

Empirical Study on the Impact of Intensive Extracurricular Education Experiences on the Future Development of Adolescents: A Case Study of the 'Jiwa Phenomenon' in Beijing

Min Zhang^{1,a,†}, Qianyu Meng^{2,b,*,†}

¹*School of Ethnology and Sociology, Minzu University of China, China*

²*Innovation Experimental Class "Xiaotong Class", Minzu University of China, China*

a. michelleminzhang@outlook.com, b. gloriamentng@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

†These authors contributed equally.

Abstract: In the context of the “Double Reduction” policy, this paper takes the group of “Tiger Parenting” in Beijing, who have had intensive extracurricular education experiences, as the research subjects, and explores how extracurricular education influences the formation of self-awareness in adolescents. The research findings indicate that extracurricular education not only provides adolescents with more educational choices but also, due to its particularly concentrated distribution in specific areas, serves as a platform for adolescents to engage in social activities with more diverse peers and to gather and disseminate information. At the same time, the “extracurricular class” becomes another space for adolescents, beyond the family and school, where they can encounter different groups and various life scenarios, contributing to the development of their spatiotemporal perspectives. The study concludes that although overly intensive extracurricular education can occasionally lead to psychological stress among adolescents in rare cases, overall, the diverse choices offered by extracurricular education aid adolescents in better exploring their interests. Furthermore, it positively influences their self-confidence and social skills through various means.

Keywords: educational anthropology, extracurricular education, adolescents, adolescence

1. Introduction

On May 21, 2021, the 19th meeting of the Central Committee for Comprehensive Deepening of Reform approved the *Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework and Extracurricular Training Burden on Students in the Compulsory Education Stage* (hereinafter referred to as the “Double Reduction” Opinion). The “Double Reduction” Opinion provides detailed restrictions and regulations on the prevalent extracurricular tutoring practices, significantly compressing the survival space of extracurricular tutoring institutions that have been booming recently. An analysis report reveals that the K12 (kindergarten through twelfth grade) education sector, covering the educational spectrum from preschool to high school in China, boasts a vast market size. In 2019, the K12 education market reached nearly CNY 475.1 billion. Among offline education providers, New Oriental, with a presence in 83 cities and 1,233 teaching centers in 2019, employed 33,900 teachers and served 7.94 million

students. In comparison, TAL Education Group, a long-term competitor, had 26,003 teachers and 13.99 million students. In contrast, online education, which has lower delivery costs and broader accessibility, has gained significant traction. Institutions like Xueersi Online School, New Oriental Online, and Yuanfudao each have approximately 20 million students, while platforms like GSX and Zuoyebang each have around 15 million students. The top five institutions alone cater to a staggering 90 million students, underscoring the extensive reach and influence of extracurricular education. [1] Consequently, the impact of the reforms in the extracurricular education industry driven by the “Double Reduction” policy has become a hot topic in society.

The introduction of the “Double Reduction” Opinion has also sparked reflection on the prevailing phenomenon of “Tiger Parenting” in recent years. “Tiger Parenting” refers to the phenomenon where parents, due to their anxiety stemming from the belief in limited educational resources but significant educational outcomes, encourage their children to participate in high-intensity and high-density learning and extracurricular activities. This encourages children to constantly strive and compete with their peers to achieve success in education [2]. The escalating “Tiger Parenting” behavior is a manifestation of the increasing competitiveness in education and does not necessarily increase the number of admission slots in prestigious schools. Although relevant government departments attempt to alleviate student competition pressure through increasing school enrollments, competition ultimately revolves around securing a “good job” that satisfies both financial and social prestige expectations, rather than merely gaining admission to a “good school”. As such, only children have no choice but to continue elevating their educational levels to meet the high expectations that have outpaced the pace of national economic growth (Wen Feng, 2018). Competitive educational decision-making driven by limited educational resources, such as “Tiger Parenting”, has long existed in society.

In fact, debates and reforms surrounding extracurricular education similar to today’s have arisen in history. As early as around the year 2000, parents in Beijing, aiming to enhance their children’s competitiveness in the job market by securing admission to better colleges, had already pushed the competition in education down to the primary and secondary school levels. Attending a good high school was considered a precursor to entering a good university, with each stage of this path, from primary school to middle school to high school, being closely interlinked. In this “educational arms race”, if parents wanted their children to succeed in school selection and enter a prestigious high school after the middle school entrance examination, the process typically looked like this: start extracurricular training as early as possible, often in preschool, and select a path for school selection based on different priorities. This path can be categorized into two main streams based on their emphasis: “academic tutoring classes focused on subjects relevant to school selection exams (such as mathematics, Chinese, and English) with the aim of improving examination scores” [3], and “extracurricular interest classes and talent classes with a focus on non-examination academic performance (such as arts, sports, etc.)” [4].

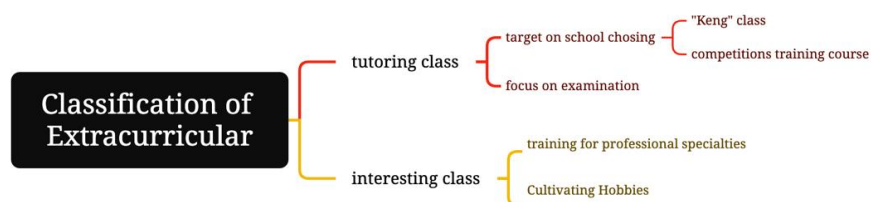


Figure 1: Classification of Extracurricular Education.

The high educational expectations of parents have given rise to a complex extracurricular education chain. Taking the renowned High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China as an

example, as early as the late 1990s, it had already established “Keng Class”. It represents a unique form of extracurricular tutoring system where students who perform well in these classes have the opportunity to excel in entrance exams for quality junior high schools, and in some cases, secure direct admission slots. Furthermore, there are admission methods for “specialized students” in fields such as arts and sports. These methods, during the transitions from elementary to junior high school and from junior high to high school, can lower the admission standards for academic subjects. In a certain sense, this has made extracurricular education in arts and sports a favored category in the market, aligning with the preferences of many parents[5].

