Parental involvement in early childhood education and care: exploring parents' perspectives in rural China

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Abstract: Over the past few decades, scholars have paid attention to how parental involvement impacts children's performance at school. Hence, parental involvement is often reduced to school-centric involvement. Moreover, several studies have shown social class differences in parental involvement, but relatively little attention has been paid to social class differences in culturally diverse contexts. In this article, we contribute to this discussion by reflecting upon how parents conceptualize parental involvement and exploring class differences in the culturally diverse context of rural China. Drawing on data from eight focus group interviews, this article explores rural parents' perceptions of the relationships with teachers, hereby asking what is good for their children and the utilization of *guanxi*. The findings indicate parents are anxious about their child's education, particularly their early learning. Furthermore, parents want to build good relations with teachers, and they emphasize *tinghua* and the strategic use of *guanxi* for their child's education. We conclude with a discussion about the findings and reflection on the inequality of rural China.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, scholars have paid attention to how parental involvement impacts children's performance at school (Jeynes, 2007; Lawson, 2003). An implicit, though thought-provoking assumption is that parents and teachers hold universal, similar and compatible perceptions of what parental involvement could and should be (Barge and Loges, 2003). According to Lawson (2003), this explains why parental involvement is often defined by the school and for parents, rather than by or with parents themselves (Lawson, 2003). It has been criticized that schools engraved the middle-class culture, hereby making middle-class parents feel more welcome than working-class and lower-class parents (Bæck, 2010; Lareau, Adia Evans and Yee, 2016). Lareau (2002) and her colleague's study, for example, argued at length that parents who question or challenge the teachers' authority or who do not mirror the dominant middle-class norms of the school are generally made feel less welcome than middle-class parents (Lareau and Horvat, 1999). Choi (2017) point out that parental involvement often means an appeal to help overwhelmed teachers manage their workloads, specifically by getting children to obey school rules and make teachers' jobs easier.

Hence, parental involvement is often reduced to school-centric involvement, depending – at least in part - upon the school's responses to parent's efforts. Although in many cases the school still possesses the power to practice exclusion or to impede parents' utilization of their cultural capital (Bæck, 2010; Lawson, 2003), it is possible to disrupt the logic of home-school relations through deliberate strategies, such as inviting parents to participate as decision makers, and developing collaborative structures (Harris and Goodall, 2008). However, this potential is often impeded by the mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction that are infused in individual power relations between social class and ethnocultural groups (Bourdieu, 1977; Durand and Perez, 2013). Moreover, parental involvement in schooling tends to function as a mechanism through which socioeconomic advantage is reproduced across generations (McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999).

As a result, there is a concern that parents from ethnic minorities and parents from poor families generally may be less involved (Tobin and Kurban, 2010). Also, low-income, minority parents seem to be understood and framed within a deficit perspective that characterizes this group as 'incompetent' or 'unwilling' (Durand and Perez, 2013). As pointed out by Calarco (2018), middle-class advantage is the result of intentional

negotiations between parents and teachers that begins early in their children's schooling journey, and assuming working-class parents do not value ECEC as highly as middle-class parents (Deutsch, 1963). Indeed, according to the current body of literature, parental involvement varies by social class and ethnicity (Lee and Bowen, 2006; McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999). Therefore, there is an urgent need to further analyze and clarify how parents become involved from the perspective of these same parents (Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack, 2007). Aside from a few exceptions (for example: Durand and Perez, 2013; Vandenbroeck and Van Laere, 2020), relatively little research has explicitly examined the view of point of parents about involvement in ECEC. This is particularly the case in a context that differ from the culture of the mainstream literature, such as rural China. In recent years, despite an enlarged income gap between rural and urban China, what have gradually emerged is the anxiety of class solidification, with an ever-growing emphasis on family origin of children. Parents' economic and cultural resources have become key elements to improve educational success of rural children during the transition from a planned to a market economy (Xie and Postiglione, 2016). Gaining better understandings of how to conceptualize parental involvement in rural China and how this contributes to inequality with rural society is therefore of pivotal importance.

