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Nicola Yelland
Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

Sandy Muspratt
University of Queensland, Australia

Caja Gilbert
Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

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Global Childhoods, Asian Lifeworlds: After School Time in Hong Kong

Nicola Yelland, Sandy Muspratt, Caja Gilbert

Introduction

In this paper, we explore the after-school lives of six-year-old children in Hong Kong, as reported by their parents in response to survey questions. Popular discourse presents a view of Asian students as diligent and hardworking, living lives that are predominantly characterized by studying, both in school and out. Yet we were aware that while there are many studies about this that focus on Asian minorities living in western countries, there is limited empirical data about Asian students living in Asian countries. Moreover, those findings are mainly about upper elementary and high school students. Accordingly, in order to broaden the body of inquiring concerning whether Asian students do in fact spend much of their time studying and little engaged in leisure activities, we sought to collect empirical data regarding how Primary 1¹ (six-year-old) students in Hong Kong spend their out-of-school time. Increasingly, there is a recognition that Asian students perform well on high-stakes international tests, and it is widely held that this is because they allocate so much time to intensive academic study in contrast to their western counterparts, both in and out of school. Tutoring in test-taking is a multimillion dollar industry. We wanted to know if this is a widespread phenomenon. In this paper we show that the out-of-school lives of the students who were the subject of our survey include many different activities. While the six-year-olds in our study do homework after school, they also watch TV, participate in activities with computers and other new technologies, and engage in indoor and outdoor play.

As educators and parents, we want to ensure that children make the best use of their time, so we put a lot of ours into planning and preparing activities for them to take part in, both in and out of school. One of the consequences of this is that children living in the 21st century don't have much free-choice time (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Instead, their lives are structured in very specific ways that have been designed by adults. This seems to be particularly true for Asian children, whose excellence in performance in international tests is often attributed to their strong work ethic as well as to their capacity for studying for many hours, both in and out of school. For example, one study by Ramey in the United States, reported by *Science Daily* ("Is There a 'Tiger Mother' Effect?," 2011), found that Asian American high school students spent significantly more time studying and doing homework (on average, 13 hours) than any other ethnic or racial group. (European American students, for example, were found to spend on average 5.5 hours a week doing out-of-school academic work.) Similarly, in Newman, Bidjerano, and Ozfogru's (2007) comparative analysis of fourth-grade children in the United States, Bulgaria, and Taiwan, the

¹ Primary 1 in the Hong Kong education system is equivalent to first grade in the United States.

Taiwanese students reported spending more time in both academic and extracurricular activities than the students from both the other countries.

We frequently talk about children's lives in terms of investments of time, money, and emotional capital, and we generally expect a payoff in benefits to justify the amount of expenditure provided. Accordingly, the amount of time spent in a particular activity and in being exposed to various experiences often serves as the basis for predictions about learned behaviors that are acquired as a consequence. However, Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) contend that while we "may know the demographic and economic characteristics of children's families and the communities where they live and attend school, we rarely know how individual children spend their time" (p. 295).

Children in the West—especially those in families where both parents work outside the home—often spend time in after-school or child-care centers. In Asian countries, however, for a range of reasons that include the availability of relatively affordable foreign-born domestic helpers, after-school programs and programs during school breaks are not prevalent. In addition, the involvement of grandparents in child rearing is more widely and culturally accepted in Asian countries than in the West. The main organized out-of-school activities in Asian countries are sports and academic tutoring.

Thus, we know that children in different countries spend varying amounts of times in a range of pursuits (Chen & Stevenson, 1995; Larson & Verma, 1999). We also know that within countries, choices of activities vary based on gender and on parents' attitudes, such as their views with regard to encouraging self-regulation and autonomy (Chao, 1994; Chao & Tseng, 2002). Larson and Verma further suggest that the various contexts in which children spend their time can be regarded as "experiential niches," characterized by specific emotional and motivational experiences that follow specific rules and scripts and that have different goals. Larson and Verma equate time spent in each experiential niche with the acquisition of various behavioral outcomes. Such niches range from engaging in self-selected activities that promote self-regulation and autonomy to working in school with adults, which supports skill building and knowledge acquisition.