Therefore, “Keng Class” and “specialized students” represent the largest and most typical manifestations of that era when parents, in their pursuit of school selection for their children, exhibited various strategies. By 2019, Beijing had issued policies that abolished the enrollment of all types of specialized students during the transition from elementary to junior high school, allocating all admission slots through centralized placement. This marked the end of the more than a decade-long “Tiger Parenting” trend during the transition from elementary to junior high school, with the closure of “Keng Class” and the discontinuation of “specialized students” admissions. The echoes of this phenomenon have continued to the present day but have subsided since the introduction of the “Double Reduction” Opinion.

When the “Double Reduction” Opinion was introduced, making extracurricular education reform a matter of widespread societal concern, it was fundamentally no different from the phenomenon that had once stirred Beijing and the current hotly debated topic. Those children who had experienced “Keng Class” and “specialized students” selection for school placement in their earlier years have now grown into adulthood and have embarked on different paths in life. By retrospectively examining their experiences from twenty years ago through their perspective, this research has discovered that extracurricular education has had a positive impact on adolescents’ self-awareness development at various levels, including boosting their confidence and enhancing their social skills. On the one hand, this offers a unique perspective for assessing the impact of educational reforms under the “Double Reduction” Opinion, a matter of societal concern. On the other hand, it provides insights for individuals making education decisions based on their circumstances in the context of market-oriented education choices.

2. Literature Review

In previous research, scholars have shown a keen interest in the role of extracurricular education in the process of cultural capital reproduction. Most studies have started from this point of view. By focusing on the relationship between education and social class mobility and examining class differences in educational strategies, scholars have pursued two main avenues of discussion to explore how extracurricular education influences adolescents from different angles. However, most of the existing discussions have been from a third-party perspective, such as from the family and society. There is a scarcity of research that examines how extracurricular education influences adolescents and what kind of impact it has on them from the perspective of the adolescents themselves. Additionally, many of these studies tend to view extracurricular education solely as an educational model and overlook the temporal and spatial characteristics inherent in offline extracurricular education. This research, taking the perspective of adolescents’ self-reflection, concentrates on discussing the factors influencing adolescents’ experiences in extracurricular education and its extended contexts. It particularly explores the impact of extracurricular education on adolescents, especially in the development of their self-awareness.

2.1. The Relationship Between Education and Social Mobility

With the global trend of social transformation that began in the 1970s and the combined effects of the knowledge economy and globalization, the crucial role of education in individual social mobility has become increasingly prominent [6][7]. Education serves not only as the primary channel for intergenerational mobility but also as the primary means of social class reproduction. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "Cultural Capital" has played a significant role in discussions about social class reproduction. Embodied cultural capital is accumulated through the family environment during childhood and one's personal cultural experiences, making it the most challenging form to acquire. Different levels of possession of cultural capital can lead to differences in aesthetic preferences and lifestyle habits. Such distinctions created by cultural capital often become markers for class divisions. Consequently, education is an essential channel for intergenerational mobility and a primary pathway for social reproduction. Although cultural capital may appear to be something that individuals can naturally acquire through learning, it is, in reality, accumulated and passed down through the power of the family. Thus, cultural capital is well-suited to legitimize the intergenerational transmission of social privileges, despite democratic ideals attempting to break this cycle [8][9][10]. This "elite culture", as a symbol of social class, can make students who possess it more readily accepted and recognized by teachers and peers in the school system. Due to the extra attention and affirmation they receive, and the characteristic of being more willing to advocate for themselves, students with higher cultural capital are more inclined to convert cultural capital into academic advantages within the educational system [11][12]. Therefore, cultural capital, which can promote academic improvement and the attainment of higher educational degrees, has become a particularly important focus for parents in the education process. This has also sparked discussions about the phenomenon of extracurricular education in various countries, such as the "Helicopter Parenting" and "Tiger Mom" phenomena in American education, as well as the supplementary education phenomenon in Japanese and Korean societies, all of which have received widespread attention in academic circles.

Given the dual influence of traditional Chinese society and the education system, the importance of education in social mobility is self-evident. Since the 1980s, with the market transformation in Chinese society, families and the consumption sphere have undergone significant changes. As the trend of "fewer children" in Chinese families becomes increasingly prominent, parents are more willing to invest money in their children's education. While parents express their love for their children through consumption, they also enhance their children's quality through substantial investments in educational resources [13]. Some Chinese scholars believe that after experiencing significant social differentiation in the 1990s, China's social structure gradually solidified [14]. In such a context, education has provided individuals with a systemic "exit" for upward mobility, making countless families aspire to invest in education and have their children compete in a society characterized by the widening gap based on "knowledge and skills" [15]. This competitive goal has intensified the competition among individual families, especially middle-class families, in the realm of education, with a greater focus on market-oriented education choices. Extracurricular education has indeed brought advantages as parents hoped. On the one hand, extracurricular education provides certain resource advantages by increasing disparities in educational duration, opportunities, and other factors, thereby enhancing individual educational outcomes [16][17]. On the other hand, extracurricular education reproduces social inequality within the compulsory education system, serving as an effective means for different social strata to maintain intergenerational "inequality" transmission, a phenomenon verified in China [18].

2.2. Class Differences in Educational Strategies

In a study based on CFPS conducted in 2016, it was found that families from different social classes

had similar willingness to enroll their children in “cram schools” directly related to competitive exams. However, there was a noticeable differentiation in their willingness to enroll their children in “interest-based classes”, with more advantaged families being inclined to have their children participate in such courses. This reflects the dual educational strategies of advantaged families, characterized by “avoiding academic decline” [19] and “effectively maintaining educational inequality” [20][21]. Extracurricular education has become a way to transmit cultural capital between generations from the perspective of cultural production theory. In a sense, it has become a “third layer” of the mechanism for the reproduction of cultural capital, following the family and school [22]. In the context of China’s exam-oriented education system, the cultivation of cultural capital may conflict with students’ academic pursuits. As a result, parents tend to adopt a “ ‘heterogeneous’ cultural capital cultivation strategy”. Advantaged-class parents use more diverse artistic inclinations, seeking to strike a balance between cultivating class taste and maintaining academic advantages as a marker of class distinction [23]. Past research has found a significant positive correlation between parenting styles and students’ academic performance. Some scholars even argue that parenting styles have a greater impact on human capital accumulation than financial and time investments [24].

Simultaneously, high-intensity extracurricular education has become a shared burden for parents and children alike. However, due to the fear of falling behind, even if everyone despises interest-based and cram classes, few are willing to take the risk of quitting, resulting in a typical collective action dilemma in society [25]. The relationship between extracurricular education and the emotional well-being of adolescents has also received increasing attention from scholars. For families with lower social class backgrounds, participating in extracurricular education may even lead to negative emotions in children [26]. The utility of extracurricular education as a tool used by the middle class to maintain intergenerational “inequality” has become a key focus of discussion in this dimension.

