FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY
AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

(De)constructing parental involvement in early childhood education and care in rural China

Yan Li

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck

A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Educational Sciences

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I would like to end with the traditional saying ‘To see a world in a wild flower and a bodhi in a leaf’ (*Yi hua yi shijie, yi ye yi puti*). I will keep going with a grateful heart.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In the last decades, parental involvement (PI) is increasingly known as an important source of support for all children, particularly disadvantaged children (Epstein, 1995; Jeynes, 2007). In some countries, working with parents is a legally required competency in the teacher training programme (de Bruïne et al., 2014). However, there is less consensus on how parental involvement should be conceptualized.

In this introduction, we state the problems concerning the conceptualisations of parental involvement and situate the context of this dissertation. The introduction then moves to the questions and aims of the study and discusses the contextualizations of education in China and rural China's early childhood care and education (ECEC). Thereafter, it discusses the study's methodology and provides a brief overview of the chapters.

1.1.1 Problem statement

PI is not a fixed concept but a dynamic and ever-changing practice that varies depending on the context where it occurs. The literature on the subject is predominantly of English language and particularly focuses on Western countries. Also, low-income, minority parents seem to be understood and framed within a deficit perspective that characterizes this group as 'incompetent' or 'unwilling' (Durand & Perez, 2013; Kim, 2009; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001; Vincent, 2017). Moreover, relatively little research has explicitly examined the views of parents about involvement in ECEC. This is particularly the case in a context that differs from the culture of the mainstream, such as rural China.

Due to rapid industrialization, urbanization, and modernization following the economic reforms in China, the gap between the rich and the poor widened, while uneven socioeconomic development between urban and rural areas and the Eastern and Western regions of China intensified. Thus, the conceptualization of parent involvement does not only need to be concerned with differences between nations and cultures but also within the nation. More research is needed that does not assume that conceptualizations of parent involvement are universally valid, but that looks at nuances that are embedded in specific cultural, political, and geographical historicities. It will be increasingly important to not only normatively describe how parent involvement is to be

implemented but also to investigate how parents and teachers themselves make meaning of parent involvement.

1.1.2 Getting parental involvement on the agenda and why

1.1.2.1 Lacking dialogue between parents and teachers

For many years, ECEC has been recognized and valued as crucial in contributing to children's cognitive and social development, and in enhancing long-term educational opportunities (e.g. de Carvalho, 2000; Epstein, 1995; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000; Tobin, Adair & Arzubiaga, 2013; Vandenbroeck & Van Laere, 2020). In this regard, international reports emphasize the importance of a holistic view on ECEC that equally balances children's learning, caring, upbringing, and social support (e.g. Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018; OECD, 2006). Recently, it has been widely recognized that ECEC quality is the result of a participatory process that involves on-going negotiations with all stakeholders – children, parents, practitioners, and local communities (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, Van Laere & Peeters, 2011; Vandenbroeck & Van Laere, 2020; Walqui, 2006).

In this regard, PI is conceptualized as a school-level resource essential in building and sustaining social ties among parents, teachers and children (Park, Stone & Holloway, 2017). Within educational discourse, PI refers broadly both to family-school-community interaction taking place in schools (such as volunteering, attending school activities, and participating in school policy-making), and to parent-child-interaction that is performed in the home environment, aiming to support homework and to contribute to children's progress (Strier & Katz, 2016). As such, the role of parents is considered pivotal in improving children's achievements (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009) and parental beliefs and social networks are crucial (Coleman, 1961; Epstein, 1995; Jeynes, 2007; Lareau, 1987).

Although there is an increasing consensus on the significance of PI in ECEC, there is little consensus on how PI is conceptualised (Huntsinger, & Jose, 2009; Tobin, Adair & Arzubiaga, 2013). Gross et al. (2020) stated that the conceptualisation of PI mainly demonstrates who you have asked. As Barge al et. (2003) argued, there is an implicit assumption in the existing literature that parents and teachers hold similar conceptions of what counts as PI, while in fact, the voice of parents is all too often absent. As a result, PI is often reduced to a

reproduction of the asymmetry that has characterized most approaches to bring parents into the life of the school (e.g. Todd & Higgins, 1998; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Vinopal, 2017). In the doctoral study, we use the general term teachers to include all men and women working in ECEC settings that provide non-parental education for children under compulsory school age.

Moreover, as ECEC is increasingly being conceptualised as a preparation for compulsory schooling, ECEC teachers and parents are expected to 'make the child ready' for school by fostering the development of typical school skills (with a dominant focus on children's cognitive and language development rather than their social and emotional development). As there are no generally accepted and empirically documented criteria of what young children should know and be able to do, parents and teachers have to rely on (explicit and implicit) beliefs regarding readiness (Piotrkowski, Botsko & Matthews, 2000). As such, parents are given a more instrumental role in the learning process of their children in the sense that they are held responsible for ensuring that their children meet the learning outcomes that the school or government has set (Baquedano-López, Alexander & Hernández 2013; Janssen & Vandenbroeck 2018). In this way, parents are not involved in the discussion about what is good for their children.

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes the possible effects of a lacking dialogue between parents and teachers (Oke, Butler & O'Neill, 2020; Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa, 2009; Tobin, Adair & Arzubiaga, 2013; Vandenbroeck, De Stercke, & Gobeyn, 2013). Hakyemez-Paul et al. (2018) argued that in essence, parents and teachers fail to collaborate. With regard to disadvantaged parents, having their voice ignored is a form of marginalization (Crozier, 2001). For this part, parents have called for increased opportunities to participate in the educational lives of their children (Lopez, 2001).

1.1.2.2 Parent diversity and societal power differences

The gap in educational outcomes for children with different familial backgrounds remains substantial despite concerted efforts among policymakers, school officials, parents, and community institutes (Marschall & Shah, 2020). The link between parents' ethnicity and SES and the educational outcomes of their children is one of the strongest and most enduring findings in the sociology of education (Fan & Chen, 2001; Lareau, 1987). However, the belief that children from ethnic minority backgrounds and poor families are lagging behind because their parents don't support them in the same ways as parents belonging to the majority group in society also remains persistent. This leads to an enforcement

of the idea of PI, as it is considered that PI would be most beneficial for children at risk (Reynolds, 1992). Moreover, several scholars (McGrath, & Kuriloff, 1999; Sanders, al et., 1999) conclude that without interventions designed to encourage greater PI with disadvantaged parents, educational and economic inequalities will persist for many poor, marginalized children. Thus, PI and the need to improve it among poor or minority parents has gained prominence as a critical strategy of addressing the achievement gap (Marschall & Shah, 2020).

This perspective, however, can foster school-centric approaches and tends to limit PI practices to the more formal activities that ignore the culturally specific perspectives of minority populations (Lopez al et., 2001; Todd, 2003). It has previously been observed that teachers often hold negative and stereotypical views of ethnic minority parents and of lower SES parents (e.g. Crozier, 2001). Bryan (2005) found that disadvantaged parents are not only faced with oppression and a lack of privilege, but they are also often neglected by teachers in the schooling of their children. Also, it has been noted that in official reports working-class parents are sometimes even accused of ignorance of their children (Baquedano-López, Alexander & Hernández, 2013; Vandenbroeck, 2007). This stance puts a lot of emphasis on the role of parents in the education of the child, but from a very negative viewpoint. The negative perceptions teacher sometimes hold (distrust and devaluation of parental cultural resources) may inhibit home-school linkages (Gu & Yawkey, 2010).

However, it remains to be seen if parents from ethnic minority backgrounds really are ‘less involved’ in the school-life of their children. Several studies have shown that marginalized parents are to a significant extent involved and concerned, yet many of their activities are outside the conventional understandings of PI (e.g. Lopez, 2001). As stated earlier, this is partly due to a lacking dialogue between parents and the school, leaving the voices of disadvantaged parents out of the picture. Lopez (2001) indicated that PI is often understood in terms of a set of behaviours and attitudes privileged by the mainstream. Crozier (2001), argued that school’s adoption of a ‘one size fits all’ approach’ to PI is disturbing for all parents and particularly those who are already disadvantaged. As parents differ by social class, race, and ethnicity, also their access to schools and their effectiveness in dealing with educators differs (McGrath, & Kuriloff, 1999). The fact that disadvantaged parents have fewer resources and lower levels of self-efficacy also partly explains their lower involvement (Hayes, Berthelsen, Nicholson & Walker, 2018; Martínez-González et al., 2008; Oke, Butler & O’Neill, 2020). These problems that disadvantaged parents have (e.g. lack of

social support and parenting psychological stress) make the daily struggle for survival take precedence (Reynolds, 1992).

1.1.2.3 Multicultural world and unidimensional view

Although there are many cultural differences with regard to how ECEC-quality is conceptualised (e.g. Guo & Kilderry, 2018), understandings of PI have predominantly been shaped by a body of research carried out in Western countries (Hu, Yang & Ieong, 2016). In this sense, PI is underpinned by what is generally considered the 'good' parent: constructed on principles of universalism in the sense that they must be shared by everyone (Crozier, 2001, 2000). As a result, the culturally-specific values and experiences of marginalized populations from non-Western countries are often not taken into account, or put on similar footing with a lower level of involvement of parents (e.g. Lasky, 2000). For example, some studies found that Chinese parents are more involved at home than at school about their children's early learning, and they are less likely to initiate communication and contact with teachers (Anicama, Zhou & Ly, 2018). This makes their involvement less visible for the teacher, and thus possibly subject to a negative evaluation. On the other hand, (white) educationalists have often raised concerns about the impact of high expectation or 'pressure' on children in ethnic minority families concerning educational performance, presenting such pressure as oppressive or pathological, while not recognizing or problematizing such parental pressure in white middle-class families (Francis & Archer, 2005). This is also the case in the Chinese context (Guo & Kilderry, 2018).

Francis et al. (2005) argued that Chinese education is a racialized narrative, used by the white population to position 'the Chinese' in a particular way, and it is part of a wider, pernicious discourse. This results in a negative stance towards educational values that are typical for the culture of parenting in China. For example, Chinese parents are often regarded as authoritarian and 'in control' about the management of their children's schooling (Ng, Pomerantz & Deng, 2014; Shek, 2007; Smetana & Daddis, 2002; Xu, Farver, Zhang, Zeng, Yu & Cai, 2005), while in fact parental obedience and strictness is, for Chinese families, equated with concern, care and involvement (Chao, 1994). For Chinese parents, involvement is guided by the concept of *guan*, which can be translated as 'to govern', 'to care for' and 'to love' (Tobin et al., 1989). Kim et al. (2018) found that Chinese parents tend to believe that effort can compensate for lack of ability, in comparison to parents from Western countries, 'intelligence' was not central to Chinese parent's beliefs about learning. For example, the high rate of Chinese

grandparent involvement in childrearing might be influenced by the dramatic changes in the Chinese society and economy such as more mothers join in working, three generations share a home in some families (*Sandai tongtang*), and one-child policy makes 'four grandparents only have one grandchild' common. Since more and more farmers migrate to cities for doing business or seeking jobs, the labor division of intergeneration (*Daiji fengong*) has become common in rural China (Shi, 2016). It means when the rural parents go to cities, grandparents stay at rural areas to do farming and take care of their grandchildren. It is also affected by the specific culture of family interaction (Luo, Qi, Huntsinger, Zhang, Xuan & Wang, 2020). Research has found grandparents' involvement in childrearing is likely to be regarded as a social responsibility in the Chinese culture, whereas grandparent involvement may be viewed an additional support to the families in Western countries (Luo et al., 2020).

1.1.3 Research questions and aims

Over the last few decades, many researchers have debated about the potential of PI as a remedy and a solution for a diversity of issues in ECEC (Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Guo & Kilderry, 2018; Gu & Yawkey, 2010; Lareau, 1987; Lopez, 2001). Along the same line, the individual responsibility of parents for their children's educational outcomes and later school success has increasingly been underlined (Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015; Vandenbroeck, Roose & De Bie,2011; Van Laere, 2017). However, the voices of parents with a diversity of backgrounds are rarely listened to when defining what PI is and teachers and parents might have a different understanding about the home-school relationship and about the notion of early learning. Moreover, research on the topic has been English-language-dominated and Chinese literature has been increasingly influenced by the U.S. All too often, it is assumed that what is produced in English language, is universally valid.

Despite the fact that Chinese children stand out prominently as high achievers in PISA, Chinese parents have rarely attracted the attention of researchers in education. Again, to our knowledge, no study to date has examined the diversity of voices among rural China. Therefore, the focus of the present study is on the perspectives of teachers and parents. Indeed, in order to contribute to the international body of theoretical and empirical knowledge on ECEC and PI in the context of social inequalities, the voices of parents and teachers should be heard.

Specifically, we examine the following interrelated research questions:

1. How is PI in ECEC conceptualised by the academic literature? (RQ1)
2. How do parents and teachers in rural China perceive PI? (RQ2)
3. How do parents' conceptualisations of PI facilitate or hinder social inclusion? (RQ3)

1.2 Educational context in China

1.2.1 A country that highly values education

The education system of the People's Republic of China consists of ECEC, primary education, secondary education, vocational education and training, and higher education. Compulsory schooling consists of nine-year basic education (including six-year primary education and three-year junior middle school education) for children aged 7-15. According to the national statistical report in 2018, over 94% the children finished the compulsory education.