We contribute to this discussion by reflecting upon how parents conceptualize parental involvement. This study explores socioeconomic status (SES) differences, not just in the conceptualization of parental involvement in a home-like environment, but also in the ways in which parents interact with teachers and other members of society in a broader social structure. Drawing on data from focus groups, we explore rural parents' perceptions of the relationships with teachers and the utilization of *guanxi* (a Chinese idiom and a specific form of social capital) in the daily life of children (Li and Vandenbroeck, 2020).

Challenge ahead in China

In China, education is commonly perceived as a viable instrument to combat poverty and social inequality. However, the problem of inequality exists within the urban-rural dual structure itself. Also, in the context of the second generation phenomenon of 'the poor, the rich and the official, as well as the monopolized industry' (Chen and Huang, 2012), upward mobility seems out of reach for an increasing number of people, hereby losing its appeal for the low status groups (Deng, 2013). Hence, social structure is becoming less

mobilizable (Deng, 2013). These challenges take place against the background of the widening gap between rural and urban China. In this context, the living situation of children in rural *youeryuan* (preschool or kindergarten for children from three to six years old) has emerged as a substantial concern among parents, teachers and educational policy makers (Li, Li, Devlieghere and Vandenbroeck, 2020; Wang, Feng and Jin, 2016). Interestingly though, is that in the midst of these debates about 'what is good for children', policy makers and researchers overwhelmingly agree that parental involvement is a critical strategy for developing children's early learning (Li, Liu and Guo, 2019). This is not self-evident as the traditional Chinese view of the parent-teacher relationship rests on the image of teachers as experts, while parents are expected to assist teachers in supporting the children's education (Guo and Kilderry, 2018; Lau, Li and Rao, 2012). This is illustrated in official documents, such as *the teacher's professional standard* in *youeryuan* (Ministry of education, 2012). Notably, parental involvement in *youeryuan* has generally portrayed parents to be 'helper', 'supporter' or 'learner' (Chen and Agbenyega, 2012). In the same way, for a few decades now, educating parents has been regarded as the main approach for teachers to offer parents knowledge and skills (Guo and Kilderry, 2018; To, Lu, Tsoi and Chan, 2013). Therefore, some scholars suggest that reciprocal partnerships between *youeryuan* and family are difficult to establish as having an equal partnership might be challenging in a context where teachers are perceived as experts (Guo and Kilderry, 2018).

This rhetoric has led to a pathological form of so-called parental anxiety (Chen and Xiao, 2014), a phenomenon of universal collective fear, which reflects the utilitarian culture and the epitome of social anxiety (Jin and Yang, 2015). Research concerning parental anxiety has found that working-class and lower-class parents tend to have more anxiety about their children's schooling because of inequality in educational opportunities and the struggle for further education (Lin, Song, Yang and Zhang, 2018; Zhang, 2015). The 'college entrance examination factory' (emphasizing the ability of taking examinations and raising test scores) indicates parental anxiety about their child's education in a highly competitive environment (Zhang, 2015). Critical in this perspective is the parents' investment and utilization of *guanxi*, meaning the strategic use of interpersonal networks to create good relations to use for personal advantages (Bian and Huang, 2015) . Increasingly, researchers are raising concerns about the impact of *guanxi* on their children's educational opportunities (Xie and Postiglione, 2016; Yu, 2019). In studying parental involvement

and *guanxi*, as well as in policy interventions, however, parents are seldom listened to; and this is particularly the case for vulnerable parents (De Carvalho, 2001; Li, Li, Devlieghere and Vandenbroeck, 2020; Vandenbroeck and Van Laere, 2020).

METHOD

Our study was conducted in a district in the northern of China, which is surrounded by the main urban area of *Baoding* and the *Xiongan New Area*. It is a core area for the coordinated development of *Beijing, Tianjin* and *Hebei*. Approximately 90% of the resident population are of rural origin. There are 266 administrative villages and this study primarily took place in six villages which are in *Qingyuan* town. Similar to many other areas in China, early childhood education in *Qingyuan* normally accommodates children aged from three to six years old. These children are divided in different class levels according to their ages. There are usually around 30 children and two teachers in each class of the six public *youeryuan*. Teachers are responsible for teaching and taking care of children's physical wellbeing, including cleaning and hygiene.

