with interests, friendships, and desires for enjoyment.

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