China is a country that highly values education. To Confucius, learning is essentially a moral endeavor, aiming to develop virtuous qualities to attain self-perfection and to become a noble person. Research suggests that this idea about learning is socialized at an early age (Ball, 1994; Li, Liu & Guo, 2019; Scott-Little, Kagan & Frelow, 2006). Chinese parents believe that all children, regardless of their ability, are capable of achieving academic goals if they do their best. Chua (2011) stated that Chinese-style parenting emphasizes high expectations on children's efforts and their academic success and excessively focuses on children's academic performance.

In Chinese society, the expectations that parents hold about the educational outcomes of their children, have special appropriateness, because it is hoped that children 'have a bright future'. Scholars have identified several characteristics of the Chinese culture originating from Confucian principles that influence parental involvement, such as Chinese parents' place in the acquisition of their children's academic skills, the importance of persistence, and the concept of filial piety (Jose, Huntsinger, Huntsinger, & Liaw, 2000). Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes strong interdependent relationships between parents and children. The traditional belief is that if parents assist children with their

educational progress, their children, as adults, will be in a solid position to care for them when they are elders (Gu, 2008).

Chinese parents are willing to spend a significant portion of their income on extra-curricular activities or afterschool tutoring program, which is regarded as a big event by parents (Xinlang jiaoyu, 2017). In 2017, the average education expenditure of Chinese households accounted for over 20% of the annual household income. However, there is a big gap between rural and urban families. An investigation indicates that the average ECEC expenditure of the rural family was 3155 *Renminbi* in 2017, while the urban family's was 8105 *Renminbi* (China Institute for Education Finance Research, 2018).In the Chinese context, parents are strongly focused on academic progress and scores due to intense academic competition from preschool to high school and the belief that academic success is critical for children's future (Kim & Fong, 2013).

Individualism and self-expression at an early stage have long been considered to be undesirable traits in China. Therefore China has a long history of separate and discrete working relationships between teachers and parents (Guo & Kilderry, 2018). Children might demonstrate higher levels of self-initiated compliance at school than at home, because in Chinese culture, teachers are regarded as authorities that need to be respected and obeyed.

1.2.2 Highly centralized education

Since the late 1980s, much debate and experimentation with educational reform in China has taken place under the banner of 'quality education' (*suzhi jiaoyu*) (Kipnis, 2001). School reform efforts prioritize PI (Lawson, 2003). For policymakers, parents are key stakeholders in their children's education that have the right to be involved in the schooling of their child. PI in schools represents a strategy for, first, strengthening ties between schools and families; second, improving schools' work; and third, improving parents' knowledge about parenting and education; as well as contributing to children's development by collaboration between parents and teachers (e.g. Chen, 2020; Fu, 2018).

The education in China is highly centralized. The ministry of education determines the educational policies and curriculum, which are applied universally in all schools across the country. This highly centralized, uniform, and structured educational system provides little freedom or space for PI (Gu, 2008).

There is a dearth of knowledge about what kind of differentiation exists among parents with regard to how they perceive the education of their children.

Research (Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018; Tobin, Adair & Arzubiaga, 2013; Van Laere, Van Houtte & Vandenbroeck, 2018) indicates that teachers and policy-makers use the deficit perspective to delineate the differentiation among parents, particularly between rural and urban parents. Analyses examining the class difference of PI within rural parents have hardly ever been published in an academic journal. Some studies have compared China's urban and rural parents to explore regional variations in the understanding of parent-teacher relationships. Decentralization is found to have a profound, exacerbating impact on variations in public educational expenditures (Wang et al., 2008). Economic decentralization left the responsibility for funding education to the county and village governments, and in recent years, tight budgets at the local level have shifted the burden to parents through a series of school fees (Brown, 2006).

1.2.3 Diverse differentiations

China's economic prosperity has contributed to an enlarged income gap and educational inequality. Moreover, social and economic changes have stratified the Mainland Chinese society and have produced diversity in parents' values and socialization goals, their educational degrees, parenting styles, and sources of social support (Xu, Farver, Zhang, Zeng, Yu, & Cai, 2005).

The *hukou* system in China was established in the 1950s and was developed to control population mobility. Residents are divided into having either agricultural status (almost all rural residents) or non-agricultural status (urban residents), and this status could not be changed without governmental approval (Li et al., 2010). The *hukou* system forms a dual division of urban and rural systems in China. China is a country with a vast territory and a huge gap between the urban and rural areas, and there are some noticeable urban-rural gaps in the quality and quantity of educational provisions (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Hong, Zhu, Wu & Li, 2020).

Over the last decades, regional differences between Eastern, Central, and Western China have been emerging, reflecting an unbalanced development and varying effectiveness of investment in education. Furthermore, inter-provincial income inequality increased markedly from the late 1980s to at least the mid-1990s, and the urban-rural income and living standards gaps remain large (Wang, Elicker, McMullen & Mao, 2008). Thus, there is growing concern about the accessibility of ECEC for children from rural areas. This concern is expressed in policy documents, as well as in empirical reports (Hong & Pang,2009; Qiu, Zhang & Hu, 2016; Wang, Feng & Zhang, 2016). Although the Chinese

government has announced the integration and modernization of urban and rural education, cheap, unlicensed, unregulated family programs are still widespread and popular in rural China (Hong et al., 2020).

China has witnessed a rapid increase in the movement of labor from rural primary industry to secondary and tertiary industries in urban areas because of the unique circumstances of economic transformation, which was characterized by unusually rapid and drastic globalization, privatization, and marketization (Kim, Brown, Kim & Fong, 2018). Also, the rural-to-urban migration in China has made this the largest migration in human history (Chen, Liang & Ostertag, 2017). However, migrant children of rural origin are excluded from school or are failing to gain a satisfactory educational experience (Li et al., 2010). Their children being excluded from schooling, of course, further marginalizes the parents' position (Crozier, 2001). Moreover, as Chen et al. (2017) have argued, what is particularly worrying is the increasing amount of children left behind in rural areas, staying with one parent, grandparents, extended family members, or even by themselves. The increasing prevalence of children at risk (e.g. left-behind children and migrant children) has resulted in heightened concerns over their development and school success. As Shi (2016) argued, because of lack of PI, left-behind children's achievement is more likely to decrease, their personality is more often unsocial, even abnormal, and there is a great hidden danger to their safety.

1.3 Contextualization of ECEC in rural China

ECEC in China is characterized by a split system, with childcare services for children from birth to three years old (*tuoersuo*) and separate preschool services for children from three to six years old *(youeryuan).* The compulsory school age for children is set at seven. In this dissertation, the focus is on *youeryuan* (preschool or kindergarten for children from three to six years old*)*, on which the policy is currently concentrated, with measures aimed at improving its quality, access and effectiveness (The Central Party of China and the State Council, 2018; The Ministry of Education et al., 2017).

In general, China's modernization and industrialization is driven by economic motives, reinforced by the rise in GDP and financial income at the expense of rural communities and farmers, who have made substantial sacrifices for the economic development of Chinese cities (Meng, 2020). Over the last decades, the gaps between rural areas and urban areas have been consistently widened,

leading to 'the double urban-rural dichotomy'. This means that farmer workers who migrate from rural areas to the city areas without urban *hukou* contribute to the dichotomy within the urban areas. Before 2003, China's reform highlighted the development in urban areas. This is also reflected in relation to ECEC. In 2003, the government pointed out 'integrating urban-rural development and regional development'. Since then, the *sannong* (peasants, villages and agriculture) problem has been regarded as the most important problem and the policy of New Socialist Countryside has been listed as the first strategy in China's future development.

Much investment has been accumulated in order to address the *sannong* problem. Infrastructure investment and the improvement of public service in rural areas have provided a great number of local non-agricultural employment opportunities. In its Targeted Alleviation of Poverty (TAP) policy, the central government acknowledges the importance of ECEC in improving people's wellbeing and fostering a prosperous society in all respects by highlighting the need for increasing the accessibility and availability of ECEC for each family. Also, the *Outline of the National Medium - and Long-Term Plan for Education Reform and Development* (2010-2020) points out 'the need to increase the number of childcare places and to prioritize the development of ECEC in rural areas'. The Ministry of Education (2017) planned that by 2020 at least 85% of children between three and compulsory school age will participate in *youeryuan*. Currently, the attendance rate in *youeryuan* reached 83.4% in 2019 (At the time of writing, no data later than 2019 were available).

In 2018, there were 100,000 public *youeryuan* which were organized by enterprises, armies, village communities, street committees and public institutions (Chen, 2019). There were 166,000 private *youeryuan*. Due to the central financial investment, 24.35 million rural children (which accounts for 66% of all children who participate in *youeryuan*) participated in *youeryuan*. Over 81% of children between four and six were enrolled in *youeryuan* in 2018 (Chen, 2019; The Central Party of China and the State Council, 2018). Despite the increasing enrolment in preschool education, there is unequal participation, as children from rural areas and/or poor families are more often absent from *youeryuan* than their more affluent peers. This causes policy concerns, as it is associated with social equity (Chen, 2019; The Ministry of Education et al., 2017). As parents need to pay a fee in function of their income, low-income families are more likely to be underrepresented in the publicly funded provision. The idea of 'public interest *youeryuan*' gradually permeated policies, consolidated by various national investments (Chen, 2019; The Central Party of China and the State Council,

2018; The Ministry of Education et al., 2017). This is considered particularly important for rural children or children living in poverty, whose families are demonstrated to have the problems of *ruyuangui* (not being able to afford a place for their children in *youeryuan*) and *ruyuannan* (there are not enough services at offer, the quality is low and children are more often absent from *youeryuan*).

Despite an overall increase in the provision of the ECEC over the late decade, the Central Party of China still struggles to address the problems of low qualified and undersized staff, and not being able to guarantee every child's right to education (Chen, 2019; The Central Party of China and the State Council, 2018). ECEC is still regarded as the poorest part in China's education system (The Central Party of China and the State Council, 2018). Within this debate, a lot of attention is paid to the qualification of teachers in *youeryuan*, because the teachers of *youeryuan* undergo formal initial training on a lower level, and their salaries are less comparable with those of primary or secondary school teachers. That is consistent with Hu and Robert's finding (2013) that rural *youeryuan* teachers rarely possess professional rankings due to their educational levels or majors. Different pathways to professionalization are agreed upon by policymakers. The ECEC report in 2019 points out that ECEC teachers should be trained at least at a college level. Policy documents state that in-service courses should be developed to raise the competencies of the teachers (The Central Party of China and the State Council, 2018). Our study clearly supports the need to raise the level of qualifications for early childhood teachers.

In line with the report of ECEC developments in 2019 (The Ministry of Education, 2020), the government continues to promote ECEC as a public good of general interest and as an inclusive part of the educational system of China, aiming at developing towards popularization (*puji*), inclusion (*puhui*) and high-quality (*youzhi*). Whereas the debates regarding ECEC in rural China have traditionally focused on quantity, increasing interest has been evidenced on the part of policymakers in the quality of *youeryuan* at both local and international levels. As a result of increased exposure to Western early childhood education practices, a paradigm shift has been occurring from didactic, adult-directed, and academically-oriented education, towards child-centered and play-based teaching (Tobin, Adair & Arzubiaga, 2013). In China, however, children from rural areas and children living in poverty are more likely to have access to low-quality provisions of ECEC. At the policy level, central-, provincial- and local-level ECEC policies all explore plans to improve quality of ECEC provisions. However, the lower targets in rural areas for ECEC staff quality and for formal centered-based

programmes may lead to rural-urban disparity not being reduced (Qi & Melhuish, 2016).

1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 A qualitative stance

The present study aims to reveal the conceptualizations of parental involvement in ECEC from the perceptions of scholarly literature, parents and teachers in rural China, calling on them to speak up beyond the taken-for-granted assumptions of the relationships between school and family. We are interested not solely in what people think but in how they think and why they think as they do. As such, we adopt a qualitative research approach, in which we focus on the social meaning people attribute to their experiences, circumstances, and situations, as well as on the meanings people embed into texts and other objects (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). This project is based on the premise that 'all talk through which people generate meaning is contextual, and that the contexts will inevitably somewhat color the meaning' (Kitzinger, 1994).

The aim of our study is to have a deeper understanding of the diverse conceptualizations of the parent-teacher relationships by focusing on what is less present in academia. As such, we aim to contribute to more elaborated theories on how these micro-relations are embedded in social, historical, and cultural contexts.

1.4.2 The context of the rural area under study

The geographical region of this doctoral study is the district of *Qingyuan*, which sits on the hinterland of the North China Plain, in the central part of *Hebei* Province and located in the center of the geographical triangle shaped by *Beijing*, *Tianjin,* and *Shijiazhuang*. It is near to *Baoding* city and the Xiong'an New Area. *Qingyuan* was selected because it is a typical region in transitional economy (from a centrally planned economy to a free market) and social transformation, which made our study easier to find rural parents from different social backgrounds. It also has very convenient transportation opportunities.