The long-standing relationship between the first author and *Qingyuan* educational authority provided the initial scaffolding for the entry into the *youeryuan*. The first step in sampling was to obtain official permission from the area. In the fieldwork, the authors followed qualitative purposive sampling and snowball sampling strategies to get in touch with the parents (Yu, 2019). Then researchers relied on the acquaintances to connect with principals from public *youeryuan*. The first author was introduced by the educational authority to principals. All aspects of the research plan, timeline, and potential outcomes were discussed first with the principals. The six public *youeryuan* were selected because they included children with diverse familial background.

To establish an overall context for the research, the first and third authors spent some time observing lessons and activities in *youeryuan* before parents were interviewed. Subsequently, with the help of the teachers, researchers invited parents to participate in the study. Parents in the study had not only different levels of educational attainment but also different occupational status and financial flexibility (see: Table 1). The study was conducted with 48 parents' representatives from 6 *youeryuan*, 37 females and 11 males. They were between 28 and 35 years old. They gave permission to participate in this study by oral informed

consent which was approved by the ethical commission of the authors' university. All parents had children

between four and six years old. They included separate groups with high SES (yearly disposable individual

income of at least 34,546 Renminbi – around 4559 euro – after taxation and a high school degree or above)

as well as groups with low SES (yearly disposable individual income of 13,842–22,495 Renminbi – around

1827–2969 euro – after taxation and a lower degree than high school) (National Bureau of Statistics of China,

2018). We chose to work with focus groups as they are considered a form of collective research for

disadvantaged parents in which the authority of the researcher is decentered (Li, Li, Devlieghere and

Vandenbroeck, 2020).

Table1 Participants of focus groups

Focus group	Participant	Number	Occupational status	SES
FG1	Father	7	Rural teacher (2); photographer; office clerk; self-employment; owner of farm or grocery	High
FG2	Mother	6	Rural teacher (2); staff of rural credit cooperative; private business owner; office clerk of telecom business	High
FG3	Mother	5	Worker (2); greengrocer; Cosmetics shop owner	Low
FG4	Mother	8	Worker (3); waitress (2); salesclerk; owner of cake shop or dried fruit shop	Low
FG5	Mother	8	Worker (2); cashier; waitress; beautician; salesman (2); owner of breakfast store	Low
FG6	Mother	6	Staff of Township enterprises (3); insurance salesman; self-employment; principal of private *youeryuan*	High
FG7	Mother	4	Officer of township government; doctor of village clinic; owner of homeware store or stationer	High
FG8	Father	4	Worker; driver; owner of repair shop; Network installer	Low

The first author and a local assistant conducted the eight focus groups, lasting on average of 60 minutes.

All focus groups were conducted in the local dialect and were audiotaped with the consent of the parents.

Parents as well as focus group leaders were all of the *Han* descent, which is the majority ethnicity in China.

The size of the focus groups ranged from four to eight. Focus groups with higher SES parents took place in

the office of the *youeryuan*. For low SES parents, beverage shops near the *youeryuan* and a community

center of the village were used, which can ensure confidentiality of their responses. No school personnel

were present during any of the focus group interviews.

At the beginning of each focus group, the first author explained the purpose. The protocol included questions on identifying parents' perceptions of their involvement and relationships with teachers. Broad topics (e.g. parents' perception of their children's early learning, their relationships with teachers, what is good for their children, what parents do for their children's early childhood education) were identified. These formed the basis of the focus group script. Follow-up probes were used to make sure parents discussed strategies at home, at school, and other aspects of involvement (such as utilization of *guanxi*) and to ensure that we obtained the most complete information.

The interview transcripts were reviewed by bilingual research staff and the third author to assure that all interview data were included. The data were read, analyzed, and scrutinized for predominant themes and patterns (Lawson, 2003). The data were coded, and utterances were defined, catalogued, and grouped. Similar events and incidents were grouped together into categories. The categories and their contents were derived inductively from the data during the process of analysis, and dealt with wider themes (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). The analysis was continued until all themes were saturated. The process of coding, cataloguing and theming was discussed by all authors. Eventually, the codes were groups into four overarching themes: educational anxiety; parents' attempts to connect with the teacher, *quanxi*; and *tinghua*. The last author participated in the whole validity check.