While practical issues (such as transportation and cost) may determine how a child spends time outside of school, Newman et al. (2007) suggest that "all societies attempt to shape childrearing to foster particular achievements and the social values of the culture" (p. 433). Certainly, there seems to be a major difference between parenting practices in the East and in the West; the former are considered more collectivist cultures, while the latter are regarded as more individualistic. Newman et al. assert that in collectivist cultures "childrearing will emphasize conformity to the group practices and values of the adult establishment so that children learn their roles and skills that are important to that group; parents will expect more obedience and attention to adult guidance" (p. 433). In contrast, in individualistic cultures, autonomy, independence, and self-regulation are valued. This resonates with our own work (Yelland, Muspratt, Chan, & Gilbert, 2012), which indicates that 10-year-old children in Hong Kong have very little discretionary time

and minimal opportunities to play with friends in activities of their own choosing. Yelland (in press) also found that 10-year-olds in Hong Kong usually go home after school and only watch television or engage in leisure activities after they have completed all their homework.

In addition, we found that the majority of children in our previous study shared their bedroom with siblings, and that it was not a common practice to play, watch TV, or use electronic devices there (Yelland et al., 2012). Computers and similar items were generally located in shared living spaces. Thus, Hong Kong students, who live in a small, densely populated city of nearly 7.2 million (Government of Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2012b) do not have access to much personal space. This presents a stark contrast to the lives of students in the United States (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) or in the United Kingdom (Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & Olafsson, 2011), who spend significant amounts of time playing with technological devices in their bedrooms.

The Context: The Millennial Kids Learning Study

This paper reports on data from a survey of parents of Primary 1 (six-year-old) children. It forms part of the data from a larger study, Millennial Kids Learning (MKL), conducted in Hong Kong over a period of two years. The MKL study sought to gather empirical information about the lives of three-, six-, and 10-year-olds. A search of the research literature had revealed that such data was largely absent.

The theoretical framework for the MKL project was derived from Bourdieu's (1984, 1993) notion of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1984, 1993) postulated that schools play a critical and increasingly pervasive role in perpetuating the advantage gained from possessing specific knowledge and skills that are valued by society across generations. Accordingly, children who have such knowledge and skills before they begin school are in a favorable position, which they maintain as those literacies and proficiencies are continually reinforced throughout the children's educational careers. Yet we know little about how this process works in Asia, or in particular, in Hong Kong.

In order to begin the investigation, we created a survey that contained direct (factual) and indirect (attitudinal) measures (Sapsford, 1999). We sought to discover how the six-year-old children of the parents we surveyed spent their time after school, on both weekdays and weekends; what new technological devices they owned individually or were owned by their families; what traditional (nontechnology-based) activities the children engaged in and what traditional items they used (we were interested in this because the use of new technologies is so widespread in the 21st century); and where in the home those electronic devices and traditional games and toys were located and used. We were interested in how this data reflected the priorities and actions of this cohort, so that we might later link that information to classroom observations in order to understand how those findings related to the students' school experiences. We knew that because six-year-olds do not yet have a fluent grasp of time, it would have been difficult to obtain accurate data from the

students themselves. We therefore asked their parents to quantify the time the children spent on various activities, which were presented on the survey in broad groupings.

As previously stated, Hong Kong students are generally seen as being very industrious and performing well on tests (Postiglione & Tan, 2007a; Tu, 1996). It is often thought that they spend most of their time in serious study dedicated to rote learning of content and that their schooling is very traditional, with an emphasis on performing mechanistic tasks (Postiglione & Tan, 2007b). At the same time, media in Hong Kong and mainland China report that due to exposure to contemporary western music, films, and video games, and because of the ubiquity of McDonalds, Hong Kong and Chinese teenagers are becoming increasingly westernized, including in their taste in clothes (Associated Press, 2004; Tang, 2012).

So while these stereotypical views of the industrious Hong Kong or Asian student that Tu (1996) mentions persist, we wanted to determine whether they were grounded in reality and whether they applied equally to all children, including those in under researched low socioeconomic schools. Thus, the following questions guided the MKL project:

1. How do students in Hong Kong kindergartens and primary schools spend their time outside of school?
2. In this cohort, how widespread are educational practices associated with private tutoring for this age group?
3. Do students in low socioeconomic neighborhoods have home tutors?
4. What types of technologies do students have in their homes, and how are those technologies used?
5. What are the students' views about various aspects of their lives and schooling?