Qingyuan is a large district where agriculture has traditionally been the main activity. In 1986, the local government began to conduct a program entitled '*Market flourishes the agriculture, opening up thrives the industry, road construction develops local economy, and technology leads development*', which

marked the beginning of an upcoming industrialization (Qingyuan Local Chronicles compilation committee, 2012). Since 1993, the government has constructed four Industrial Parks and has been supporting private businesses. The opening up to foreign investments has attracted many foreign-invested and/or joint venture enterprises and, as such, the economic structure shifted in 2004, from 'agriculture-industry-service sector' to 'industry-agriculture-service sector'. Nowadays, this region is the largest manufacturing base of Light lifting machines in China (Qingyuan Local Chronicles compilation committee, 2012). Considering the infrastructure, the region had fully realized 'Every Village can Phone' (*cuncun tong dianhua*) in 1995, which means every village is covered with telephone signals, and in 2004, 2700 households installed broadband. Since then, *Qingyuan* has started to enter the information age (Qingyuan Local Chronicles compilation committee, 2012).

With the market reforms, more and more farmers migrated from rural areas to the county town for working and engaging in businesses, which is also regarded as a strategy of addressing the surplus labor problem in rural China. They tend to buy a house or flat in the county town for living and for their children's education. However, according to the statistics, over 90% of the population still live in the rural areas of the region (Qingyuan Local Chronicles compilation committee, 2012).

The people of *Qingyuan* value education and respect knowledge. This is also reflected in relation to ECEC. In 2006, 100% of the 3-year-olds children were enrolled in preschool (Qingyuan Local Chronicles compilation committee, 2012). The local outline proposes several intentions for improvement, including '*ECEC should be developed. The gap between rural areas and urban areas should be decreased. The educational resources will be integrated and teachers should improve professionalization. The teachers should explore rural resources to develop rural ECEC curriculum*' (Hebei Education Department, 2014). Moreover, the local government encourages newly graduated ECEC teachers to work in *Qingyuan* by increasing their salary, providing them priorities on excellent teachers assessment, and giving them more welfare benefits. In 2009, there were 1098 staff in *youeryuan* in this region and over 70% of them had a college degree. However, in the rural areas of the region, there are still not enough high-qualified *youeryuan* teachers, as most of them would prefer to go to the *youeryuan* in the county town.

In some private *youeryuan* of *Qingyuan*, parents tend to conceptualise ECEC as a preparation for primary school. In this vein, children are expected to learn more

exam-taking skills from a young age in a context of prevailing educational anxiety, which implies that parents fear their children cannot adapt to the primary school. Some parental anxiety about early learning is related to inequalities in educational resources, educational evaluation mechanisms, and societal anxiety, which is also related to an increased individualisation in a competitive society. In rural China, the construction of preschool education as an equalizer before primary education has gained momentum since 2010. The *hukou* registration system not only enforced disparities in social provision and entitlement, but also resulted in inequalities in affordability between rural and urban residents. In marketised ECEC systems, economic and cultural resources have become key elements in household strategies to improve educational success of rural children during transition from a planned to a market economy. However, rural parents' affordability of education is limited. Most of rural children enter the nearest *youeryuan* instead of high-quality *youeryuan* in the county town (Qingyuan Local Chronicles compilation committee, 2012).

1.4.3 Research process

This doctoral research project, which commenced in October 2017, includes three interconnected studies.

The first study examines the way in which PI in ECEC is conceptualised in the scholarly literature. The study was conducted in the form of a systematic literature review. As such, this literature review aimed to provide a sound theoretical basis for the research project.

We collected academic work that covers both theoretical and empirical insights published in English and (based on the Social Sciences Citation Index) and Chinese. We focused our selection of Chinese language literature on the China National Knowledge Internet (CNKI). Keywords related to the central research topic of PI were defined (such as parental participation, school-family collaboration,…) and subsequently entered into the electronic databases. After a first electronic search on title and abstract, we selected relevant articles independently, and screened their references to find other relevant articles. The abstracts of the extracted articles were then read to develop new criteria for inclusion and exclusion. We repeated this process systematically until data saturation occurred. A thematic analysis was then carried out in order to gain a better understanding of how PI in ECEC is conceptualized within the existing literature. On the basis of this systematic literature review, content such as

parents' roles, the relationships between PI and ECEC, and between PI and Chinese traditional culture was produced.

The second study sets out to investigate how parents and teachers perceivePI. We captured both the parents' and teachers' perspectives on the meaning of *youeryuan* and on the relationships between families and schools in rural China.

Data were collected by the researcher carrying out fieldwork in the *Qingyuan* district in *Baoding*. The population is 650,000 and more than four-fifths of the population are rural residents. We visited the schools and met with parents and teachers several times, before inviting them to participate in this study. In total, 15 focus groups were organized, each lasting between 40 to 80 minutes. The focus groups were all audio-taped with the consent of the participants and then transcribed verbatim. Also, the main researcher kept a reflective diary with observational notes that were also transcribed immediately after each focus group interview. The transcribed text was checked against the recording. The research team read through the data several times in order to prepare the ground for analysis. Notes about comments, reflection, and content were made before returning to the transcript afresh and transforming the notes into themes.

Data were analyzed by using interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore potential themes and topics, but not entirely without some discipline or direction (Dey, 2003). Jiacheng Li who a professor at East China Normal University supported the fieldwork both theoretically and methodologically, both in the collection and analysis of data.

The third study explored socioeconomic status (SES) differences, not just in the conceptualisation of PI 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 with parents, we explored rural parents' perceptions of the relationships with teachers and the utilization of *guanx*i (a Chinese idiom and a specific form of social capital) in the daily life of children.

1.4.4 The position of the researcher

Since the beginning the study in 2013, the researcher has been developing a strong interest in how parents as children's first educators influence their child's learning, living and wellbeing in a socioculturally diverse society. Born in a rural county of China, living as a master student in Shanghai (a so-called most international city in China), and studying in the department of social work and

social pedagogy of Ghent University helped the researcher to move away from thinking the relations of family, school, and society in a pragmatic way and to specialize herself in issues of listening to the voices of subjects, social inclusion and parents' diversity within one country, the monoculturalism in a multicultural world and multiplicity on what is good for children.

After more than one-year of learning and training at Ghent University, the researcher had a systematic understanding of conceptualisations of school-family relations in the dominant literature and sought to expand on this knowledge through focusing on the perceptions of teachers and parents in China. Although her personal stance has a clear common ground with the dominant assumptions in the conceptualisations of parental involvement in both English and Chinese literature, the researcher talked many times with her supervisors on 'why I (as a Chinese scholar and studying in Belgium) do research in the context of rural China'.

The researcher, as a Chinese scholar studying in a Western university and funded by China Scholarship Council, was inevitably restricted by the requirements of her scholarship and sociocultural background. The researcher was mindful of her obligations. Besides that, for nearly four years, the researcher has been working in East China Normal University (ECNU), which has a research group focusing on the education of rural China and family-school collaboration, led by Prof. Dr. Jiacheng Li. The cooperation with China's university could support the fieldwork in rural China both theoretically and methodologically, both in the collection and analysis of data.

The researcher's personal life also affects her interest. She had lived in a northern rural country for more than ten years. She moved from a homogeneous poor village to a socioculturally and economically diverse city in northern China. She has many friends with rural origin who each have their own challenges in having access to *youeryuan* for their children. She knows many rural parents and teachers who have different perceptions on what is good for children. She worked for three years with parents who migrated from rural to urban areas of China. Through these encounters, she has developed empathy in rural parents' struggles and their anxiety for their children's education. She has also developed knowledge of a few rural dialects and learned how to negotiate understandings and deal with uncertainty during dialoguing with diverse background people. All these skills were useful in inviting participants and conducting the focus group interviews.

Moreover, the researcher considered what the doctoral study adds to the literature, what is innovative (methodologically and as results from Chinese society and culture). The doctoral study aims to include instead of excluding rural parents who are underrepresented in the dominant research. Because of this, the researcher regarded parents as subjects and they can decide how to share. In the focus groups, for example, the parents were unwilling to discuss when they were recorded by video. It seemed like parents had worries and felt uncomfortable if they were video-recorded. Finally, the researcher recorded the interviews by audio. Parents then felt more relaxed and told the researcher that they wanted to engage in more discussion in comfortable ways. This indicates how the process of doing research should have a critical examination of the context where the research is conducted.

1.4.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues relevant with research are most frequently discussed in the context of research using human subjects (Behi & Nolan, 1995). Research involving human volunteers is founded on the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice which find their translation in a number of safeguards, such as informed consent, confidentiality protections, institutional ethical committee review, and oversight (Roberts, Geppert, Coverdale, Louie & Edenharder, 2005). Empirical work in parent-teacher relationships commonly involves data gathering on personal experiences, knowledge, attitudes, and performances. Thus, considering how to protect privacy and confidentiality is particularly salient for conducting ethically sound studies (Notko, Jokinen, Malinen, Harju-Veijola, Kuronen & Pirskanen, 2013; Pring, 2001; Roberts, Geppert, Coverdale, Louie & Edenharder, 2005).

One of the core principles in this kind of research is ensuring the willingness of the participant (Notko, Jokinen, Malinen, Harju-Veijola, Kuronen & Pirskanen, 2013). We conducted the site visits as opportunities for parents and teachers to get acquainted with the researcher, ask questions, and determine if they wished to participate (Jarrett, 1993). Informed consent was systematically obtained for (the recording of) our interviews. With regard to the ethical guidelines, ethical approval had been received from the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science of Ghent University (2019/34). During the study, we ensured our respondents that their identity and information was confidential and that the data would be used in an anonymous way. Proper attribution and citations are required to protect intellectual property (Fendler, 2016).

To give a voice to parents and teachers, while being especially well-attuned to understand the subtle pressure that rural parents may experience, researchers used different places for interviews. The focus groups with teachers took place at the meeting room, office, or dancing room of the *youeryuan*. The focus groups with high SES mothers and high SES fathers took place in the office of the *youeryuan* without the attendance of teachers or other staff in *youeryuan*. For low SES mothers and fathers, beverage shops near the *youeryuan* and community center of the village were used, which were neutral and easy to find. Given the difficulty of getting migrant parents together, the focus group with them was arranged on Wechat (an anonymous and safe communication software) by voice. All focus groups were conducted in the local dialect.

1.5 Overview of the chapters

In this section, we present a short overview of the chapters in which we summarize the research questions addressed and the methodological used, and discuss the research findings.

Chapter 2: Beyond the veil of parents: Deconstructing the concept of parental involvement in early childhood education and care

The second chapter highlights the concept of PI that has has often been attributed a potential as a critical educational remedy and solution for a diversity of issues. When exploring the existing body of research on PI, we observed that it is unclear (i) how parents themselves are viewed within these conceptualizations and (ii) to what extent parents are being included in the conceptualization of PI. To explore this existing gap, we used the Social Sciences Citation Index to collect our data. The content of the articles was analyzed by conducting a thematic content analysis. We found that in most of the literature, PI seems to function as a concept of convenience, an umbrella term that can be used whenever it fits. At the same time, we also uncovered that when attempts are made to conceptualize PI, parents are seldomly involved in this process, even though they are key stakeholders. Furthermore, our study shows that PI is almost always conceptualized as means for academic success and an ‘equalizer’ of inequalities.

The chapter has been published in the *Early Years* (Published online: 23 Oct 2020).

Chapter 3: Conceptualisations of parent involvement in early childhood education in China

The third chapter starts with the delineation of the monoculturalism of PI in a multicultural world. We conducted a systematic review of Chinese literature on parent involvement and analyzed underlying assumptions on rationales for PI, on how PI is configured, on *guanxi* and social inclusion, and eventually on the meaning of early childhood education. The thematic analysis of the literature shows that – at first sight – the rationale for PI is quite similar to the English language literature: children's development. How the implementation of PI is narrated in Chinese literature, as this is a prominent theme that stood out in our analyses. It implies a seemingly increasing influence from the outside and from the U.S. in particular on Chinese policy and practice. We also analyzed *guanxi,* as related to social inclusion, and diversity, which reflect the complexity of Chinese condition and subtle influence of Chinese culture.

The chapter has been published in the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education* (Vol.14, No.1).

Chapter 4: What parents and teachers say about their relationships in ECEC: a study in rural China

The fourth chapter explores parents' and teachers' perspectives on what they perceive as 'good' for children in ECEC and on the relationship between families and schools in rural China. we conducted 15 focus groups. The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, exploring emerging themes and topics after multiple readings of the transcripts. The findings indicate that parents and teachers consider ECEC as a long-term investment in terms of social and intellectual capital. Furthermore, the conflicts between teachers and parents in our study on learning ideas were downplayed by 'pushed-down' reforming policy, and PI was featured by including parents into the life of *youeryuan*, as well as the pedagogicalisation of parents.

This chapter has been published in the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* (Volume 28, Issue 3).