FINDINGS

Our study identifies and explains the articulation of the relationship between parents and teachers and their conceptions of what is good for children in rural China. In doing so, our study uncovers differences between low SES parents and high SES parents. In what follows, we will discuss each of them in detail.

Educational anxiety

The parents in our study expressed to be supportive and positive to comply with the *youeryuan*'s standards as they would do 'everything for the child' (FG2). They expressed their concern about their child's education. Not surprisingly, enhancing parents' interpersonal networks and resources to contribute to their child's education was the dominant rationale when parents were asked about their own involvement.

Parents also developed strategies to be involved in the learning process of their children at home. One of the common strategies was to create a good environment for their children's learning. All parents thought a reasonable mix of nutrition was the foundation for their children's growth and learning process. Some parents also decorated the rooms with pictures of bilingual (Chinese and English) letters, numbers, common animals and fruits. In addition, parents bought story books and picture books, so that their children could read and describe the pictures. Furthermore, supervising homework also emerged to be a major activity for improving children's learning:

> I often accompany him to finish his homework. When my niece comes to my house, I perceive it as an opportunity to further develop his social skills. I will tell him that he should share toys with his sister, and he should take care of his little sister (FG5).

Yet, lower SES parents in our sample reported to be less involvement in their child's spare time: 'as long as children finished their homework and improved their learning, they can play' (FG5). Playing and doing homework were children's main activities. Usually, children played with other children in the neighborhood, played games or watched TV. High SES parents, however, would supply extra-curricular activities for their children and the children decided which they would attend:

> The quality of extra-curricular activities has fallen behind compared to the urban area. I want my child to choose which extra-curricular activity to attend to stimulate her interest. (FG7)

This indicates that what children do over their lifetimes is related to the commodification and commercialization of extra-curricular activities and some extra-curricular activities organized by adults have a higher status than others. Painting, for example, not only requires financial investments and time-intensive practice, but also the awareness of identifying its meaning, which tend to be associated with higher SES parents (Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). This aligns with the finding that higher SES parents in our study encouraged their children to participate in more adult-organized activities in leisure time as a way for parents to pass on cultural capital to their children by giving them opportunities to familiarize habits and behavioral styles valued by schools (Lamont and Lareau, 1988).

Connecting with the teacher

All parents in our study seemed to be aware of the importance of trust in building and sustaining close relationships with teachers. Trying to connect with the teacher was one of the main themes in how participants spoke about parent-teacher relationships because parents consider a 'good relationship with the teacher as beneficial to the child's development (FG2)'. Trust and deference were understood by parents as a taken-for-granted attitude by teachers. Traditionally, Chinese parents respect teachers and believe that with their professional expertise they are best equipped to teach children knowledge and skills in a school setting (Guo and Kilderry, 2018; Lau, Li and Rao, 2012). Most parents indicated that they 'chose this *youeryuan*' because they 'think this institution is good' and they 'have trust in teachers' (FG1).

When talking about trusting teachers, transparency seemed to be a key issue. A lower SES mother in the sample provided an account of why she had confidence in the teachers:

> *Uh, my child had been in a private youeryuan for one year, but teachers rarely gave feedback about my child's performance. In the public youeryuan, the teachers give daily feedback about my child's behavior. The children really changed a lot and I then had better relations with the teachers. (FG3)*

Despite the general consensus among parents about the importance of trust and their confidence in the teachers, significant differences between higher and lower SES parents were noted. Higher SES parents tended to connect with teachers on another level than their lower SES counterparts. Many high SES parents in the study emphasized initiating different ways to establish interpersonal social connections with the teachers, since they perceived strong types of social relationships as offering more possibilities to gain access to important information about their children in the *youeryuan* and expected that this would lead to more targeted tutoring.