This paper deals primarily with questions 1 and 4, but we were also eager to find out how many of the children attended private tutoring centers (question 2) and how many had home tutors (question 3) because those factors were posited as having a major impact on the ways in which the students spent their time outside of school.

A total of 102 parents of Primary 1 students completed the survey, which was provided both online and in paper form. The response rate was 87% (102/117 parents)

Methods of Analysis

The survey contained a series of questions in which the parents were asked "how often" or "for how long" their six-year-olds were engaged in particular activities, as well as questions concerning how many toys and electronic devices those children had and where in the home those items were located. We present summaries of the parents' responses in a graphic format and discuss them in the next section. We also analyzed the data with regard to whether boys spent more (or less) time

engaged in a given activity than girls did and, whether the children spent more (or less) time engaged in a given activity on weekends than on weekdays.

Results

Background information: The families

Nearly all the parents (97 of 102) lived in the Kwai Tsing district, an area bordering the Tsuen Wan district where the school was located. Seventy-one percent (70 of 102) of the surveys were completed by the mother of the child. Most of the parents were low-income earners.

Approximately 44% reported a combined household income of less than 10,000 Hong Kong dollars per month (approximately 1,300 US dollars). Forty-one percent reported a monthly income of between 10,000 and 20,000 Hong Kong dollars. Only 15 parents reported having a combined household income of more than 20,000 Hong Kong dollars per month, and only three parents reported combined monthly household incomes of more than 40,000 Hong Kong dollars. Thus, 85% of the cohort had earnings below 20,200 Hong Kong dollars, the median monthly combined household income (Government of Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2012a) and could accordingly be regarded as low-income families.

Ninety-six percent of those who responded to the survey had attended school through age 15, completing Form 5, as had 97% of their spouses. Forty-nine percent of those who completed the survey listed their occupation as "housewife," and the next-largest group (11%) listed their occupation as "clerical." Of the 77 people who answered the question concerning their spouse's occupation, 18% listed it as "driver," 16% listed it as "housewife," 10% listed it as "salesperson," and the remaining 56% listed it as one of a range of blue-collar and industrial or transportation-related jobs. Only 13% of the 77 who responded here, indicated they hired domestic help.

How much time did the children spend engaged in various activities?

The parents were presented with a list of activities and were asked how long their child was engaged in each of them after school on weekdays and on weekends. Because there was some missing data among the 102 responses, the number of valid responses ranged between 90 and 100 regarding activities engaged in on weekdays and between 90 and 98 for those engaged in on weekends.

Figure 1 shows a summary of the parents' responses in the form of stacked bar charts. To read the graph, consider, as an example, the activity at the bottom of Figure 1 ("Talk, share with parents on nonacademic matters") in the weekday column. The length of the bar with the darkest shading represents the number of parents (in this case, 4) who reported that their child spent more than four hours per day engaged in that activity, while the length of the second-darkest bar represents the number of parents (31) who responded that their child spent between one and four hours engaged in it daily. The two bars are stacked end on end; combined, they represent 35 parents. The length of the third-darkest bar represents the number of parents (55) who reported that their child

spent less than one hour a day engaged in talking and sharing with them about nonacademic matters. Finally, the length of the lightest bar represents the number of parents (seven), who responded that their child spent no time on the activity. The horizontal axis gives the percentage values of parents' responses.

The activities are arranged down the page in increasing order of the number of parents who reported that their child was engaged in the activity. The activities shown at the top of the page are accordingly those that many children engaged in only infrequently or not at all; most of those activities—which include some done with an adult helper (being read to, doing homework, and discussing reading)—are school-related. In contrast, many children engaged for longer periods of time in the activities shown at the bottom of the page, which include more leisure and recreational pursuits as well as activities that involved the parent in both school-related work and nonacademic matters.

Parents reported that their Primary 1 children spent roughly the same amount of time doing homework on the weekend as on a weekday, and many parents reported that their child used a computer to do homework on both weekdays (63%) and weekends (53%). Similarly, the majority of parents responded that their child did school-related work with them on both weekdays (87%) and weekends (80%), and the vast majority of parents responded that their child talked and shared with them about nonacademic matters on both weekdays (93%) and weekends (92%). In addition, many parents reported that their child read short stories and novels on both weekdays (76%) and weekends (72%) and read comics on both weekdays (65%) and weekends (63%) as well. However, fewer parents responded that their child read magazines, either on weekdays (32%) or weekends (34%).