Chapter 5: Parental involvement in early childhood education and care: exploring perspectives of parents in rural China

The fifth chapter contributes to the discussion by reflecting upon how parents conceptualise PI and by exploring class differences in rural China. Drawing on data from eight focus group interviews, we explored rural parents' perceptions of the relationships with teachers, hereby asking what is good for their children and exploring their utilization of *guanxi.* The findings indicate that parents were anxious about education, particularly their children's early learning. Furthermore, parents wanted to build good relations with teachers, and they emphasized *tinghua* and the strategic use of *guanxi* for their child's education. We also uncover differences between low SES parents and high SES parents.

This chapter has been submitted to the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* and it is under review.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The sixth chapter provides a summary of this doctoral research project, reflects on the main findings of parents' and teachers' voices and perspectives on PI and ECEC in rural China, discusses its strengths and limitations, outlines its main conclusions, and makes suggestions for further research.

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CHAPTER 2

Beyond the veil of parents: deconstructing the concept of parental involvement in early childhood education and care

Abstract

Parental involvement (PI) is one of the momentous narratives in educational reform as it has numerous positive effects on school outcomes and educational achievements. When exploring the existing body of research on PI, we observed that it is unclear (i) how parents themselves are viewed within these conceptualizations and (ii) to what extent parents are being included in the conceptualization of PI. In this study, we explored both questions by conducting a thematic content analysis on the plethora of research on the theme of PI. We found that in most of the literature PI seems to function as a concept of convenience, an umbrella term which can be used whenever it fits. At the same time, we also uncovered that when attempts are made to conceptualize PI, parents are seldom involved in this process, even though they are key stakeholders. Furthermore, our study shows that PI is almost always conceptualized as means for academic success. We therefore call for a shift from instrumentalizing and silencing parents towards a reciprocal, symmetrical dialogic relationship between teachers and parents when conceptualizing PI.

2.1 Introduction

Parental involvement (PI) is a much-debated theme in educational policy in general and early childhood education and care (ECEC) in particular. In this debate, a shift from parental involvement 'on the margin' to parental involvement 'at the core' seems to occur. Interestingly, this shift seems to be marked by an increasing belief that PI needs to serve children's outcomes and academic success (Froiland, Peterson, & Davison, 2013; Jeynes, 2012; Stylianides & Stylianides, 2011).

Over the past decade, a large amount of literature has been published referring to PI's potential as a critical educational remedy and the solution to a diversity of issues (Knapp et al., 2017; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000; Levine-Rasky, 2009; McWayne et al., 2013). This literature and the research on which it reports refer first and foremost to the positive effects of PI on school outcomes and educational achievement (see Downey and Condron 2016 for an extensive overview). Furthermore, PI is also believed to have a positive influence on adjustment to school adjustments during and after the transition from kindergarten. Family-school partnerships (Smythe-Leistico et al., 2012) as well as family literacy programs (Baker, 2014; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016), are believed to contribute to children's readiness for transition to school. According to Sheridan et al. (2011), it is clear that PI in school is an important contributor to school readiness. This is also the case for so-called underprivileged children. For example, research including children with cerebral palsy or hearing loss and children experiencing traumas shows that the involvement of parents has a positive effect on their wellbeing and process of healing (Cohen & Mannarino, 2015; Ingber & Most, 2012; Yap et al., 2016). Schools, as microcosms of society, tend to be largely heteronormative, where adoptive families, especially same-sex adoptive families, may be vulnerable to marginalization. These children's psychological functioning has been studied from the perspective of PI (Goldberg & Smith, 2014, 2017).

Bearing this in mind, it comes as no surprise that PI is nowadays considered to be crucial by many stakeholders, including researchers, legislative bodies, communities, professionals and parents (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; McWayne et al., 2013; Turney & Kao, 2009; Whitmarsh, 2011; Williams et al., 2017). Although this growing consensus concerning the positive effects of PI may give the impression that PI has gained solid ground in the hearts and minds of researchers, services, professionals and legislative bodies, a remarkable issue

comes to the fore when digging deeper into the existing literature. The issue is that when talking about PI, other notions such as parental participation, parental engagement, and parental partnership are used interchangeably (see: Bæck, 2010; Cottle & Alexander, 2013; Rouse, 2012). In the end, there seems to be a consensus that involving parents provides access to parents' wide knowledge about their children and promotes the children's well-being across a diversity of domains including education (Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja & Silvennoinen, 2018). The issue, however, is that when talking about PI, it is unclear how parents themselves are viewed within these conceptualizations (Kekkonen, Montonen & Viitala, 2012) and to what extent parents are being included or excluded as key stakeholders in the conceptualization of PI.

This article therefore aims to clarify this gap in our current knowledge by analyzing to what extent parents themselves are included in the conceptualization of PI and how parents are viewed within these current conceptualizations of PI. In what follows, we will first outline the way we have addressed this existing gap before we move on to our findings. Finally, we will discuss the implications of our findings for the conceptualization of PI as well as for policy and training practice in working with children and families.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 Literature review

In order to collect our data, we performed a directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) to analyze the plethora of research on PI. We used the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) as it provides 'access to current and retrospective bibliographic information, author abstracts, and cited references found in over 1,700 of the world's leading scholarly social sciences journals covering more than 50 disciplines' (Russ-Eft 2008). At the first stage, we used the central keyword of 'parental involvement', a search that resulted in a total of 2547 studies. We excluded the non-English studies, reducing the total to 2477 manuscripts. Afterwards, we further reduced the selection by only including those articles that were published between 1 January 1997 and 31 December 2017, resulting in a total of 2129 remaining articles. For the purpose of our research focus, we then included those articles with a research focus on early childhood education and care, including all provisions before compulsory school age, leading to a final total of 220 articles.

As the concept of PI is often used interchangeably with other concepts, the second stage of the literature review included the use of keywords such as ‘parental participation’ OR ‘parental engagement’ OR ‘school-family collaboration’ OR ‘school-family cooperation’ OR ‘school-family partnership’ OR ‘parent-teacher communication’ OR ‘parent-school interaction’ OR ‘school-family connection’ OR ‘parent-teacher relationship’. As a result, 62 additional articles were identified, resulting in a total of 282 papers. To further sharpen the focus of the literature review, the abstracts of these papers were analyzed in order to exclude further articles that were not directly related to PI in the context of early childhood education, resulting in 115 papers.

A review protocol was established which comprised a structured table for collecting and categorizing key information from each article. The items of the table include research subject, methodology, and key findings. Based on this review protocol, nine articles were excluded as they did not match the scope of early childhood education and care. Furthermore, eight articles could not be included in the study, as we were unable to retrieve them. This resulted in a total of 98 articles that were analyzed for the aim of our study.

2.2.2 Data analysis

The content of the articles was analyzed by conducting a thematic content analysis, led by our research questions that were drafted using existing theory: (1) are parents involved in the conceptualizations of PI and (2) if so, how are parents perceived in these conceptualizations? The aim of thematic analyses is to understand the latent meaning of the manifest themes which are observable within the data (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). This is exactly what we aim to do in this research as we are looking for meanings of the concept of PI and the involvement of parents in determining these meanings. This thematic analysis allows us to identify overarching themes which are pertinent to the concept of PI (Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018).

In analyzing the data, the articles were thoroughly read to gain a sense of the entire collection of information. The authors re-read the articles multiple times to select data that referred to the research questions. General statements, explicit and implicit arguments were included. Using NVivo 11 Pro, these data were then clustered into several themes to make sense of the data. The initial themes were then grouped and condensed where possible, going back-and-forward between both analytical stages to check and refine the themes – resulting in a rigorous explorative analysis of the concept of PI (Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018).

2.3 Findings

2.3.1 Parents' (dis)involvement

Our analysis confirms that many authors struggle to provide a clear definition of PI. Bearing in mind the variety of concepts that are used interchangeably under the heading of PI, this does not come as a surprise and only confirms what we already knew. Hence, it is much more interesting to uncover the content of the conceptualizations that are used in contemporary literature, rather than to focus on this struggle to define PI.

2.3.1.1 Parental involvement as a school-oriented concept

First and foremost, it is notable that many of the conceptualizations of PI seem to be rooted in the interplay between parents and the school. From this perspective, as Doucet (2011) points out, parents are the primary caretakers and first educators of their children and they are crucial for three things: school-based involvement, home-school connection, and home-based involvement. By highlighting the collaboration between parents and the school, scholars aim to create strategies to involve more parents as the school is one of those places where parents have little or no choice about being present, as they have to drop off and pick up their child. However, this seems not to be self-evident in practice.

These efforts are not unprecedented. In the last two decades, attempts have been made to increase PI in different areas around the world. For example, immigrant parents and low-income families from diverse backgrounds in U.S. and African countries as well as islander families from Australia were involved in projects to promote the supportive role parents can play in educational contexts (Williams et al., 2017). However, there is still much more that can and should be done, for instance, by holding regular and extensive meetings between teachers and parents, by stimulating parents to participate in playgroups and by paying explicit attention to the involvement of minority families (Williams et al., 2017).

2.3.1.2 In/Exclusion of minority groups

Jeynes (2012, p.709) has already addressed the exclusion of minority groups and the attempts to include them, stating that 'although numerous studies have been done that examine the effects of school-sponsored parental involvement programs, many of these studies examine only particular aspects of parental involvement, examine parental involvement only in a specific context, or are interested in the effects of parental involvement only on particular groups (Sy,

2006)'. One important element in the processes of exclusion is that minority groups such as immigrants, families with a low income and parents belonging to an ethnic minority group are often approached from a deficit perspective, resulting in the targeting of these groups based on their class, gender or race(Crozier & Davies, 2007; Levine-Rasky, 2009; Whitmarsh, 2011).

In the end, it seems that PI activities often tend to ignore the culturally specific perspectives of minority populations (Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). This stems from the assumption that parents from diverse backgrounds might or should behave in a homogeneous way as they are supposed to be all the same and therefore they can all be treated in the same way. This results in the marginalization of disadvantaged parents, especially ethnic minority parents, and ignorance about them (Crozier, 2001). Hence, parents who, unwillingly, belong to one of the many minority groups in society experience several barriers when it comes to PI. These families often have unequal access to resources, and this inequality impacts the extent to which parents are able to invest in their children, as well as the investments they (are forced to) choose between (Parcel, Dufur & Cornell Zito, 2010). This was aptly illustrated in study by Whitmarsh (2011). He investigated asylum-seeking mothers in the United Kingdom and found that these mothers were less likely to engage in PI activities. He argued that the concept of PI may not be transferrable outside a Western context as the idea of a partnership between parents and the school did not a good fit with culturally polyvalent concepts (Whitmarsh, 2011).

Furthermore, Turney and Kao (2009) found that United States minority immigrant parents, compared with native-born parents, reported more barriers to participation and were subsequently less likely to be involved in PI. Latin American immigrant parents, for example, had lower levels of involvement and actual interactions with the school, which tended to result in a large group of parents being more passive recipients of teachers' directives, rather than active participants in the shaping of those directives (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2015).

As a result, PI 'has been especially embraced by white middle-class parents as part of the general intensification of their strategic investment in their children's future over the last several decades' (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2015, p.2). This comes as no surprise as PI is often constructed in a decontextualized framework and operationalized by so-called scripted activities endorsed by schools, resulting in approaching and attracting so-called mainstream parents rather than disadvantaged parents (Durand, 2011). This raises some concerns. Not only because those disadvantaged parents are labeled as 'disinterested',

'unsupportive', 'unwilling' or 'unable'(Auerbach, 1989; Davies, 1988; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Simon, 2004), but also because the many resources and strengths of disadvantaged parents are not being recognized and used in practice. As a result, children are not receiving the full scope of diverse learning experiences, including the enrichment that comes from meeting different cultures (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2015).

2.3.1.3 The (missing) parents' voice

The third element that comes to the fore when studying the conceptualizations of PI in contemporary literature is the non-involvement of parents. Despite the importance of PI, it seems that the conceptualization of PI happens without the involvement of parents even though they are of course crucial stakeholders. It seems that schools are conceptualizing PI without listening to parents' voices in the first place. As Vinopal (2017, p.3) stated recently: 'Parents are important co-producers of education for children, but their direct response to organizational factors at the school has received less attention than effects on children directly'. It seems that parent adjust their expectations about issues such as PI based on implicit and explicit rules, norms, and routines of (pre)school institutions, rather than co-constructing these (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017).

This one-way view or unidimensional perspective on PI in which there is no room for negotiating with parents reflects the powerlessness of parents (Todd & Higgins, 1998). We could even refer to Freire's concept of a 'culture of silence', thereby expressing the internalized oppression, exclusion, and unidirectional adaptation discourse that parents seem to experience in the current school system (Freire, 1996; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017). The role of parents in schools and thus in defining and conceptualizing PI is framed within a narrow preordained framework, resulting in the expectation that parents and their involvement must fit within the criteria set out by the school itself (Crozier, 2001). In other words:

> *"Schools want parents to be involved, but not too involved, to support the school on the school's terms, but not to dictate how the school operates. Thus, "good" involved parents are cheerleaders, of sorts, ones who are there to focus on what teachers and schools are doing right, and to reinforce school and school people's agendas, rather than imposing (or even proposing) their own agendas in overt ways (Doucet 2011, p. 409).*

This is remarkable as several scholars argue that PI is teachable and that it can be improved by school-based behavior. Simon and Epstein (2001), for instance, support this claim by arguing that teachers can teach parents to become fully engaged in their children's education. Jeynes (2010, p.766–777), similarly, states that: 'even if certain subtle traits are the most vital aspects of family involvement, it is problematic if they cannot be easily taught . . . [we] need to discover more efficacious means of instruction'. Moreover, in his United States based research project, Jeynes concluded that teachers can teach parents to understand and then act on even some of the more subtle aspects of PI (Jeynes, 2010).