In the existing relevant research, researchers often examine the practical utility of extracurricular education as a tool from the perspective of the older generation and the broad impact it brings. However, there are fewer discussions from the perspective of the younger generation regarding the role and influence of extracurricular education. Furthermore, in existing studies on extracurricular education, scholars tend to focus on the “educational process” within extracurricular education, selectively overlooking extracurricular education as a holistic process that may involve complex factors affecting adolescents. This study aims to provide analysis and responses to these gaps.

3. Introduction of the Research Subjects

During the preliminary research process, the author found that by using extracurricular education types and educational pathways as criteria, the participation of adolescents in extracurricular education could be roughly divided into two directions and seven types, as illustrated in the figure below. Therefore, when selecting representative research subjects, the author paid special attention to the overall educational experiences of the interviewees, and the final list of interviewees included cases from all seven different educational pathway choices.

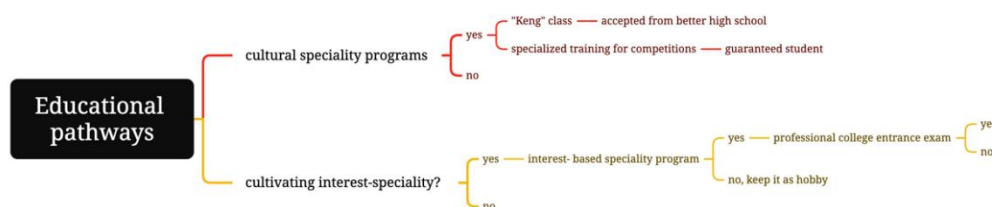


Figure 2: Educational Pathway Diagram.

All nine interviewees completed their compulsory education in the Beijing area and, during this period, had experienced no less than ten different categories, totaling twenty class instances of extracurricular education, with distinct categories, institutions, and purposes. These experiences encompassed both tutoring classes and interest-based classes. Currently, all nine interviewees are enrolled in universities ranked 211 or higher, come from families with a favorable annual income, and can be classified as part of Beijing’s middle-class demographic. Among the interviewees, one pursued an art-focused program in secondary school and later gained admission to an art-focused university through the arts entrance examination. Two interviewees attended full-time high school programs and subsequently entered music-focused universities to study cross-disciplinary majors through the regular academic entrance examination. Two others initially participated in specialized sports training programs but later returned to the regular academic high school education system, one in junior high and one in high school.

Table 1: Interviewees’ Extracurricular Education Experiences.

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Competition Training	Cultural Specialty Programs, such as “Keng Class”	Interest-based Specialty Programs, such as “specialized students”	Interest-based Professional Training	Arts/Sports Entrance Exam	Arts/Sports University /Major
1	Ayang	Male	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
2	Xiaoxue	Female	No	No	No	No	No	No
3	Xiaoyu	Female	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
4	Sisi	Female	No	No	No	Yes, fine arts track	No	No
5	Gezi	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes, sports track	No	No
6	Axiang	Male	No	No	Yes	Yes, sports track	No	No
7	Yunzi	Male	Yes	No	Yes	Yes, music track	No	Yes, music track
8	Ayao	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, music track	No	Yes, music track

Table 1: (continued).

9	Lanlan	Female	No	No	No	Yes, fine arts track	Yes, fine arts track	Yes, fine arts track
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4. “Experimental Fields”: Multiple Extracurricular Extensions for Varied Educational Types and Resources

4.1. A More Diverse Range of Educational Types

In conventional school education, students often study subjects that are closely related to college entrance exams, such as the high school and university entrance exams. Although some schools offer “school-based courses” that may involve subjects from different fields (such as Chinese language and traditional culture) or other interest-based training as part of their distinctive school programs, they still lack diversity compared to market-driven educational choices. What courses students can take depends largely on the direction of the school’s curriculum development and the fixed teaching staff of the school. Taking Beijing as an example, students from “traditional sports schools” often have limited exposure to arts education, and the education time allocated for it is relatively short. Conversely, the reverse is also true. Even for students in “arts-oriented schools”, the courses and the quality of teaching staff provided by the school are often not comparable to those offered by professional institutions in the market.

Interviewee Gezi mentioned in the interview that he had participated in a variety of extracurricular education activities. These activities include sports such as soccer and roller skating, as well as artistic pursuits like sketching and playing the clarinet. Additionally, he has engaged in activities related to language skills and calligraphy, which, while somewhat related to the curriculum, lean more towards personal development and enrichment. Among these, he had participated in more professionally oriented training for soccer, while most other activities were pursued as hobbies. In his perspective, a wide range of extracurricular activities serves as a valuable use of his free time, which includes weekdays after school and weekends. He sees it as a way to make the most of his time without wasting it. In his view, if he didn’t have various extracurricular activities to fill his spare time, even if he spent it all playing with friends, it would be a monotonous experience. However, by participating in different types of interest-based classes, he can have fun with friends while also learning new things, making the experience more diverse and less repetitive.

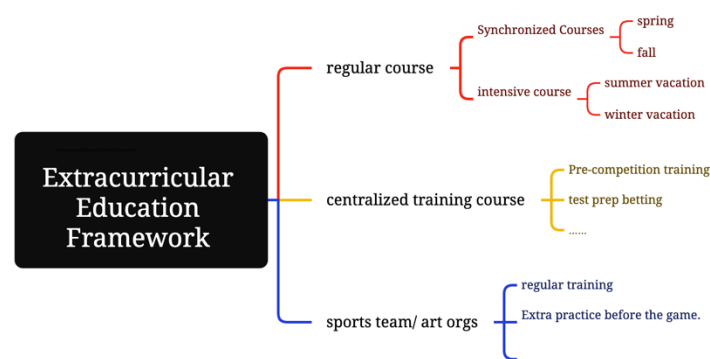


Figure 3: Extracurricular Education Curriculum Framework (Compiled by the author based on oral descriptions from multiple interviewees.).