In general, the patterns of responses for weekdays and weekends are similar, although there are some exceptions. According to the parents, children spent more time on the weekend than on weekdays engaged in a range of leisure activities: visiting friends and relatives, participating in various indoor and outdoor games and sporting activities, and shopping. In addition, as would be expected, children tended to spend more time travelling to and from school on weekdays than on the weekend. However, since some school events take place on the weekend, children spent time travelling to and from school then as well. Finally, the parents reported that both on weekdays and on the weekend, boys and girls spent approximately the same amount of time engaged in a given activity.

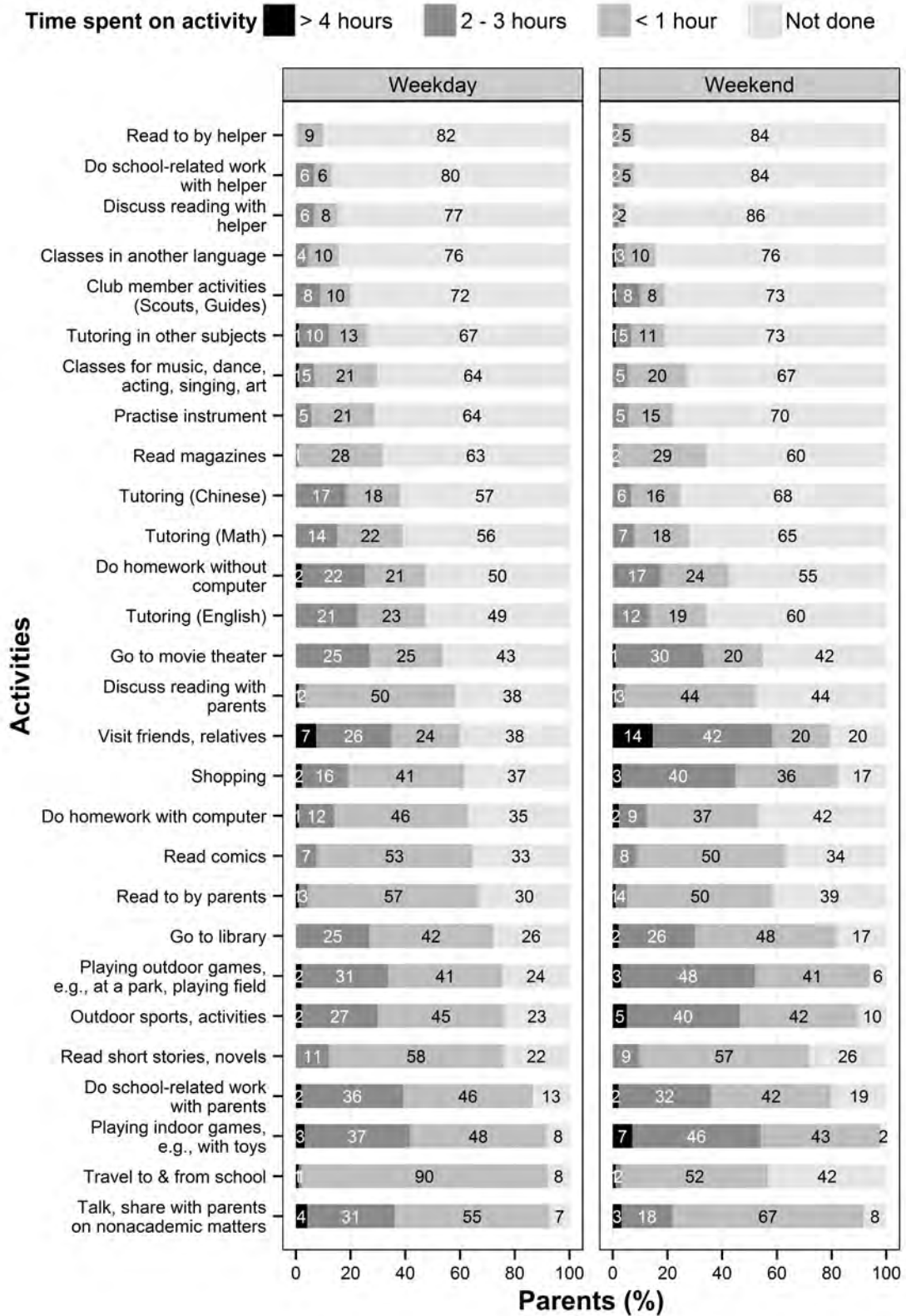


Figure 1: Parents' reporting of time their child spend on activities outside of school on weekdays and on the weekend.