2.3.2 Parents' instrumentalization

So far, our analysis has shown that the conceptualization of PI is rooted in the interplay between parents and the school and that minority groups and parents are often excluded from this process. The fact that the conceptualization of PI is rooted in the interplay between parents and the school has far-reaching consequences for the concept of PI itself. Our analyses show that schools often 'use' and even instrumentalize PI for educational reasons as well as to try to flatten out socioeconomic and racial or ethnic disparities between parents.

2.3.2.1 PI as means for promoting academic success

One of the reasons for this instrumentalization can be found in the idea that PI has emerged as a powerful predictor of children's academic skills (Christian, Morrison & Bryant, 1998). This is also represented in legislation worldwide, such as the US No Child Left Behind Act that explicitly states that 'effective parental involvement fosters achievement to high standards for all children' (Section 1111.d). Consequently, the dominant rationale for PI in ECEC is to improve children's academic success. According to Stylianides and Stylianides: 'children's academic achievement at the beginning of kindergarten appears to be of critical importance for their success in school because children's school-entry academic skills were found to be strong predictors of their later achievement in different subject areas such as mathematics and reading (p.409)' (Stylianides & Stylianides, 2011). Chen and Zhu support this claim, stating that: 'during this period of time, parents play a more critical role in children's learning than do the roles of schools and communities' (Chen & Zhu 2017, p.2999)'.

The existing body of literature offers abundant evidence to explain the relationship between PI and children's scholarly and academic achievements. One of the central arguments is that the children's home experiences in acquiring

academic skills such as mathematics, reading and literacy are of pivotal importance as positive experiences have a positive impact on their academic achievements (Sheridan et al., 2011). These positive experiences can be generated by accompanying and supervising children in achieving their main scholarly goals, which are to study and to learn (Castro et al., 2015). Stylianides and Stylianides (2011) even found that children with more access to parent-child interaction tended to have higher levels of academic achievement than their peers.

2.3.2.2 PI as an 'equalizer' of inequalities

At the same time, PI is deemed to be an important mitigator of socioeconomic and racial or ethnic disparities (Cheadle, 2008). For example, the negative association between family poverty and school-based PI is well established. However, research from the United States shows that PI has some potential to moderate the association between family poverty and children's achievement in kindergarten (Cooper et al., 2010). PI is also more positively associated with literacy outcomes for children whose mothers are less educated when compared with children whose mothers are more educated (Dearing et al., 2004).

This encourages the idea that PI should be a central goal of practice and policy solutions to reduce the existing and growing gap between children who live in lower and higher income families (Dearing et al., 2006). The widespread dissemination of PI is envisioned as an 'equalizer' to decrease or even close this gap. At the same time, in a context where traditional nuclear families are changing because of the increase in divorce and recomposed families, same sex couples, female labor, and other factors, PI is also reported to reduce the risk of later depression and anxiety among adopted children from lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parent families (Goldberg & Smith, 2017). Focusing on the positive and supportive influence of PI on children's academic success is, however, more likely to lead to the radical conclusion that the responsibility for children's academic failure lies with the parents (Vandenbroeck, et al. 2016) and is particularly exacerbated by their deficiencies, because they do not perform the counteracting or remedying role which parents 'should' perform. Vandenbroek, Roose and De Bie have already criticized this radicalization of parental responsibility (Vandenbroeck, Roose & De Bie, 2011).

This reflects how PI has been conceptualised from the perspective of schools, rather than from the perspective of parents. Many scholars have criticized this as parents are regarded as a resource 'allowed' to support schools in ways

based on the school's decisions (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Dukes & Smith, 2007). This unidimensionality is what is often criticized as the so-called pedagogicalization of parents (Popkewitz, 2003) or the proto-professionalisation of parents (Knijn & Hopman, 2015).

2.4 Discussion

PI is one of the major narratives in educational reform and is – in this evolving sense – defined as an advance and progress. In this study, we have explored the meaning of the concept of PI and the involvement as well as the conceptualization of parents in this meaning. We have focused on the extent to which parents are included in the conceptualization of PI and how parents are viewed within current conceptualizations of PI.

We found that most of the literature fails to conceptualize PI as a clear and well-defined concept that can be used in policy, practice and research. The difficulty of conceptualizing PI may be found in the ever-expanding meanings associated with the concept. PI seems to function as a concept of convenience, an umbrella term which can be used whenever it is needed. It seems that researchers have different understandings, but also emphasize different aspects of PI.

Although we recognize the ambiguity of the concept and the need for a broad interpretation of PI, we do argue that a comprehensive view of the conceptualization of PI should aim to integrate the diverse and various perspectives that we found in our research, rather than advocating one particular aspect of it. In conceptualizing PI, it should also be viewed as one of many aspects of teachers' professional development (Walker & Dotger, 2012), recognizing that teachers must acknowledge the diversity of families and take concrete measures to involve all parents rather than adopting a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

This is not an easy task, as our study demonstrates a lack of knowledge about how parents of heterogeneous cultural and socioeconomic groups perceive their involvement and relationships with teachers. PI has become a greater challenge in recent years as the characteristics of families are changing and the diversity of parents is rapidly increasing in our contemporary societies (C. McWayne et al., 2004).

At the same time, little is known about parental motivations and decisions about their involvement as parents are not involved in the conceptualization of the concept itself (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Green, et al. 2007). To date, attempts to conceptualize PI have never considered how parents are involved in the school or choose to be involved, how contextual and systematic elements might constrain this involvement and how these elements may be interconnected. This exclusion of parents marks a democratic deficit in research that is not new. On the contrary, from the nineteenth century onwards, parents have been excluded from debates about what is good for their children because the debates have often focused on the importance of early childhood education and the parents' responsibilities (Vandenbroeck, 2004).

This study therefore recommends a shift from instrumentalizing and silencing parents towards a reciprocal, symmetrical dialogic relationship between teachers and parents (Tobin, Adair & Arzubiaga, 2013). In the end, our study shows that PI is not all about recruiting parents to help schools to achieve better academic results. This shift, however, is not a task only for academics or legislative bodies. On the contrary, it is our understanding that this shift should be a central element when training professionals (pre- and in-service) in early childhood education and care since our study has demonstrated how PI is also about participation and diversity. Bearing in mind the general agreement that it is professionals who put policy into concrete and day-to-day practice (Aronson & Smith, 2009; Evans, 2011), they should be informed and trained to do so in a participative way with respect for diversity.

A reasonable and valid conceptualization of PI should at least account for the inclusion of parents' as well as teachers' perspectives. PI should reflect a participatory reciprocal process involving dialogic participation in a democratic way. Conceptualizing PI entails a dialogue with parents as well as professionals on what is good for children, which may enable diverse parents to participate in the co-construction of parental involvement (Vandenbroeck, 2007). PI can neither be studied nor practiced in a vacuum as participation can become a new determinant norm that excludes precisely those who have always been on the margins of society (Vandenbroeck & De Bie, 2006). The fundamental question is, therefore, who is entitled to define PI?

2.5 References

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CHAPTER 3

Conceptualisations of parent involvement in early childhood education in China

Abstract

There is a growing attention for parent involvement in education in general and in early childhood education in particular. The vast majority of scholarly literature is published in English language and originates from Western countries. There is a risk that this may lead to the assumption that mainstream ideas in international literature are globally valid and come to dominate those of other countries, despite cultural differences. We conducted a systematic review of Chinese literature on parent involvement and analyzed underlying assumptions on rationales for parent involvement, on how parent involvement is configured, on *guanxi* and social inclusion, and eventually on the meaning of early childhood education. We found that while traditional important Chinese values are missing in dominant literature, there is also an increasing influence from U.S. literature on Chinese policy and practice.

3.1 On the monoculturalism of parent involvement in a multicultural world

Ever since the much-cited Coleman (1966) report, there is a growing interest in parent involvement in education in relation to equality of opportunities. Over the last few years, this interest is also increasing in early childhood education, both in research (Janssen & Vandenbroeck 2018; Van Laere, Van Houtte, & Vandenbroeck, 2018) and in policy (European Commission, 2018; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). PI is increasingly regarded as a solution to educational and social problems since parents are expected to be responsible for helping their children develop and parent involvement is considered to be among the most salient external factors affecting children's achievement (Melhuish et al., 2008). In relation to the conceptualisations, has predominantly been understood in terms of "what parents do" and "how that fits or does not fit the goals of the school" (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005). However, more fundamental questions on what precisely *is* parent involvement and *why* it matters, have been less well studied. Comparative studies have demonstrated that conceptualizations of parent involvement may substantially differ from one country to another and may be linked with underlying assumptions on children's needs and the very meaning of early childhood education and care (Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018).

Parent involvement is not a fixed concept but a dynamic and ever-changing practice that varies depending on the context where it occurs. In the 1980's, Lareau (1987) already found that a "one size fits all" approach to parent involvement may increase the educational gap, rather than reduce it. More recently, Van Laere, Van Houtte and Vandenbroeck (2018) showed that a democratic deficit – meaning that parents are not involved in how parent involvement is conceptualized – may also have exclusion effects in early childhood education. In sum, a concept of parent involvement that is believed to be universally valid may very well favor the already favored. Therefore, it is particularly worrying that the concept of parent involvement remains under-theorized. As a result, not only the multiple meanings of the concept remain veiled. As the literature on the subject is predominantly English and particularly focuses on Western countries, it is too easily assumed that the strategies and assumptions in these literature are globally culturally valid and come to dominate those of other countries. Significant here are conclusions on the role of parental involvement may not be applicable for all groups or countries (Wong & Hughes,

2006). Specific nations have specific cultural traits that are “rather sticky and difficult to change in any basic fashion, although they can often be modified” (Hofstede & Bond, 1988).

In China, governmental investments have impacted on the accessibility and quality of provision in early childhood education in the last two decades (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009; Wang, 2010). In today’s China, parent involvement has become a priority in policy documents. The *Chinese Medium- and Long-Term Competence Development Plan* (2010–2020) and the *Guidance of the Ministry of Education on the Establishment of Parents’ Committee in Preschool, Primary and Secondary Schools* have formally highlighted parental involvement and required the establishment of parent committees in every preschool. Embedded in the concrete context of China, parent involvement and children’s development have a very long tradition and familial influences on children, parental self-cultivation and parents’ teaching good morality to children are inherited values that date from the Warring States period (Zou, 2008). In 220 BC, under the Han dynasty, the regulation was advocated to “ban hundred philosophers, and venerate Confucianism" (Zou, 2008; Ma, 1997). Since then, Confucianism has taken a dominant position and influenced many aspects of Chinese history and daily life (Ma,1997). A much-used Confucian slogan for education is “self-cultivation, family harmony, country management and world peace” (Zou, 2008:20), which explains the interrelated constructions between education, the family and the wider society or the State. This pattern stimulated parental attention for children’s education and learning, as this concerns the harmony of the family, the management of the State and the peace of the wider society. This educational model looks at the family as a similar structure with the State and stresses the parallel between education and citizenship. As Zou (2008, p. 24) summarized: “The State is the enlarged family and the family is the shrunken State”. The family concerns the existence of State and the vicissitude of society. Educational success is therefore not only the success of the child, but also of the family and the State. The formal tropism of education and learning intensifies parental involvement in children’s education.

The Chinese concept of 'self-cultivation, family harmony, country management and world peace' is associated with parent involvement in children’s education and thus parent involvement is also generally accepted as a duty to society (Du & Wang, 1998). This perception may be shaped through *Jiaxun*, a kind of monograph on parental involvement and education written by the elders of the family, as a special form of traditional family involvement (Zhao, 1994). It means the heritage of pedagogical experience from parents and the elders of the family

and aims at educating their descendants and calls attention to various aspects of children's life. The most classical monograph on parental instructions is the "Yan clan tradition", which has a distinctive feature: attaching importance to children's ethics and study (Zhao, 1994).