In this situation, even a superficial interest attempt has its value. Even if it's just one or two courses of study ("one course" often corresponds to one semester or one vacation in school education, with "four periods" per year), it may also play its role as cultural capital in the subsequent growth process: "Until now, the feeling that I can get in touch with everything others talk about is still quite good, and I cherish the ability gained from dabbling in many different courses when I was young". Unlike previous studies that generally assume that cultural capital plays an important role in cultivating hobbies that can be referred to as "strengths", the author found that just delving into a certain field at the entry-level level can also have a certain degree of impact on the growth of adolescents. This impact is mainly due to two aspects. One is that, as interviewee Z pointed out, the knowledge brought by a brief and systematic introduction becomes the cultural capital of teenagers during their growth process, helping them expand their social circle and reducing communication barriers when chatting with different groups. The wide range of interest courses in childhood helped them broaden their horizons during their lower opportunity cost childhood, discovering what they were suitable for and what they were not suitable for. At the same time, it also helped them accumulate various insights and play a role in future cooperation and communication with others. The second is that mastering more different hobbies will give teenagers more opportunities to showcase themselves, thereby becoming more confident and more conducive to developing a good self-awareness.

The interviewee Sisi has extensive experience in participating in art interest classes during preschool and primary school stages, and has persisted in training in dance, piano, art, and recitation for a long time. As of the approaching pressure of the middle school entrance examination, she has been continuously studying for more than five years and has achieved a relatively good level among amateur students, such as piano level 10. In her retrospective, it was specifically mentioned that although she may not have realized the significance of these interests to herself during the learning process, she gradually discovered from high school that the learning of these strengths had an indelible impact on her growth process. Although she did not embark on a professional path related to her interests and strengths in the end, she mentioned that these strengths brought her many performance and competition opportunities during her teenage years outside of regular courses. This point has also been widely mentioned by the vast majority of respondents. A richer range of hobbies and specialties will provide teenagers with more opportunities to showcase themselves, and these opportunities can better reduce their social anxiety level and promote the good development of teenagers' self-awareness in adolescence when the public has a strong self-awareness and pays special attention to "how others see me". At the same time, the display scenes are often accompanied by teachers' praise of teenagers, as well as high evaluations of teenagers by peer groups. These positive evaluations help teenagers develop higher levels of self-esteem and develop better self-awareness.

But this effect is not always positive. Taking interviewee Ayao as an example, he has a high musical talent. After more than ten years of continuous music training, he entered a professional university to study music-related majors through cultural course exams. He mentioned that over the years of extracurricular learning, he has become overly focused on positive evaluations of himself, making it difficult to accept negative evaluations or experiencing situations where he is unable to do his best in a certain field. This makes him tend to adopt a strategy of "differentiated competition" to face uncontrollable parts of daily life. For example, in the process of full-time high school learning, it is difficult to achieve first place in academic performance, so a lot of time is spent on extracurricular vocal training; alternatively, one may only delve into a certain part of a certain subject and strive to be the first, but correspondingly abandon the study of other subjects and other parts. The process of extracurricular education may lead some teenagers who excessively pursue a sense of achievement to fall into misunderstandings when their self-awareness development is not yet mature. Moreover, some respondents expressed that the vicious competition events they encountered in extracurricular sports education led them to have a very negative view on cooperative behavior in their subsequent

growth process.

In addition, there is another feature related to this that has been repeatedly mentioned by multiple respondents during the research process. For respondents who have had a long and in-depth learning experience in a particular field of interest and expertise, this early period of time has become a “reference frame” for their future life path. Extracurricular education related to interests often requires long-term persistence in learning, overcoming monotonous and repetitive training. This process helps cultivate teenagers’ perseverance ability and makes it easier to persist in completing homework or work.

4.2. More Flexible Educational Resources

In the conventional school education setting, teachers are typically assigned to specific classes through administrative arrangements, making it difficult for students to find the best-suited teacher by changing classes or other means. The principle of “teaching according to aptitude” means that even recognized “great teachers” may not necessarily be suitable for every student, and may not deliver the most ideal educational outcomes. Moreover, in most cases, schools offer only one set of subject courses matching the students’ grade level, which forces families with advanced learning needs or competition training requirements to opt for extracurricular education as a means to pursue their studies.

Extracurricular education provides adolescents with the freedom to choose teachers who are a better fit for their individual needs and to access courses with the appropriate level of difficulty. Admittedly, there are situations where students from schools or districts with relatively weaker educational resources resort to extracurricular education in pursuit of “great teachers” to enhance the quality of their education. However, from a broader perspective, even with equal-quality educational resources, different combinations of teachers and students can yield different learning outcomes. In extracurricular education, students can choose teachers of different styles that suit their learning habits and interests, whether they are humorous, serious, or have any other teaching style, in order to achieve more ideal learning results. This actually explains why, even in schools with highly recognized educational standards, there is still a significant proportion of students opting for extracurricular education.

Interviewee Xiaoyu attends a school in Beijing known for its comprehensive evaluation, but she has still participated in a substantial amount of extracurricular education throughout her academic journey. The majority of her extracurricular education has been related to college entrance exams, including regular tutoring classes, competition training, and “Keng Class”. Despite attending a school with well-established educational resources, she still sought out extracurricular education as it allowed her to find teachers who were better suited to her needs. Through extracurricular education, she was able to build strong relationships with her teachers, and the style of learning in extracurricular settings matched her preferences, which led to better learning outcomes.

Furthermore, compared to the large class sizes and non-segmented teaching in school education, extracurricular tutoring classes have smaller class sizes, and different levels of intensity are clearly defined within the same grade level. This is particularly beneficial for students with preferences for school choice or those participating in competitions. For example, using the example of Xueersi, an educational company under TAL Education Group, each session of their courses is divided into basic classes, advanced classes, elite classes, and super classes 1, 2, and 3, with promotion exams between each level. Such an approach to education is more favorable for talented students, allowing them to leverage their strengths and selectively enhance their abilities [27][28].

At the same time, for students who find it relatively challenging to study in school, targeted improvement through extracurricular tutoring often yields significant results. Moreover, during this process, adolescents do not face the psychological pressure of feeling “inferior because I’m not as

smart”, but rather form a more objective understanding: “Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses, and I may have some shortcomings in this particular area”.