How much time did children spend using various technologies outside of school?

Parents were asked about the amount of time the children spent engaged in 10 technology-related activities, which included using online, digital, and mobile devices as well as watching television. The results are shown in Figure 2. The activities are arranged down the page in increasing order of the number of parents who reported that their child was engaged in the activity. Because there was some missing data among the responses, the number of valid responses ranged between 90 and 101. All but one of the parents reported that their child watched television. Close to 75% of the parents reported that their child used a computer for either school-related work or for playing games or visiting websites for enjoyment, but only 20% responded that their child used a computer to communicate online with friends. Approximately 33% of the parents reported that their child used a mobile phone to communicate with others, but substantially fewer responded that their child used a mobile phone for connecting to the internet (5%) or taking and sending photos (17%). Very few parents reported that their child spent more than four hours on any of the activities. Fifteen responded that their child watched television for more than four hours a day, and four parents reported that their child used computers for playing games and using the internet for more than four hours a day. Parents reported that boys and girls spent approximately the same amount of time using a given technology.

What digital technologies, toys, and related items did the children have access to in their homes, and where were those items located?

In order to find out in greater detail how the children were spending their out-of-school time, we asked the parents which digital technologies and traditional play and leisure items their child had access to at home. We were also interested in where those items were located.

Hong Kong apartments are much smaller than those in many western countries, and shared spaces are also much more common in Hong Kong. Most children do not have their own bedroom. In fact, secondary school students frequently study at the library because they are unable to concentrate on their schoolwork at home. They can be seen standing in long lines every day, waiting for spaces in the individual carrels. We accordingly thought that we would find that primary-school-aged children studied and did their homework—both with and without using new technologies—in the living area of their home since there is not enough space in their bedroom for such activities

The new technologies that parents reported that their child had access to are similar to those used by children in the West. However, the Hong Kong data reveals that those devices are usually shared with siblings and kept in communal spaces, rather than in the children's bedrooms. Figure 3 shows a summary of the responses to a set of questions concerning access to digital devices and toys, including information about where the items are located in the home. The items are arranged down the page in increasing order of the number of parents who responded that their child had access to the item. Because there was some missing data among the responses, the number of valid responses ranged between 88 and 99.