In order to develop this relation , high SES parents in our study agreed that giving cards and small gifts (such as a small dessert, a pen) to teachers and sending their greetings on teacher's day and other festivals were productive ways to produce interpersonal social connections with teachers. One mother, for example, told about her efforts in connecting teachers:

When the teacher is sick, usually I send messages to her and care about her situation. Sometimes I will

bring something to the teachers when I go to see her and ask for information. […] If you want to have a

close and good relationship with the teachers, you should pay more attention to them. (FG2)

In contrast, lower SES parents reported that they rarely communicated with teachers except when their

children had problems in the *youeryuan* or in the family. They felt they were substantially disadvantaged in

establishing social relationships with the teachers as they were busy working. They mentioned: 'all we can

do is to trust in teachers. If something happens, the teacher will contact the parents' (FG8). From their point

of view, communication with teachers could only be initiated by parents when their children had problems:

I will participate in all the activities as long as teachers require us to attend.

Teachers are so busy. If everything goes well, I have never initiated the communication with teachers.

The social connection is rare. (FG4)

This suggest that social connections between teachers and lower SES parents are infrequent compared to

higher SES parents in the study. It seemed that for lower SES parents, the initiative to build a relationship

with the teachers depends on the teachers. In that way, this study partly confirms a previous analysis of

teachers' dominant role on *youeryuan*-family relationships, in line with parents' deference to and

dependence on teachers (see Zhang, 2015).

Tinghua

Tinghua or the obligation of parents and teachers to instruct children, and children to be unconditionally

respectful, compliant and obedient was another main theme in our data. One reason for the emphasis on

tinghua was the parents' worry about potential risks in society. 'Too many cars', for example, was most-

mentioned by parents in our sample. A few parents, commenting on their children's immature situation,

remarked that 'children are too young. They know few rules in *youeryuan*. They should *tinghua*' (FG7). In

these cases, parents attempted to *guan* (loving control) their children in order to make children *tinghua*.

Nevertheless, almost all parents in our sample sought the teachers' advice in relation to tinghua. Many

parents explicitly stated that they tend to follow the teacher's advice, comply with the *youeryuan* standards

and even 'follow the way teachers are teaching their child' (FG4). Indeed, parents in our sample seemed to agree that teachers are professionals and that, consequently, they know more about child rearing and learning. However, some higher SES parents also expressed doubts about *tinghua*:

> *I am wondering whether tinghua can inhibit children's nature of freedom. If you make your girl obey the rules too seriously, will she then not lack imagination and creativity? If she tinghua, she will not break any rule. However, if she does not tinghua, sometimes she may break a rule and that may be helpful to cultivate her creativity. (FG8)*

The conceptualization of *tinghua* is related to a form of obedience that is in tension with a form of individualism. This tension between individualism and collectivity has been widely documented in public debates about individualism in China (Yan and Yang, 2017). Remarkable though is that the parents who did not reflect on the potential downsides of *tinghua*, were all lower SES parents. Their emphasis on *tinghua* seems to align with the finding in previous Western research that working-class parents expect their children to be more deferential and quieter (Lareau, 2003; Small, Harding and Lamont, 2010).

Guanxi

A fourth and last theme that came to the fore, refers to *guanxi* or network, which is typical for rural China (Fei, 1985). It is as if you throw a stone in a still lake, with this stone (individual) as the center and forming a circle of ripples, the distance of the ripples can indicate the intimacy of social relationships. The center of Chinese *guanxi* is the familial tie. *Guanxi* can be transferred during interpersonal interactions and can be regarded as a stock of social capital. Parental involvement is then considered as a form of social capital that provides individuals with access to resources that parents may draw upon as needed to children's learning. *Guanxi* in parental involvement can be illustrated by utilization of relatives, friends, colleagues' network.