However, when it comes to the most common “one-on-one” tutoring, especially before the junior high school entrance examination, arranging extracurricular education too intensively can have a counterproductive effect. During our research, we found that even if extracurricular “interest-based classes” in elementary school are scheduled quite densely, they do not create too much pressure for the interviewees. This is because the content of these extracurricular education activities is relatively relaxed and lively, and for adolescents, it is even a form of richer entertainment in a sense. In contrast, the “large class” model of tiered extracurricular tutoring, although it exerts noticeable academic pressure, benefits from the larger class size, meaning that teachers do not need to focus on each student at all times. Therefore, even when attending classes continuously throughout the day, there is downtime during class to alleviate fatigue. However, one-on-one tutoring lacks this buffering period as it requires both the teacher and the student to concentrate their attention simultaneously in order to efficiently address the student’s potential problems. This characteristic makes students feel exceptionally exhausted after completing the courses, and arranging them too densely may lead to unintended adverse effects.

During the interviews, one of the interviewees, Sisi, commented on this matter: “Although one-on-one tutoring is more effective, and the teacher is quick to assist you when you ask questions, the period when I went for one-on-one tutoring in the ninth grade was simply too painful. Because the academic pressure in the ninth grade was immense, I had to attend several subjects every day, wake up early in the morning, and even cross a pedestrian bridge to get to the other side for classes. During those times, you would see the morning scenery on the pedestrian bridge. Sometimes you could see the sunrise, or you could see the sun had just risen not long ago. By the time you returned home, there would be no more sunlight. This image remains vivid in my memory”. Looking back from today’s perspective, the interviewee stated that this painful experience, which is still vividly remembered, did not actually bring about substantial academic improvement. Instead, it served as a psychological comfort at that time. In the case of extracurricular classes primarily focused on improving in-school academic performance, this phenomenon was repeatedly mentioned by different interviewees. In the view of most interviewees today, extracurricular classes served more as a psychological comfort, reassuring them that they were “already working hard in their studies”, but in reality, they did not substantially improve their grades. However, this phenomenon may also be attributed to the prevalence of extracurricular tutoring among their peers, leading to a situation where, although each student improved academically, relative rankings did not show an upward trend. Nevertheless, when considering extracurricular classes as a whole, they still had a positive impact on the students.

In summary, extracurricular education offers adolescents a more diverse range of educational choices compared to school-based education, encompassing both horizontal and vertical dimensions. From a horizontal perspective, if adolescents merely dabble in various interests, these brief yet systematic forays will become a form of unique cultural capital, facilitating the development of a more favorable self-image in their future social interactions with different groups. In the case of long-term specialization, the experiences gained in the process of persisting over an extended period and overcoming difficulties to achieve goals become a “reference frame” for adolescents in their growth, helping them to face setbacks more positively and contributing to the development of a constructive self-awareness.

From a vertical perspective, extracurricular education is better equipped to meet students’ personalized educational needs. Firstly, compared to the relatively fixed teachers and classes in the school environment, extracurricular education offers more flexibility in teacher-student matching. This allows students with different personalities to more easily find suitable teachers after broad experimentation, facilitating a personalized approach to teaching. This aspect is more pronounced in

younger students who are relatively introverted. Suitable teachers can establish a high level of trust with them, aiding in the development of adolescents' interpersonal skills. Secondly, extracurricular education differentiates the difficulty levels of courses within the same subject, allowing adolescents to participate in courses of varying difficulty levels based on their own performance. In contrast to the stigmatization in schools where students in the same class may feel labeled as "less intelligent", different types of classes in extracurricular education do not necessarily create psychological pressure for adolescents and are more likely to contribute to targeted performance improvements. For example, classes emphasizing "strengthening foundations" and "personalized customization" can play a more effective role in addressing learning issues and improving academic performance.

5. "Extracurricular Classes": The "Third Space" Beyond Home and School

5.1. Broader Peer Interaction

Many interviewees expressed during the interviews that extracurricular classes provide a distinct social space where adolescents can interact with a more extensive peer group beyond their regular schoolmates. Due to zoning policies, most interviewees had limited exposure to a relatively homogeneous group of peers during primary and middle school. In contrast, the influence of geography on extracurricular classes is less pronounced, and the composition of participants is more complex due to greater mobility. Therefore, extracurricular classes become a "second space" outside of school where teenagers can socialize with a more diverse and larger peer group.

Firstly, some extracurricular education is offered through schools. Activities like school-sponsored arts groups, sports teams, and elective courses are avenues through which certain extracurricular institutions and teachers engage with students. This means that the participants in these types of extracurricular activities are often the same as those encountered in school. Interviewee L, for example, primarily participated in extracurricular activities of this nature. These courses are typically attended by a fixed group of classmates. For them, the specific class being taken is not as important as being able to continue spending time with their friends. L mentioned, "It doesn't matter what class we're taking; as long as I can continue being with them, it's fine. It's so boring at home with no one to play with". Friendships strengthened in extracurricular classes can also positively impact daily interactions within the school.

Secondly, due to the unique nature of the extracurricular education market in Beijing, a tutoring circle with the "cosmic cramming centers" Haidian Huangzhuang[29] as the core and radiating outward has been formed for a considerable period of time, including radiation points such as Dazhong Temple and Gongzhufen. In these points, high-density and diverse extracurricular education institutions gather for business, and "great teachers" and "excellent children" from all over Beijing gather here. During its heyday, primary and secondary school students in Beijing were able to immerse themselves in these areas from morning to night throughout the winter and summer vacations, completing all extracurricular courses from Chinese, mathematics, English, to music, sports, and arts. Therefore, despite the vast area of Beijing, a large number of parents and students choose to accept one to two hours of one-way commuting during peak periods in order to provide their children with the best possible access to educational resources.

Unlike students who share similar family backgrounds and experiences due to strict zoning policies in their schools, these extracurricular institutions in various areas bring together a diverse group of adolescents with different backgrounds and characteristics. The collision and interaction between these young people with distinct lifestyles and experiences foster unique dynamics. Given the unequal distribution of educational resources among districts in Beijing, this characteristic is particularly evident among students from suburban areas outside the "eight urban districts". Take interviewee Xiaoxue as an example. She attended schools in Changping District for both middle

school and elementary school, but she would spend entire weekends and holidays taking classes in cramming centers like Haidian Huangzhuang. For her, perhaps her grades did not significantly improve through extracurricular education. However, being surrounded by “mostly very talented students from Haidian”, who consistently achieved exceptionally high scores in standardized exams, made her feel the desire to study and catch up with them. This peer pressure, which she did not feel as acutely in school, was one of the reasons she continued to participate in extracurricular education.