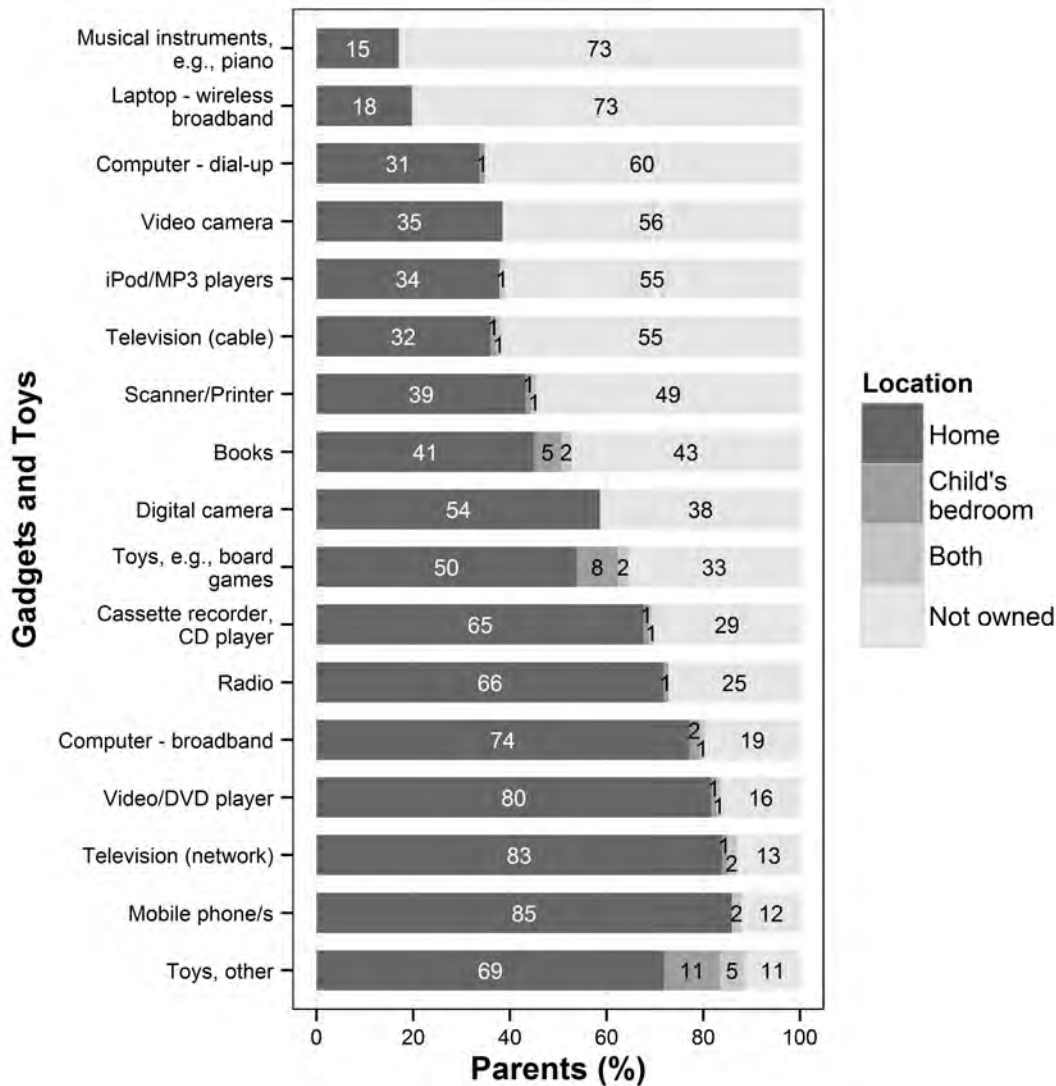


Figure 3: Parents' reporting of children's access to toys, electronic devices, and other leisure-use items in the home and the location of those items.

Figure 3 shows that overall, the items were either available in shared spaces in the home or not owned at all. Very few parents reported that the items were available either only in the child's bedroom or both in the child's bedroom and in other parts of the home. However, for a small number of households, parents responded that some belongings that children had access to—such as toys, books, mobile phones, and iPods—were located in children's bedrooms. Most of the families had mobile phones (90%) and televisions with free network channels (87%), but only 38% had cable television. Additionally, many had DVD players (84%), radios (73%), and CD players (70%). Eighty percent had a computer with a broadband connection, while fewer had computers with a dial-up connection (35%) or owned laptops (20%). There were no significant differences between boys' and girls' ownership of or accessibility to these items.

How many toys, items of brand-name clothing, and electronic devices did the children own?

We wanted to know what possessions were available to the children during their out-of-school time. The parents were accordingly asked how many toys, games, items of brand-name clothing, and electronic devices their child owned. We were interested in, not only the types of games but also in brand name clothing as Chinese culture assigns prestige to the ownership of luxury items as an indicator of success. We presented a broad response scale; the parents could report that their child owned ten or more, fewer than ten, or none of each item. Figure 4 shows a list of the