In that vein, parent involvement does not only refer to maximizing children's learning, but it also refers to educating children to be reasonable people and to improve their moral self-cultivation (Ma, 1997). In Confucian philosophy, the influence of the family needs to start early, even before birth. This does not mean, however, that traditional families would not be geared towards the school success of their child. School success has been a critical way of upward social mobility since the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, eloquently phrased in the maxim "In the morning he is a farmer, while in the evening he ascends to the noble" (Zou, 2008). It is a vivid metaphor regarding education as a way of glorifying and illuminating the ancestors, and improving the social status. Confucian philosophies emphasize the role of the family in children's development and parental factors are considered more influential than other environmental factors concerning children's achievement (Wei, Wu, Lv, Zhou, Han, Liu, & Luo, 2016). Chinese authors claim that Chinese parents are more involved in children's education than their western counterparts (Lau & Power, 2018). Many parents particularly in the larger Chinese urban areas tend to have fewer children and follow the one child per family policy, as Chinese parents are willing to take great efforts to contribute to children's academic success. They consider their continuous efforts– from an early age on – to be the best way to have their child enter a top-rated university and access a top job afterwards (Wang & Cai, 2017). This results in investing heavily in child care and preschool education (Short, Zhai, Xu, & Yang, 2001). It has been documented that single children had higher achievement and more academic advantages than their peers with siblings and parental involvement was higher in the family of one child than in families with more children (Wei et al., 2016). Recently, Jia's group wrote:

> *(…) the generational inheritance of parental responsibility is handed down and parents emphasized their responsibility in being involved in cultivating their child's interests, morality, personality development and all-round development (…) Parents have combined the cultivation of their children with the country and society, which is the inheritance of a sense of patriotism"(Jia, Ren, Shen, Wang, Wang, & Kang, 2018, pp. 48-49).*

3.2 Globalization influences

Since the policy of reforming and opening-up from 1978, Chinese society and academia have increasingly been influenced by foreign experiences during globalization and sweeping social transformation. Chinese early childhood education profoundly changed in two decades (at least in the major cities), increasingly embracing individual effort, competition and meritocracy, without therefore neglecting the collectivity (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). The personality characteristics highly valued by parents and teachers (such as being creative, learning to learn and being responsible to the social) are congruent with the needs of marketization and globalization of economy and constructions of the good citizen. Researchers critically analyzed how today's Chinese education is influenced by Western ideas and practice in the context of modernization.

The diffusion of the Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966), which highlights the significance of family background characteristics for the differentiated school achievements and downplays the significance of schools (De Carvalho, 2000), has marked the international influence on the relations between families and schools in China. A prominent example is Epstein's model of parental involvement characterized by the framework including parents in parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995), which became prevalent and a much-cited model in Chinese documents since this framework proposed the overlapping sphere of influence and contributed to the establishment of National Network of Public Schools and the wide implementation of PI in U.S. and many other countries. Another example is Ma Zhonghu, a pioneer of parent involvement research in China. He initially introduced 15 strategies of involvement from foreign schools in 1994 and published the first book on parent involvement in China in 1999, arguing how today's Chinese education can be modernized by the cooperation between parents and teachers. In addition, the study of Tobin and colleagues (2009) documented an increased pressure from parents on preschools in China, as parents are increasingly viewed as customers. Tobin and colleagues documented how this tendency of individualization and competition is a phenomenon that is so embedded in the U.S. early childhood system.

With the combined influence of internal culture and external experiences, the specificity of parent involvement can mirror cultural differences and processes of continuity and change. Obviously, the conceptualization of parent involvement does not only need to be concerned with differences between nations but also

within nations. As Lareau (1987) already pointed out, this is especially the case for socioeconomic disparities in countries. In China, disadvantaged parents are to be found in agrarian rural areas (Meng, Gray, Bradt, & Roets, 2018). Thus, this study also pays attention to the diversity of parents within the country instead of typicality and generality. In this study, we attempt to broaden the discussion on possible conceptualizations of parent involvement by looking at the Chinese literature on this subject. By Chinese literature we mean both scholarly literature produced in Chinese and English language literature about parent involvement in China.

3.3 A review of the literature

Our study analyzed research articles on parental involvement in relation to early childhood education in China, published in international English language peer-reviewed journals and in Chinese language journals. We focused our selection on the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and the China National Knowledge Internet (CNKI), the most valuable Chinese website with the largest amount of Chinese literature in the world. All English articles containing 'parent(al) involvement' AND 'China' OR 'Chinese' in the title were included in the study. The synonyms for 'parent(al) involvement' — 'parent(al) participation', 'parent(al) engagement', 'school-family collaboration', 'school-family cooperation', 'school-family partnership', 'parent-teacher communication', 'parent-school interaction', 'school-family connection', 'parent-teacher relationship'— were used. We included all papers published between 31th, December, 1990 and 31th, December, 2017 and this resulted in 25 papers. The selection of literature is from the 1990s for several reasons. Since the 1990s, China began the comprehensive transformation from plan economy to market economy. The educational management highlighted the decentralization of powers and the policy advocated the cooperation of school, family and communities. The abstracts of these papers were analyzed on the content, to further exclude articles that did not directly relate to early childhood education or this topic, resulting in only 5 English language studies. 122 Chinese language articles on parent involvement in early childhood education were also identified. 117 of these Chinese articles were published after the year 2000. The total of 127 articles were analyzed to explore how parental involvement in China is perceived by academia. A review protocol was established which comprised a structured table for collecting and categorizing key information from each article. We acknowledge that limiting our review to the title of articles and the SSCI reduce the article number and may induce a biased view.

A thematic analysis was conducted by means of detailed coding while identifying potential subthemes. Subthemes were regrouped in overarching analytic themes. We found that the content of the articles could be analyzed along the following lines: the rationales for parent involvement; the implementation of parent involvement; *guanxi* and social inclusion; and the meaning of early childhood education. In so doing, we also look at how diversities within China are treated in the scholarly literature on parent involvement. Finally, we will briefly go into differences between the scholarly literature on parent involvement published in Chinese and in English, and discuss the implication for future research.

3.4 Results

The thematic analysis of the literature shows that – at first sight – the rationales for parent involvement are quite similar to the English language literature: children's development. However, we also found some nuances. After developing the rationales, we will deepen how the implementation of parent involvement is narrated in Chinese literature, as this is a prominent theme that stood out in our analyses. It implies a seemingly increasing influence from the outside and from the U.S. in particular on Chinese policy and practice. We will then develop two themes that are particularly interesting in this literature: *guanxi*, as related to social inclusion, and diversity, which reflect the complexity of Chinese condition and subtle influence of Chinese culture.

3.4.1 The rationales for parent involvement

The rationale for parent involvement in Chinese preschool can briefly be summarized, as there is one dominant rationale: improving children's outcomes and through children's outcomes – contribute to a harmonious society. Children are constructed as the future citizens should be cultivated to be responsible individuals to participate in the construction of a harmonious society. The following quotes (own translation) illustrate this:

> *"In essence, education is the effect of one minded and emotional person on another minded and emotional person. The healthy growth of children not only needs to give play to the unique influence of the family and school, but also needs to realize the communication and coordination between the two worlds (Huang & Ma, 2011, p. 23).*

> *There is a close association between parental involvement and the construction of harmonious society. To implement scientific development concept and construct harmonious society, talents are critical and education is the foundation. The modern society requires the school not only to try its best to educate children, but also to integrate various educational resources in order to strengthen the cooperation of school, family and social education and fully realize the construction of harmonious society (Liu & Chen, 2017, p. 5).*

Diverse rationales that are analyzed in other literature studies (Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018), such as creating a more child-centered environment or negotiating pedagogical practice, are rarely mentioned, yet there are some notable exceptions. For example, Huang et al. (2011) stated that parental involvement linked up the two living worlds of children, namely school and family, and the pedagogical value of this reciprocal practice can be reflected in the family-style school, where the school was regarded as big family and was more child-centered by creating unique environment for every child. Hu (2012) proposed that the basic ideas on which parent involvement should be built are equality, fairness, and justice.

Parental involvement in Chinese academia is regarded as an educational resource or as assistance to the school in order to contribute to children's success (Chen, 2012; Shi, 2017), in which parents are regarded to be positive tools to improve children's success (Wu, Zhang, & Wang, 2014, p. 15). Xu emphasized the importance of the educational resources of parents and explained how to utilize parents to fulfil the school's educational aim.

> *How to reasonably and effectively use the parents' educational resources is an important issue that every preschool teacher should consider. If the teacher wants parents to serve the preschool, the foundation is the teacher should know the advantages of parents through survey (Xu, 2004, p. 52).*

It is both framed as a means to improve individual competitiveness (as an individual dimension), as well as improving school (Ma & Yang, 2014; Yang, 2009), favoring school-family relationship and contributing to educational equity and social harmony (as a social dimension) (Liu, 2006; Li, 2008; Huang et al., 2011). An example of how individual achievement and societal progress are linked with parental involvement is the study carried out by Li:

> *“ Parental involvement was the momentum of school reform and parents can support school’s development by inviting parents to participate school’s activities (…) Parent involvement in school reform is an inevitable requirement of educational management democratization and Chinese society democratization (Li, 2008, p. 16).*

The Chinese language literature reveals that there has been a marked trend that educators highlight parent-child interaction and activities to contribute to the child’s development. They claim that parents may encourage their children’s reading skills and social adjustment in daily activities, for instance, they can foster their children’s reading interests through reading traffic sign, product names, shop and street names or restaurant menus (Ma & Lu, 2015). Several examples were developed, such as parent-child homework, parent-child play and parent-child reading. Parent-child homework, designed by the teacher, is presented as a positive factor of education. Chang (2017) argued that parent-child homework should be assigned, based on children’s body and mind characteristics and that it should attract the child’s interest, so he thought the content should originate from children’s daily life, and the breadth and depth should be appropriate with the child’s zone of proximal development. Researchers argue that parent-child language games can improve early children’s language competence, while parent-child dramatic play is to develop children’s social cognition. Parent-child reading is proposed to cultivate children’s reading habit and improve parent-child relationship (Liu, 2017; Chen & Zeng, 2015). Four of the five English language papers also focus on children’s school outcomes, such as mathematics learning (Pan, Gauvain, Liu, & Cheng, 2006), Chinese immigrants’ academic socialization and readiness for school (Lau, Li, & Rao, 2011; Yamamoto, Li, & Liu, 2016; Xie & Postiglione, 2016).

3.4.2 The implementation of parent involvement

The majority of the Chinese research focuses on the daily implementation of parental involvement. The literature is predominantly technical and focuses on *how* to increase parent involvement, rather than *why* to do so. Some papers call attention to other countries’ experiences. Studies document that face to face parent-teacher communication, or teachers making an appointment, and telephone communication are the most widely and daily used ways in parent involvement in early childhood education (Yuan, 2013). There is no unified standard of operation in Chinese early childhood education, yet, there seems to be a growing consensus that parent involvement takes place by family education

lectures, a form of parent education organized by the school: parent meetings, usually twice a year; parental committees, comprising the representatives of parents in a board; parents as volunteers to help the teacher or school activities; and open days for parents when all parents can have access to the preschool (Li, 2007; Li, 2012; Kou, 2005). Zhou (2015), in addition, mentions school activities, such as fundraising activities and curriculum design, parental expectation and home learning as occasions for parent involvement.

Despite the variety of forms that parent involvement may take, a general tendency is that the focus in Chinese literature is on school-centered parent involvement, meaning initiatives that are initiated by the school and most often take place in the school. This may include the school , involving parents in the curriculum of the kindergarten, classroom teaching and learning, the evaluation of teachers and even the school management (Kou, 2005; Chen & Yu, 2007; Yu, 2006).

Only few studies mention parent involvement in daily educational activities that are not initiated by the school (picture-book reading, spelling blocks), social activities (playing with peers, calling on relatives), physical activities (swimming, dancing) and life activities (doing housework, purchasing, cleaning, cooking) (Wang, 2017; Zhang, 2015). This somewhat differs with the English language articles on parent involvement in China, where there is more focus on home-based parent involvement (Lau et al., 2011). In China, parents are reported to have high educational expectations for their children and therefore to be highly involved in the home. Kim and Fong (2013) found that less educated parents developed effective processes and beliefs in children's potential through building purposeful learning environments, supplying nourishing food, doing parent-child homework, supervising homework, inculcating the importance of education, reinforcing the school program, punishing and other strategies to involve themselves into home-based activities (Kim & Fong, 2013). Some scholars have compared how parent involvement is operationalized in China and in the U.S.

> *"Chinese mothers' emphasis on teaching their young children school-oriented mathematics knowledge, particularly calculation. (…) Chinese mothers may have presented mathematical knowledge in a more effective way than the American mothers did even though the mathematics knowledge that American and Chinese mothers provided to their children was similar and the majority of mothers in both groups were college educated (Pan, Gauvain, Liu, & Cheng, 2006, pp. 32-33).*

Li (2016) argued that Chinese parents want schools to have more direct instruction and preparation of the examinations and that they make children participate in after-school homework help service. According to Bi and Wang (2015) Chinese parents set higher standards and work more often with their children on homework, which explains why Chinese urban children are consistently among the highest achievers in international comparisons of mathematics and science achievement.