Simultaneously, the complex student composition also positions extracurricular classes as an “information hub” to some extent. When adolescents interact with peers from different backgrounds and characteristics, they exchange information, which is more favorable for families to make informed educational decisions. This exchange of information can sometimes have a significant impact on adolescents who are not yet mature in their self-awareness, making them feel like they are “opening their eyes to the world”. Interviewee Yunzi, for example, started attending coaching classes at a cramming center in Haidian Huangzhuang four times a week (Thursday and Friday evenings, and full days on Saturday and Sunday) from a suburban area from the eighth grade. After more than a year of continuous effort, he made a leap in his performance from being an average student to achieving the top position in his class in the ninth-grade entrance examination.

For a considerable period of time, the high-quality educational resources offered by extracurricular education institutions have been considered indispensable for his academic improvement, and in some cases, the primary reason for his remarkable progress. Yunzi mentioned, “Both from the perspective of parents and teachers, they would think that my current level was achieved through tutoring, which I somewhat deny. I believe it provided me with subjective initiative to engage in competition actively, which led to rapid progress. But I don’t think every point I scored was obtained from the tutoring teacher.”

However, upon later reflection, he realized that extracurricular education provided educational resources was just one aspect. What was more crucial was the information he gained through interaction with other peers during those classes. He said, “Actually, the main thing that extracurricular classes brought me was information. It awakened me at that time. If I hadn’t attended these extracurricular classes, if I hadn’t talked to so many students from top schools like X High School, XOX School, I wouldn’t have known how important rankings, cross-district policies, and the high school entrance examination were. I had good grades at school, but only when I went there, did I realize the significance of information disparity. Suddenly, it felt like I was doing well in that small environment, but it wasn’t enough. Doing well in that small environment didn’t count for much in comparison to others. You would come to Dazhong Temple every weekend and gain a new understanding of yourself. You would experience two kinds of feelings continuously. The first feeling is that as a Changping resident, I’m better than many students from Haidian, and this is a good experience. The second feeling is that I might never catch up with the group of talented people above me in my lifetime.”

5.2. Diverse Teacher-Student Relationships

Furthermore, the teacher-student relationships in extracurricular education differ from those in compulsory education. In schools, teachers often appear as authoritative figures in front of students. Due to various pressures such as college entrance exams and assessments, teachers in schools are usually expected to be “responsible for students”, whether it’s in terms of academic performance or character development. Since students in the compulsory education stage are often younger and less mentally mature, they have difficulty motivating themselves to study or “do the right thing”, and teachers need to play a supervisory role. This often results in a clear boundary and a more serious atmosphere in teacher-student relationships in compulsory education. However, in extracurricular education, the teacher-student relationship is more relaxed because it is based on a commercial

interest where teachers are not necessarily bound by moral obligations to be “responsible for students” in the same way, and the connection between teachers and students’ academic performance is not as apparent.

Therefore, the teacher-student relationships in this environment tend to be more relaxed and resemble those in high school or college: “The relationship between teachers and students is like colleagues. We are in class together (at work) at the designated time, and once the class is over, we go our separate ways. We do what needs to be done. If the relationship is good, we can also have meals together, just like colleagues after work, not as serious”. During the interviews, it was observed that this different dynamic in teacher-student relationships had a significant impact on the interviewed adolescents, especially when they were at a young age. One of the interviewees mentioned that this relaxed teacher-student relationship almost reshaped his perception of the teaching profession, influencing how he perceived teacher-student relationships in high school and college.

In addition, teaching assistants, often university students, also play the role of “teachers” in a broader sense within extracurricular education. In extracurricular education, teaching assistants need to communicate with teachers, parents, and students, assist teachers in grading tests, check homework, and handle various daily tasks. This work dynamic leads to close communication and interaction between teaching assistants and students, but teaching assistants do not possess the same level of authority as teachers in a school environment. In informal communication settings, they might engage in conversations and recreational activities with students. This further diminishes the authority of teachers in extracurricular education settings.

During the research process, it was evident that, unlike conventional views within academia that often simplify extracurricular education as merely an educational process and explore its impacts accordingly, adolescents, especially those in lower grades who had not yet faced the pressure of college entrance exams, placed considerable importance on whether they would have peers to socialize with when deciding whether to participate in a particular extracurricular class. Under the influence of the “school district enrollment” policy, adolescents’ peer groups in school were relatively fixed. In some cases, described by the interviewees, this group remained the same from kindergarten to middle school. However, due to the concentrated distribution of extracurricular classes in certain areas, extracurricular education provided adolescents from across the city with opportunities to meet, significantly expanding their social circles. Additionally, since students from different districts and schools participated in extracurricular education, they came from diverse family backgrounds. Extracurricular education also became a platform for adolescents to exchange information and share trends, holding significant social significance.

The way adolescents interacted with teachers in extracurricular education also differed from their interactions in school education. The dissolution of the traditional perception of teachers as authoritative figures in extracurricular education prompted adolescents to reevaluate their relationships with authority figures and redefine the relationship between “self” and “authority”, further contributing to the development of adolescent self-awareness.

6. “Training Ground”: Initial Experience in Life Planning

6.1. Trying to Engage with a More Complex World

Unlike the common perception of a miserable childhood overloaded with extracurricular classes, most of the interviewees had the autonomy to decide what classes to take and what not to take. They didn’t reject the idea of extracurricular classes being an essential part of their weekend holidays. When they were younger, parents often decided whether or not to attend classes and which classes to take through trial classes and considering their children’s opinions. As the interviewees grew older, typically in the upper grades of primary school when parents believed they had some decision-making ability, they

began to have a certain degree of decision-making power. In retrospect, most interviewees stated that this decision-making experience had a positive impact on their ability to plan their time. They didn't feel overwhelmed by extracurricular education at that time, and some even actively wanted to attend extracurricular classes because they found their home life boring.

This widely given decision-making authority over their lives did indeed force adolescents to start considering what they wanted and what they didn't want. Although limited by their not fully matured self-awareness, the factors they could consider were relatively simple. However, this opportunity for decision-making did promote the emergence and development of their ability in this regard to some extent. Interviewee D, who was the first interviewee, stated during the interview that he had the authority to decide whether or not to attend classes and which classes to take from an early age. However, once he made a decision, his parents no longer allowed him to withdraw halfway. He had to complete at least one term of classes, and if he didn't like it, he wouldn't continue. Although initially he would make decisions about whether or not to attend a particular class based solely on his preferences and whether or not he wanted to play with someone, he quickly realized what it meant to "take responsibility for one's choices" and what standards to use to make a decision earlier than his peers. Despite frequently encountering difficulties during this process, the valuable experience gained during adolescence with relatively low opportunity costs still has a significant positive impact on him today.