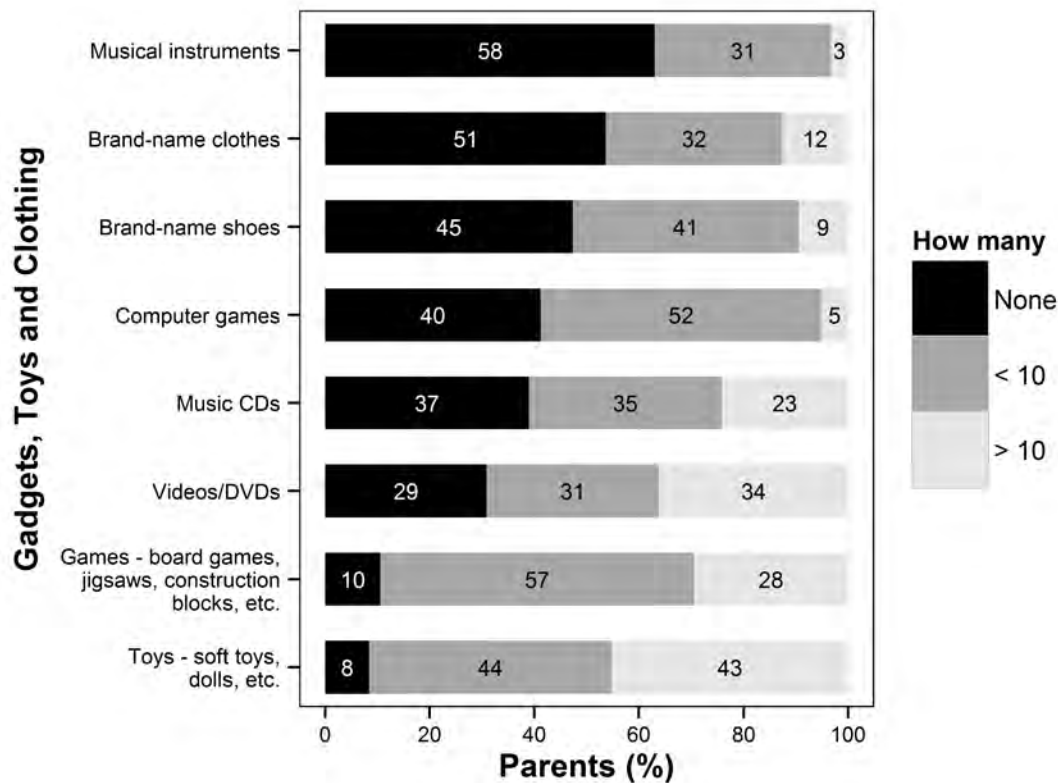


Figure 4: Parents' reporting of the number of toys, games, electronic devices, other leisure-use items, and articles of brand-name clothing their child has.

items and a summary of responses. The items are arranged down the page in increasing order of the number of parents who responded that their child had access to the item. Because there was some missing data among the responses, the valid responses therefore ranged between 92 and 97.

Ninety-two percent of parents reported that their child owned traditional toys, and 89% responded that their child owned traditional games. Somewhat fewer reported that their child owned digital devices (59% responded that their child owned computer games, 69% that they owned videos or DVDs, and 61% that they owned music CDs). Even fewer reported that their child owned musical instruments (37%), brand-name clothing (54%), or brand-name shoes (47%). There was no significant difference between girls' and boys' possession of these items.

Conclusions

The parents' responses to the survey provide a snapshot of the after-school lives of six-year-olds in Hong Kong. Overall, the responses show that the children did not spend great amounts of time (i.e., more than four hours) daily on any one activity, but rather engaged in a range of activities both on the weekend and after school on weekdays.

Thus, the commonly held view that Asian students spend most of their time doing schoolwork and little time engaged in leisure activities is not borne out by the survey results. In fact, the data shows that the children spent most of their out-of-school time shopping, visiting friends and relatives, engaging in club activities or organized sports, and playing both indoors and outdoors. Doing homework fell approximately in the middle of the 28 activities on the survey in terms of time spent engaged in each, and after homework came a range of school work related tasks.

We also found that the children in our study did not spend much time using new technologies, and did so mostly for homework-related tasks. In addition, computers and televisions were very rarely located in children's bedrooms or owned by children individually; such items instead belonged to the family and were shared. In contrast, more traditional toys and games were more often located or stored in children's bedrooms. Thus, it would seem that while the students used technology, it did not dominate their lives.

This initial exploration of the after-school lives of Hong Kong children has raised many questions, including:

- When do Hong Kong children have time to play with friends, either at home or elsewhere?
- Are their patterns of play with friends spontaneous, or does play occur in the context of organized activities, such as sports, art classes, or dance or music lessons?
- How do the children describe their lives outside of school?
- What type of organized after-school activities are provided in Hong Kong, if any, and how much do children participate in them?
- Do programs for children during school breaks exist? If not, how do children spend their vacation time?

It would be interesting to conduct the survey with parents from a higher socioeconomic group, who might hire nannies or tutors for their children. Such a survey would make it possible to ascertain whether the empirical data collected and analyzed here is unique to low socioeconomic families.

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