All parents in the sample talked about using kinships. Lower SES parents spoke about the financial pressure of being at home and a lack of time to be involved in their children's ECEC. They expressed that long working hours and time-rate wages restricted their involvement. One of the fathers in the sample left the mother at home to take care of the children. Three parents left their children to be looked after by their grandparents. Interestingly though is that the parents in our study exchanged information with their

relatives about their children's performance in *youeryuan* and discussed their academic plans. In order to get access to quality educational resources, some parents even chose to buy a flat in the county. But most of them could not afford to do so and would borrow money from their relatives:

> *I want my child to access good education from the youeryuan. But my educational degree is low, and my salary is low. My sister lives in Beijing. I want to send my child to Beijing to have a better education. My sister promised to help me pay the tuition. (FG5)*

Lower SES parents highlighted the importance of kinships and relatives in creating social connections with the teachers of their children. They agreed that they would strategically make use of the kinships when there was a need:

> *I usually do not have extensive ties to teachers in youeryuan. A relative of mine is the teacher's good friend. I asked the relative to tell my worry about the child's attentiveness. The relative introduced my worry to the teacher. The teacher communicated more with me about the child's performance. (FG4)*

All parents in the sample also often communicated with the parents whose children were in the same class about the teachers' work and children's homework. Higher SES parents, then again, also highlighted the importance of colleagues and friends in the process of obtaining information about their children in *youeryuan* and other information about ECEC. This seems to imply that higher SES parents can convert economic capital to social capital, as they had more 'power' or 'resources' (Bourdieu, 1986). This is not the case for lower SES parents as they stated that their friends and colleagues tended to have the same status as they had and they 'did not want to use their friends or colleagues' networks' (FG8).

Furthermore, our study seems to confirm that some parents seek relationships with individuals who are of a somewhat 'better' social status in order to gain additional resources (Lin, 2001). This is apparent when it comes to deciding which *youeryuan* to attend:

> *I hope my child can go to the best youeryuan in the county. So, I contacted my aunt because my aunt is familiar with the principal of the youeryuan. My aunt introduced me to the principal. I bought some very good wine and a nice gift to her. She paid attention to my aunt and finally helped me. (FG3)*

This illustrates how parents widen and improve their *guanxi* network for their children's educational benefit. The strategy of buying a gift may illustrate how economic capital is at the root of other types of capital and implies the transformation of economic capital into social capital (Bourdieu 1986).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

There is abundance of research about the impact of parent involvement on children's outcomes. Yet, seldom parents are listened to in this debate and studies that explore parents' perspectives beyond English language countries are even more scarce. This exploratory study contributes to this recent vein of research, by giving voice to the perspectives of parents in rural China. We analysed parental discourses about relationships with teachers and early childhood education and explored how parents use *guanxi* as social capital for their child's education and care. In doing so, this study also explored inequalities and power relations that construct Chinese rural parents' involvement in ECEC.

Our findings aim to enrich the debates on the constructions of parental involvement in ECEC. We found many parents assume that early learning in *youeryuan* makes children ready for learning in primary school, in a context of prevailing educational anxiety, which implies that parents fear their children will not be able to adapt to primary school. As previously pointed out (Lin, Song, Yang and Zhang, 2018; Zhang, 2015), our findings concur that parental anxiety and fear of falling behind, is related with an increased individualisation and competitive society and is particularly relevant for disadvantaged parents (Hunt, 1999). Parental anxiety about early learning is related to inequalities in educational resources, educational evaluation mechanisms, and societal anxiety. There is growing concern about the accessibility of *youeryuan* for children in rural areas of China. It is well-documented that rural children are more often enrolled in provision of poorer quality than their more affluent peers in urban China. A large body of literature has grown around the idea that poor families, living in poor neighborhoods, may reproduce poverty via a cumulative exposure process (DiPrete and Eirich, 2006). In Chinese schools today, there is an unprecedented fierceness in educational competition. Rural children must compete with others to attain a better position and contend for limited opportunities

(Kai, 2012). China's rigorous examination-oriented education has been widely criticized, as it is of critical importance to children's future and children from provinces with higher percentages of rural students often face higher cut-off score for a given university (Dello-Iacovo, 2009).

The parents in our study seemed to perceive a gap between what they expect their children to learn and what the *youeryuan* teached, yet they did not explicitly ask the *youeryuan* to address their anxiety. On the contrary, parents rather conformed with the dominant norms of the *youeryuan*. In other words, parents were not involved in ways that challenge the prevailing norms, but conformed with how the schools script their involvement (Lopez, 2001). A few decades ago, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) criticized that children from low status groups were disadvantaged and may experience 'symbolic violence' that undermined their self-worth and self-esteem. They documented how structures of advantage and disadvantage may become self-reinforcing and cumulative and how inequalities persisted and are deepened (Lamont and Pierson, 2019; Thomas and Gregory, 2006).