3.4.2.1 U.S. influence in Chinese literature

Parental involvement has been the arena of educational reform . During the globalization and marketization, China has been affected by new educational ideas, especially ideas from U.S. Several authors have explicitly compared China and the U.S. suggesting that Chinese educational policies should be inspired by U.S. models. Most of these articles are quite critical of the Chinese situation, while idealizing the U.S. context. Qin (2011) compared China's *The Kindergarten Education Guidance Program* with the *National standards for parent/family involvement programs* and the *National standards for family-school partnerships* in the U.S. He argued that equal and reciprocal relationships between the parent and the teacher, and teacher's equitable attitude towards minority parents and lower socioeconomic status should be learned from the U.S. Xu (2008) also took inspiration from the U.S. to plead for the creation of legislation on parental involvement. Also other Chinese scholars have referred to U.S. federal and local government legislations that warrant parent involvement, while criticizing the laws in China that are believed to lack detailed implementation rules, and while stating that some parents are unaware of their responsibility of involvement (Zhu, 2015; Li & Zhang, 2006). They condemn the lack of funds to implement parental involvement, the limited school and community resources, and the infrequent communication between teachers and parents (Zhu, 2015; Li & Zhang, 2006).

In the same vein, Ma (1996) argued that parental involvement should be an integral part of the education system after reflecting the implementation history of parental involvement in the U.S. He stated that:

> *"parental involvement as a strategy of resolving the crisis of public school has been an ongoing topic of educational research and school reform since 1960s. (…) But before the 1960s, parents were not welcomed by the school, and even compete with teachers." (Ma,1996, p. 33)*

He also argues that "– in contrast to the U.S. - some Chinese parents were unaware of their right to be involved", and he criticized the Chinese teachers who thought that low educated parents cannot be involved. He concluded that parent involvement in China was at a lower level compared with the western countries (Ma, 1999). Another salient example is the "parental involvement series", sponsored by a research group, represented by Wu (2015) and focusing on translating influential books on parental involvement from U.S. They published among others translations of Annette Lareau and Joyce Epstein and plead for related research paradigms and methodologies in China. Inspired by Lareau's work, Zhao (2016) argued that parental involvement in China should be conceptualized from a reciprocal and dialogic perspective instead of school-centered and middleclass-based.

In addition, Chinese scholars have been studying parent involvement in the U.S. Tian, Mo and Li (2015) for instance explored the successful experience of parent involvement in the transition from kindergarten to primary school in the U.S. Zhang (2015) discussed the necessity to encourage parents to be more actively involved in preschool education from the perspective of the teachers and proposed to learn from what he labels as good practice from the U.S. Han (2014) focused on the parent involvement policy of Head Start Projects in U.S. preschools and advocated for its wider implementation. These examples illustrate the interest of critically examining the influence of imported conceptualizations of parent involvement in China, and to raise the question on how to balance learning experience from other countries and national conditions.

3.4.3 *Guanxi* and social inclusion

Chinese culture emphasizes interpersonal harmony and a harmonious society (Zou, 2008). As Liang reminds us that China is a relation-oriented society and the individual can achieve his or her value in good relationships with others (Liang, 2000, p. 93). and thus, *guanxi* and social inclusion are central issues in China. *Guanxi* is a special Chinese idiom and a specific form of social capital, meaning the strategic use of interpersonal networks to create good relations to use for personal advantages (Bian & Huang, 2015).

People's social activities aim at building and improving their interpersonal relations and expanding their social networks, because *guanxi* can represent resource and productivity (Sun, 2010). *Guanxi* networks may consist of children, kinship networks, neighbors, colleagues, schoolfellows, friends and other interpersonal relationships and are used by Chinese parents to make social

connections with the teachers of their children, to enroll their children in a better school, to improve family-school relations and other education-related activities (Bian, 1997). This, in turn, may serve as a critical resource and a way in which parent involvement contributes to children's school success to create class advantages or group advantages (Xie & Postiglione, 2016). Qi and Liu criticized the abuse of *guanxi* of parents, because it can intensify the school-choosing phenomenon and affect the equalization of educational opportunity (2005).

> *"Which school children can go into is not only related to children's ability, but also closely related to guanxi networks of parents (…) The competition among children turns into the competition of social resources and educational resources owned by parents (Qi & Liu, 2005, pp. 11-12).*

Parents develop strategies to be involved in the educational processes of their children in their homes, in schools and in the communities through their *guanxi* networks. One of the most common strategy developed by parents is to create a good environment conducive for school success, which highlights parental presence and support at home, as well as parent-child interaction and parental supervision. In order to maintain the social connections between parents and their children and to get access to important information about their children in school conveniently, a salient example of this particular type of active involvement in children's education is that some Chinese parents choose to rent an apartment next to the school and accompany their children (Han, 2017), Besides, parents usually communicate their academic plans for their children with their relatives to gain accesses to important information (Xie & Postiglione, 2016) and sometimes strategically make use of the relatives who have a good relationship with teachers to creat social connections with teachers. Various WECHAT (a social network software) groups including parent communities and parent-teacher communities have been widely used in China to build *guanxi* networks and be involved in the education (Dong & Wang, 2017).

However, referring to financial pressures, parental disinvolvement in schooling is more likely to emerge in disadvantaged families (such as rural parents) compared to the mainstream parents, as being present at home and supervising children by themselves will intensify their pressures of earning money. These disadvantaged parents are less likely to have close ties with teachers considering the social distances between them and teachers, which concerns the issue of parents diversity, social equity and social inclusion. In Lin's

conclusion (2013), to some degree the implementation of parental involvement excludes some parents, particularly disadvantaged parents.

3.4.4 Diversity and inequality

The meaning of early childhood education is – in the literature on parent involvement in China – primarily a preparation for primary school and later academic success and social mobility. This is, however, increasingly met with criticism from Chinese scholars who criticize that early childhood education has become schoolified as a prep school (Cheng, 2014). Researchers criticized that family education becomes the extension of school education and that the school to some degree may 'control' family education (Wen & Yu, 2010). Min argued that traditional Chinese education is knowledge-based and too heavily orientated at academic success:

> *"The pursuit of knowledge and academic success is superior to all other walks of life." (Min, 2012, p. 47).*

The social climate of respect and deference for teachers and education makes teachers be agents of knowledge and puts them in a powerful position. Increasingly, Chinese scholars examined the communication processes and indicated that teachers are in a dominant position, while parents are in subordinate role (Wei, 2016; Dong & Wang, 2015). They found that teachers are more willing to communicate with parents when children have delinquent behavior, and there exists unequal opportunities of communicating with teachers for parents. They criticized that parent involvement is limited to rhetoric and technical help.

Some scholars specifically addressed the issue of early childhood education as a preparation for later academic success including the perspective of socio-economic diversity in China and the rural-urban divide. Wei (2017) stated that there are two different perceptions about the research on parental involvement. One perspective looks at parent involvement as behaviors from parents of middle and high class to be involved in children's education; the other originates from a policy perspective and advocates to increase the involvement of families with lower socioeconomic status. Scholars in this vein documented how parent involvement may be accompanied with stigma and prejudice against specific classes and groups. Xu (2009) stated that rural migrant parents generally had high educational expectations for their children, but their involvement was low because of low socio-economic status and lack of time and knowledge. Wu

argued that parents in disadvantaged conditions thought it was unnecessary to communicate with the teacher unless their children encountered some problem. Lin argued:

> *"not only because they have less social capital and their lower socioeconomic status may restrict their involvement, but also because the school is essentially elitist and the teacher attached to the middle class"(Lin, 2013, p. 48).*

Time and energy constraints, besides others factors related to financial resources and cultural capital, may reduce parental motivation and their sense of self-efficacy to be involved in their children's education (Lin, 2013). Middle class parents may generally be characterized as proactive and their powerful influence on the school is believed to foster educational results, while working class parents are found to be more passive followers of the school (Jiang, 2010).

Fang, Sun and Yuen (2017), in contrast, found that disadvantaged parents regarded education as a necessary path to social inclusion and that they had high expectations for their children's education. In addition, children themselves confirmed that low educated parents can very well help their better educated children with homework (Kim & Fong, 2013).

There is, however, only a limited number of studies that have looked at parental involvement in rural China. These studies document that families in rural areas may have poorer *guanxi* networks and are often in disadvantaged conditions. They account for about half of the total population and were reported to have a negative attitude towards familial involvement, giving over the responsibility of education to professionals (Xie & Postiglione, 2016). According to some authors, this may explain that parent involvement of the economically disadvantaged families is usually low (Wang, Deng, & Yang, 2016). Yet, this is far from being a consensual observation among Chinese scholars. Lu (2016) also found that parental involvement in rural China was low, and parents were the passive recipient of information. Wang (2012) corroborated this in his study, arguing that rural parents are less involved as they thought that children's play is not significant for children's development.

3.5 Discussion

Western discourses on the relations of parents, children and government and globalization of early childhood education ideas have induced the potential risk of cultural hegemony and monoculturalism of parent involvement. We have analyzed the literature on parent involvement in early childhood education in China, both in English and Chinese language, to look at dominant discourses of early childhood education and at how parents experience dominant assumptions of their involvement. In so doing, we wished to uncover to what extent there is a Chinese way of conceptualizing parent involvement and if that differs from what is prevailing in Western scholarly literature. However, we found that Chinese language papers are less concerned with conceptualizations and rationales (the why) of parent involvement and focus more on concrete implementations (the how), while the English language papers deal with rationales in more explicit ways. The Chinese language papers primarily focus on parent involvement in the school and home based activities have less attention, while this seems less the case in the English language articles, where the home environment is more dominantly conceptualized as a home *learning* environment.

At first sight, Chinese and Western papers share a common conceptualization of parent involvement as instrumentalized for children's school success. Narrowing down parent involvement as the prolongation of school, is a rather technical and uni-directional view on parent involvement, with a clear hierarchy between teacher and parents, jeopardizing real reciprocal dialogue (Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018). This kind of relationship is described as 'readying for school', in which early education is assumed a subordinate role of making children ready for primary education and perform well (Moss, 2012). This critique is to be found in Western literature, yet there is growing body of Chinese literature that also criticizes the unidirectional and hierarchical relation between teachers and parents. The focus on the similarities between Western and Chinese literature, risks to obscure important nuances.

In Chinese literature, children are in many different social relations and children are believed to influence as well as be influenced by parents and society. Parental involvement is not only the implementation of parent's educational responsibility, but also the practice of contribution to the cultivation of citizens, which is accordance with the emphasis on parents' responsibility in today's neoliberal Western society. China's traditional values emphasize to educate children how to be and how to do, and children's success means children can properly deal with relations with themselves, others and society, which is

different from highlighting children's school success as a mere individual success. While traditionally important Chinese values (such as children's morality) are somewhat missing in dominant literature, there is an increasing influence from U.S. literature on Chinese policy and practice.

There are also subtle nuances in how inequality and diversity are part of parent involvement debates. In some Chinese language papers, rural or poor parents are suspected to lack the ability to directly assist their children in their schoolwork at home. Yet these authors are criticized for 'removing educational responsibility from the school' (Li & Zhang, 2006). These disadvantage parents seem to be considered as "problematic", but more research is needed to question how they become "problematic", by whom and why. These future discussion could induce more explicit understanding how inequality related to diversity is produced. The focus in Chinese literature is on school-based and school-centered parent involvement. Consequently, and more importantly, we noted that there are hardly any studies in Chinese literature that give a voice to the parents themselves on how they conceptualize parent involvement, or how they react on the models that Western researchers have developed (Kim & Fong, 2013). And the salience of these strategies are understudied in Chinese language literature. This seems important to take contexts into account and to avoid conceptualizing parental involvement in the way of excluding those who already are disprivileged in future research and policy-making.

In conclusion, we argue that more research is needed that does not assume that conceptualizations of parent support are universally valid, but that look at nuances that are embedded in specific cultural, political and geographical historicity. It will be increasingly important to not only normatively describe how parent involvement is to be implemented but also to investigate how parents and teachers themselves make meaning of parent involvement. And in doing so, it will also be important to recognize that there is not one single approach to parent involvement, but that regional, socio-economic and other diversities within countries may be equally important with diversities between countries.

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CHAPTER 4

What parents and teachers say about their relationships in ECEC: a study in rural China

Abstract

A growing body of literature refers to the potential of parental involvement (PI) as a critical educational remedy and solution for a diversity of issues in ECEC. However, the reflection of mainstream values and assumptions and the lack of attention to cultural differences in this existing body of literature has been criticized. In this article, we therefore conducted 15 focus groups to explore parents and teachers' perspectives on what they perceive as 'good' for children in ECEC and on the relationship between families and schools in rural China. The findings indicate that parents and teachers consider ECEC as a long-term investment in terms of social and intellectual capital. Furthermore, the conflicts between teachers and parents in our study on learning ideas were downplayed by 'pushed-down' reforming policy, and PI was featured by including parents into the life of *youeryuan*, as well as the pedagogicalisation of parents. This article concludes with a discussion about the findings and the potential of building relationships of mutual exchange, connectedness and solidarity.