This decision-making authority will expand to more areas as they grow older. In the later years of primary school and junior high school, all interviewees stated that they had spent the whole day in a certain area attending extracurricular classes, commuting by public transportation in the morning and evening, and had the freedom to use a small amount of pocket money to solve their meals. In fact, this has invisibly expanded the range of people and scenes that adolescents may come into contact with in their lives. Unlike the usual protection by parents at home and isolation from the outside world at school, they need to learn how to take the subway during rush hour without conflict with others, how to go to a restaurant or store to buy food on their own, and so on in this situation. In some uncommon but not nonexistent cases, some parents even let their children decide how to plan their own course schedules. From choosing the subject institution, communicating with administrative sales, and paying fees, to deciding which teacher and which time slot to attend, planning the courses for a whole cycle, these situations require adolescents to deal with multiple topics simultaneously and consider multiple factors in decision-making, all of which are valuable opportunities for all-round growth. At the same time, this process also trains their ability to manage money. During the fieldwork, the author found that many adolescents tried to plan their pocket money to avoid going hungry while saving money to buy snacks, stationery, or other items they desired.

Exposure to different life scenarios also increases the opportunities for adolescents to observe and understand the world. During the interviews, I paid special attention to where the interviewees' memories of extracurricular education were concentrated. It is worth noting that most interviewees did not directly provide scenes from the "educational" process, but rather described memorable moments during their journey to class. One of the most representative scenes mentioned by interviewee Ayao was: "Normally, my primary school, junior high, and high school were all quite close, just one street for primary school, two streets for junior high, and four streets for high school, and I didn't stay in dorms. I always lived very close to school, but the extracurricular classes were far away. My home was on Changchun Street, and if I had to go to Gongzhufen to attend classes, it was quite far. At that time, Route 57 was a long way from the terminus. I still have a strong impression of that long journey. I actually quite liked that relatively long journey because if I only traveled within the vicinity of my school during primary school and junior high, I would feel limited. I thought Beijing was just this big, with only two streets because I hadn't been to other places. In fact, it wasn't until I went to Xueersi and attended classes near Gongzhufen that I realized there was more to this

side of Beijing, and Beijing is actually very large. It really expanded my horizons”. The long bus journey had a significant impact on the interviewee’s spatial understanding of the Beijing area. In the context closely related to “school district housing” and “school district” today, the daily lives of most adolescents revolve within the extremely limited scope of school and home. However, due to the concentration of extracurricular education institutions at a few specific locations, students had the opportunity to break free from the routine of going back and forth between school and home and explore the broader world around them.

6.2. Exploring More Diverse Paths



Figure 4: Diverse Groups Adolescents May Encounter in Extracurricular Education.

For young people with artistic or athletic interests and talents, their learning during adolescence serves two main purposes. On one hand, it helps them improve their skills and proficiency in these areas, and on the other hand, it allows them to assess whether they possess a natural aptitude for these domains and whether they have a genuine passion for them. If young individuals aspire to pursue a professional career in fields such as arts or sports, it is essential for parents to encourage them to undergo basic training in these areas at a young age. For instance, in music, this may involve sight-singing and ear training, while in sports, it could include activities like artistic gymnastics or ball sports. These foundational skills serve as the basis for further development in these fields later in life. Therefore, for families with ambitions in mind and for students with innate talents, early exposure to diverse extracurricular education programs and training increases the range of possibilities for their future.

Simultaneously, if during the early learning process, it becomes evident that a student lacks a particular talent or, after comprehensive consideration, is not inclined to pursue a professional path, their prior learning experiences are not in vain. Instead, these experiences can be retained as personal interests and hobbies throughout adolescence. In the medium to long term, excelling in a particular talent may also provide young individuals with better educational opportunities. For example, as observed in the case of interviewee Xiangzi, his years of basketball training allowed him to enter high school as a sports talent student, providing him access to a school with higher educational quality compared to standard admissions through the entrance examination. While he ultimately did not choose to pursue a professional sports career and participated in the regular college entrance examination, the experience aligns well with his family’s educational expectations. In retrospect, he views both entering high school as a talent student and later realizing that he was more interested in computer science as ideal educational choices.

On the contrary, interviewee Lanlan’s personal experience offers a different perspective. Lanlan had several years of art education and, upon the advice of her extracurricular institution teacher, opted to attend an affiliated middle school of the Academy of Fine Arts and later pursue a professional art

college through the arts entrance examination. Given her strong foundation in the arts and her natural artistic talent, she successfully followed this educational path. However, in retrospect, she believes that committing to a specialized career path too early may not always be the ideal choice. During the interview, she explained that, in her current view, her interests might not have been fully explored at the time. She discovered a greater passion for theoretical subjects shortly before the college entrance exam, but her previous commitment to the arts restricted her from changing her chosen direction. However, it cannot be denied that it was the intensive training in art schools and specialized institutions that led her to realize this. Therefore, prematurely setting a clear professional direction during adolescence, before self-awareness has fully developed, may not be the most ideal educational decision.

In summary, extracurricular education influences the life planning of adolescents in two significant ways: by shaping their interactions with their surroundings and by encouraging them to explore various paths in life. These aspects collectively contribute to the development of a more mature self-awareness in young individuals. Firstly, adolescents during compulsory education are relatively young and often not considered by parents to have independent action abilities. Their daily activity space and social sphere are limited between home and school, and they only come into contact with monotonous groups such as teachers, parents, and peers. But extracurricular education may be located at a certain distance from the daily life circle. For teenagers who have been active in specific areas for a long time since childhood, this “long journey” that breaks through conventional boundaries can help them establish a more three-dimensional spatial concept of their surroundings. At the same time, in a series of activities derived from extracurricular education, such as registering for extracurricular education, shopping near educational institutions during breaks, eating, and taking public transportation to and from extracurricular educational institutions, teenagers are able to come into contact with a large number of different life situations, giving them the ability to interact with different groups of people. This rare exercise in daily life helps them to be more proactive in solving social problems in their future growth process.