Our study suggests that the discourse on parent involvement in rural China may be one of the ways in which class differences contribute to this kind of perpetuation of inequalities and may need further exploration. Our study indeed confirms that parents in rural China perceive parent involvement in different ways, according to their social class. All parents in our study trust the teachers and frequent interaction between teachers and parents (such as informing parents about activities planned by teachers) gives access to information and enhances this trust and reciprocity in the relations. Parents from lower SES are less capable of initiating connections with teachers than more affluent parents and this may be one way in which class differences influence involvement, confirming earlier research of Xie and Postiglion (2016).

In addition, there are important class differences in how *guanxi* is enacted and this may very well be another way in which class differences are perpetuated in the school system. Our study also suggests rural parents are actively involved in their children's early education and reproduce disciplining mechanisms by adopting *tinghua* as a normative feature of early childhood education. Parents tend to

comply with what teachers consider as the way things are. In contrast, higher SES parents are more attached to values of individuality and the language of choice and self-expression. In that sense, the value of self-expression may, as Tobin (1995) argued, favor those who are already favored. Moreover, we found that the educational anxiety fuels a commercialization of extra-curricular activities in the preschool age, that in turn may fuel the educational anxiety.

The quest for *tinghua* and the imperative of connecting with teachers then again, indicates that it is important to develop places where parents and teachers can interact, recognize and resist. In much of the research on parent involvement, parents are constructed as a separate but homogeneous category, assuming all parents should involve in children's education in similar ways. Yet, our study suggests that inclusive policies towards parents would need to consider their diversities and avoid instrumentalising parents as accessory teachers.

These findings contribute to the critical literature on the concept of social capital. *Gunaxi* utilization is a response to parents' perception of their responsibility of the development of their child and – as a consequence – contributes to the individualization of the educational responsibility. We argue that both the quantity and the quality of *guanxi* can reflect the classed practices of parents. The *guanxi* networks of lower SES parents are far more likely to include friends and colleague than are those of their higher SES counterparts as *guanxi* networks tend to be homogeneous about class (Horvat, Weininger and Lareau, 2003). We suggest that Coleman's (1988) school-based 'intergenerational closure' – that is, networks that connect with parents of the same school peers - is a cross-class phenomenon in our study, leaving aside the result of children's attending adult-organized activities.

Education contributes to the myth of personal achievement and of schooling as one of the most salient pathways to upward social mobility (Vandenbroeck, De Stercke, and Gobeyn, 2013). Sociologist, however, have shown that educational systems tend to reproduce and perpetuate the existing social stratification, rather than fundamentally change it. It seems necessary to look at parent-teachers relations and parents' perceptions in connection to the social, economic, cultural and political

embeddings of these micro-interactions. It is important to acknowledge that China is a society where diversity and fundamental inequalities persist, and we cannot separate parents' perceptions from the actual early childhood education conditions and context. Effective parental involvement will not happen without concerted effort, time and commitment of both parents and teachers (Harris and Goodall, 2008). It has been demonstrated that parents have much to say about what they want for their children in ECEC and much to contribute to discussions of practice and policy, as well as when given opportunities to speak about their children's early education, are more often than not passionate, thoughtful, and pragmatic (Tobin, Adair and Arzubiaga, 2013).

Limitations of the study

There are several limitations to the study. First, the study involved a small sample and despite the efforts to involve fathers, the focus groups were dominated by mothers and mainly focused on parents whose children regularly attend *youeryuan*. Second, the study does not include information on parents who migrated from other areas of China. Hence, additional research is needed in order to generalize the findings to other areas and countries. Third and last further research also needs to be conducted to fully grasp some other areas of parental involvement such as teachers' response to parents as this might lead to insights which are necessary for the establishment of alternative perspectives towards the intervention of parental involvement in ECEC in rural areas.

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