Secondly, extracurricular education allows adolescents to explore a variety of paths during their formative years. In professions related to arts and sports, there are numerous specialized options that require individuals to start training at a young age. Traditional school curriculums often cannot cater to these diverse interests and demands for training. However, directly enrolling in specialized institutions may not be the best choice for young individuals if they do not possess a genuine interest or aptitude for a particular field. Extracurricular education offers them the opportunity to maintain their talents and interests while continuing with their standard school education. This, in turn, expands the range of possibilities for adolescents, such as gaining access to better educational resources through talent-based admissions or choosing a professional path related to their talents.

7. Conclusion

This article explores the forms and impacts of extracurricular education on the development of self-awareness among adolescents. The research findings reveal that the influence of extracurricular education on adolescents is multifaceted and complex. These influences are intricately connected and not easily discernible. It is the prolonged and intensive exposure to extracurricular education experiences among the “Tiger Parenting” generation of adolescents that vividly and richly exhibits these characteristics.

By integrating these characteristics with the materials collected through various avenues of influence, this article ultimately presents three distinctive features of extracurricular education. Firstly, it is an “experimental field” that focuses on the diversity of extracurricular education subjects and the flexibility inherent in market-driven educational choices. Field investigations suggest that the breadth of extracurricular education and the adaptability of teacher-student relationships it offers are difficult

to completely replace within the mass education provided by schools in a short period. However, this is not without controversy, as extracurricular education has often been criticized by scholars for exacerbating social inequality and accelerating social stratification. Furthermore, whether stratified teaching has an overall positive or negative impact on students also requires further research and exploration. With the further implementation of “Double Reduction” policies and ongoing education reforms, the combination of school education and market-driven educational resources may pave the way for a “third path” that is more conducive to social equity. Simultaneously, participation in extracurricular education related to interests and hobbies aids adolescents in building self-confidence, fostering a more positive self-awareness. The significant amount of time and effort invested in cultivating talents, as well as the difficulties overcome, play a role as a “reference frame” in the growth process of young people, helping them to face difficulties more actively in the future.

Secondly, the significance of the extracurricular education environment as a unique social space for adolescents is examined. Compared to the school environment, the composition of individuals in extracurricular classes is more diverse, which enhances the informational exchange function of social interactions within these classes, beyond the realm of typical adolescent socialization. Overall, this environment is more favorable for individuals with relatively limited access to educational resources, mitigating the drawbacks of information inequality. The teacher-student relationships within this context also differ from those in compulsory education schools. In contrast to the traditional “authoritative” teacher image, extracurricular education teachers often resemble the approachable demeanor exhibited by university professors, resembling that of friends or colleagues. Additionally, the presence of student teaching assistants further deconstructs the authoritative image of teachers in the cognition of adolescents during their daily interactions.

Thirdly, extracurricular education provides adolescents who have not yet developed full independent capabilities with the possibility to break away from the direct link between home and school, bringing about impacts on their daily lives and long-term planning. On one hand, extracurricular education to some extent grants adolescents more opportunities to try and explore freely. Starting from choosing what to study, which institution to attend, and when to begin, adolescents are required to face the dynamic factors that influence their decisions in daily life. On the path to extracurricular education and during the gaps between different courses, they learn how to plan their route and manage their pocket money for basic needs, which subtly enhances their analytical and financial skills. Additionally, the strict time requirements between courses and the lengthy commutes to attend them have a profound and lasting impact on adolescents’ perception of time and space. On the other hand, this study focuses on how long-term learning during childhood and choices made along the way influence adolescents’ future development. The paper contrasts an example of someone who eventually pursued a professional path with another who dropped out midway. Both individuals exhibited talent and strong interest in a particular field and underwent specialized training at some point, but in high school, they realized they did not genuinely want to pursue that path. The difference lies in the former not entering specialized training in sports and instead entering a regular high school as a gifted student, ultimately giving up the talent to take the regular college entrance exam. However, the latter entered specialized art training and had to continue the education in a professional institution through an art college entrance exam. This illustrates that while extracurricular education helps adolescents explore their interests, it can also lead to misunderstandings for both them and their parents. Therefore, although talent development is beneficial, it should not prematurely limit adolescents’ future possibilities to a single path.

In summary, this paper, from the perspective of adolescents as ‘participants’, discusses “how extracurricular education has influenced them” and “what impact it has had on them” through retrospective analysis after several years. The research contributions of this paper primarily encompass three aspects. Firstly, whereas existing academic studies often regard extracurricular

education simply as an educational process, this paper discusses its relationship with social mobility and the characteristics of decision-making in extracurricular education across different social strata. In the research process, it was found that extracurricular education is, in fact, a more complex concept that includes processes such as peer socialization and the construction of spatial concepts, which positively impact adolescents on multiple levels. Secondly, the research finds that extracurricular education is not always a burden that adolescents are forced to bear; in many cases, it is an activity they actively seek to participate in. Thirdly, regarding the topic of the impact of extracurricular education on adolescents, among a plethora of quantitative studies, there are relatively few qualitative studies, and most of them discuss the impact of extracurricular education on adolescents from a third-party perspective, such as parents, families, and schools. This paper, taking the perspective of the younger generation who directly experienced extracurricular education, argues that the field of extracurricular education, not just the educational process itself, has an important impact on adolescents' future development and fills this gap through case studies.

In the research process, the author noticed that extracurricular education, as a platform outside of the school, plays a significant role in providing adolescents with a broader social network. The intermediary role of the extracurricular education process, which exposes adolescents to different people and life situations, should not be ignored. Combining the current situation of a significant reduction in extracurricular education under the “Double Reduction” policy and the return of adolescents to a life limited to home and school, this study proposes the following recommendations:

1. At the policy-making level, advocate for breaking the limitations of school district areas in cities and communities and conduct a wide range of extracurricular activities for adolescents of different ages and interests to promote communication and interaction among adolescents from different backgrounds and characteristics.

2. At the school education level, actively collaborate with social forces in the extracurricular education initiated under the “Double Reduction” policy and offer diverse and multi-level interest courses to encourage adolescents to explore diversely and develop comprehensively.

3. At the family education level, focus on expanding the scope of activities for adolescent groups, cultivating their independence, and opening up richer life situations between home and school. Encourage independent interaction and communication with different social groups to nurture their multifaceted social awareness.

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