4.1 Introduction

Parent involvement (PI) in early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been looked at with increasing attention to equalize educational opportunities among diverse groups (Baker, 2014; Coleman, 1966; Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018; Lareau, 1987). This is particularly salient in China in general and rural China in particular as the rural child has emerged as a much-debated issue in current Chinese social work discourse, policy and practice (Lv, 2007; Tang, 2005; Wang, 2010). While respect for the encapsulation of urban-rural dichotomy structure and prioritizing the urban area of China were themes at the core of the debates on ECEC before the 1980s, the provision and the quality of ECEC in rural China have been increasingly discussed in more recent decades (Hong & Luo, 2012; Luo &Li, 2010; Zhang & Yu, 2009). One of the reasons is that children in rural China are overrepresented in ECEC provisions of poor quality and are still often neglected in mainstream provision. Today, both the government and the so-called early years community have acknowledged that improving ECEC should encompass involving parents, as is made quite clear in *The Guidelines on Strengthening Family Education*:

> *“ The family is the first class of children and parents are children’s first teachers (…). Parents should actively communicate with the school to know more about children’s schooling. Parents should support children to participate in social practice and contribute to the fusion of family education, school education, and social education. Teachers should communicate with parents and give feedback to parents on children’s behavior. The school should build cooperative family-school relations (The Ministry of Education, 2015).*

As a result, PI has emerged as a designated area of policy intervention in rural China (Hong & Luo, 2012; Wang, 2010; Xue, 2014). However, there seems to be a tension in the discourse on what children need. It is argued that parents need to be involved. Yet, at the same time, parental beliefs on what is good for children seem to be neglected. Previous research (e.g. Yang & Sun, 2012; Zheng, 2005) in rural China, for instance, shows that parents wish to put more emphasis on teaching numbers and letters, while teachers favor child-centeredness and play-based approaches. Hence, there seems to occur a tension between the plea for PI as a quest to listen to parents and their beliefs on what is good for children on the one hand, and the realisation of these beliefs

in ECEC practice on the other hand. An important lens to grasp the complexity of the tension and to better understand this paradoxical situation is the perspective of the parents. This is exactly what is missing in the debate. At this point, there is little insight into the perspective and strategies of parents on how to deal with differences - conflicting beliefs and expectations - between their perspective and that of their children's' teachers. This is troubling as Vandenbroeck (2009) indicates that 'it is hard to argue that we educate the whole child, when leaving his or her parents' opinions in the corridor' (2009, p.167).

The literature on PI predominantly frames the involvement of parents in terms of school-related or learning-related actions that aim to increase academic outcomes of children (Chen & Yu, 2007; Christian, Morrison & Bryant, 1998; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Epstein, 1995; Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018). As a result, PI tends to normalize the perspective of the school (Baquedano-López, Alexander & Hernández, 2013), considering PI as an educational remedy for a diversity of issues, such as children's readiness for and the transition to school and children's learning and academic success, as well as social inclusion of underprivileged children (Baker, 2014; Cheadle, 2008; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Xia & Wen, 2019). However, the voices of parents with multiple backgrounds are rarely listened to when defining what PI is (Li & Vandenbroeck, forthcoming; Vandenbroeck, 2009; Goossens, 2019), despite the criticism that the notions of PI and of good practice that guide ECEC may be reflective of white middle-class values and assumptions (Crosnoe & Ansari, 2015; Crozier, 2001; Yao, 2019), and do not respect cultural or other diversities.

Moreover, the research has been English-dominated and Chinese literature has been increasingly influenced by the US, and it is all too often assumed that what is produced in English, is universally valid (Li & Vandenbroeck,2020). The hegemonic discourse and the monoculturalism of PI in a multicultural world may not be applicable for all groups or countries (Wong & Hughes, 2006). This article wishes to contribute to this critical discussion by capturing both the parents' and teachers' perspectives on the meaning of *youeryuan* (preschool or kindergarten for children from three to six years old) and on the relationships between families and schools.

4.2 The context of rural China

China undergoes a rapid industrialization, urbanization and modernization since the economic reform in 1978, yet this goes hand in hand with uneven

socioeconomic developments between urban and rural areas and the eastern and western regions. Despite profound changes in the social class structures, the inhabitants of rural areas are at the bottom of society in China (Wei, 2016). According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2018), the rural population was 576.61 million. Rural educational development is regarded as a fundamental way of resolving agricultural and rural problems in China. While rural children's education has attracted much attention, the complex amalgam of educational challenges, including high dropout rates and low qualification of teachers, remains a challenging issue. The disparity between rural and urban areas, in terms of economy, education and other aspects, results in rural children achieving less cultural capital (Qi & Niu, 2012) and considerable differences in approaches toward learning, cognition and general knowledge, language, and social knowledge persist (Yu, 2006). These differences intensify the urban-rural dichotomization through reproducing social status and culture (Zhao & Gao, 2017). The national funding system of ECEC mainly supports the development of public *youeryuan* in cities and marginalizes the development of ECEC in rural areas (Liu, 2012). The household registration system distinguishing between the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors hinders rural parents to send their children to urban schools for a better education, while passing the college entrance examination is the only way for rural children to achieve higher social status.

The Chinese government announced that the integration of urban and rural education was a strategic choice of educational modernization to promote educational equity (Han & Qin, 2012). The government also invested in improving pre-and in-service training of the ECEC workforce as a contribution to the quality of provision across all layers of society, as well as in increasing the number of qualified places for rural *youeryuan* (Han & Qin, 2012; Wang, 2010; Yang & Sun, 2012; Zheng, 2005). Accessible, high-quality ECEC provision is regarded as a way to address the demographic challenges of the urban-rural dichotomy and to break the generational cycles of poverty and social status (Hong & Luo, 2012; Wang, 2010; Zhang & Yu, 2009).

4.3 Methods

4.3.1 The region

The region of the study is Qingyuan district in Baoding, which sits on the hinterland of the North China Plain, in the middle part of Hebei Province. The

population is 650,000 and more than four-fifths of the population are rural residents. Qingyuan is a large district of traditional agriculture with upcoming industrialization (Qingyuan Local Chronicles compilation committee, 2012). The economy changes and the emerging pattern of social stratification in Qingyuan bears similarities to the overall situation in China. It can be assumed to be in many ways typical of Chinese rural development, or at least not a-typical. The school system in Qingyuan is relatively complete and resembles many of those districts in other parts of China (Xie & Postiglione, 2016). Since the reform and opening-up policy, China has been focusing on popularizing compulsory education, vigorously developing higher education and supporting vocational education, while ECEC has been in an embarrassing situation, especially in rural China. Many of the *youeryuan* in rural areas of Qingyuan are attached to primary schools or converted from primary schools by using their unoccupied buildings, which are mostly old and have dilapidated teaching infrastructure and facilities. The number of *youeryuan* teachers in rural areas is seriously inadequate and the number of qualified preschool teachers is obviously insufficient. There are 96 rural public *youeryuan*, 533 full-time teachers, and more than 15,000 school-age children (3-5 years old) (Qingyuan Local Chronicles compilation committee, 2012).

4.3.2 The method

The study used focus groups, grounded in the 'human tendency to discuss issues and ideas in groups' (Albrecht, Johnson & Walther, 1993; Sink, 1991), as focus groups are a salient way to give voice to marginalized groups (Morgan, 1996) and to gain insight into the often complex motivations and perspective of participants (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996). Other studies showed good results in using focus groups to study family-school relations as well (Morabito, Carosin, & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Rodriguez, Schwartz, Lahman & Geist, 2011; Tobin, 1992).

4.3.3 The participants

The first author sought permission of the principals of the *youeryuan* to access the rural schools with the help of the local education authorities. Then, the first and second authors visited the schools and met with parents and teachers several times in a period of ten days prior to conducting the focus group, usually on days and at times when parent activities were scheduled and when they picked up their children at the school gates. The site visits were opportunities for parents and teachers to get acquainted with the researcher, ask questions, and determine if they wished to participate (Jarrett, 1993). The selection of

participants aimed to reflect the diversity of parents in terms of social-economic status (SES), gender and origin. We organized 15 focus groups (see table 1) and each group was attended by four to eight participants. 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). The main reason to organize separate focus groups with parents with a low and a high SES is homogeneity as this ensures that participants will be more comfortable speaking with each other. The idea that participants share certain characteristics, such as SES, will facilitate more open responses (Vaughn et al., 1996, Williams & Katz, 2001). Furthermore, two focus groups addressed fathers. One focus group consisted of low SES mothers and fathers with migrant backgrounds.

Table 1. Participants of the Focus Groups

Focus group	Participant	Number	SES
FG1	Father	7	High
FG2	Mother	6	High
FG3	Mother	5	Low
FG4	Mother	8	Low
FG5	Mother	8	Low
FG6	Mother	6	High
FG7	Mother	4	High
FG8	Father	4	Low
FG9	Migrant parents	5	Low
FG10	Teacher	7	
FG11	Teacher	5	
FG12	Teacher	4	
FG13	Teacher	7	
FG14	Teacher	8	
FG15	Teacher	6	
Total	Parents	53	
	teachers	37	

The parents were recruited with the assistance of the teachers; they gave permission to participate in this study by oral informed consent which was approved by the ethical commission of the authors' university.

4.3.4 Data collection

The focus groups with teachers took place at the meeting room, office, or dancing room of the *youeryuan*. Three focus groups with high SES mothers and one focus group with high SES fathers took place in the office of the *youeryuan* without the attendance of school personnel. For low SES mothers and fathers, beverage shops near the *youeryuan* and a community center of the village were

used, which were neutral and easy to find. Given the difficulty of getting migrant parents (who migrated from other areas of China to the area) together, the focus group with them was arranged on Wechat (an anonymous and safe communication software). All focus groups were conducted in the local dialect. The focus groups started with a welcome, explaining the aims, the topic, as well as the ground rules, confidentiality, and ethics. Discussions were conducted in a relaxed fashion with minimal intervention at first to give priority to participants for freely speaking, then tried to maximize interaction between participants to encourage dialogue about inconsistencies and similarities among participants. Focus groups started with a 'warming-up' time, providing general information on the current situation of ECEC in China, followed by parents' open dialogues about the general questions on participants' perceptions of children's education and their aspirations for their children's future. These general questions included exploration on how parents and teachers perceive the child's education and development as well as their view on what would be a good life for children. The second part of the focus group focused on the role of ECEC in general and *youeryuan* in particular. Here, participants were asked to explain their view on the role of ECEC in realizing the future for the children as well as to elaborate on what they thought *youeryuan* could contribute to the child's development. The third part dealt with the parent's role in ECEC in the particular rural context by asking parents how they thought of the teachers and vice versa as well as by exploring the relationship between the teachers and the parents. Furthermore, we asked if parents and teachers had the feeling they could influence each other. The last part was about barriers or difficulties and their hopes. Each focus group lasted between 40 and 80 minutes. The focus groups were audio-taped with the consent of the parents and teachers, and then transcribed verbatim by the authors. A reflective diary was kept by the first author and notes were written immediately after each focus-group. The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, exploring emerging themes and topics after multiple readings of the transcripts (Dey, 2003). Then connections between the themes and clusters were made to come to overarching themes.

4.4 Results

Analysis indicated five overarching themes: *Xiguan* formation as the dominant rationale; Diverse concepts about learning; Teacher's negative views about parents; Parent's positive views about teachers; Pedagogicalization of parents.

4.4.1 *Xiguan* formation as the dominant rationale

Parents and teachers shared ideas about the dominant rationale of ECEC as developing *xiguan*, a pluralistic, compound conception in China, referring to cultivating daily behavioral habits and learning to live together. Despite the common concern about acquitting *xiguan*, ideas about the home versus the school responsibilities differed.

4.4.1.1 Cultivating daily behavioral habits

Parents in our study described forming good habits as the most basic behavioral issue for future learning. They stressed the importance of the period (between three and six year old) for forming children's good habits and expressed the hope that the child can display proper behaviors and politeness. When asked about the role of *youeryuan,* they stated that they sent their children to *youeryuan* with the hope of providing a better environment as a foundation for forming good habits and improving children's prospects. Although all parents in our sample valued children's habits formation in *youeryuan,* not all parents recognized the significance of their own role and this was especially the case for parents from lower SES.

> *"As long as children are well fed and dressed, and parents' obligations will be fulfilled (...) It is the responsibility of youeryuan to develop children's good habit (…) My child is often absent-minded. He pays much time to play mobile games at home. He listens to the teacher. The kindergarten should cultivate his habits of learning. (FG3)*

Teachers commented that children who had good habits appeared to behave better in class and *xiguan*, expressed as being obedient to teachers so that everything went smoothly and all children could be treated equally, seemed congruent with the teacher's evaluation. This was consistent with the parents' idea that children should be obedient to teachers.

> *"Youeryuan is a big collective. Nothing can be accomplished without norms or standards. The first thing is to urge children to have good behavioral habits, such as raise one hand before speaking, speak softly, and hold chopsticks using three fingers. (FG10)*

In the eyes of the teacher, ‘good habits’ are expressed in being polite, being respectful to others, persistence, and listening to the teacher, as well as in a chain of multiple small, provisionally insignificant and yet highly important inclinations (such as washing hands before meals and raising the hand before answering the question). Rural parents in our sample tended to think pragmatically about forming good habits in *youeryuan* as an adaptation to primary school, preventing the failure of their children, and helping reduce (even close) the educational gap caused by familial lack of cultural capital. Parents tend to agree with the beliefs of the teachers on these good habits. As a result, a first reading of the focus groups seems to lead to the conclusion that there is no disagreement between parents’ and teachers’ expectations about *xiguan* as good habit formation.

4.4.1.2 Learning to live together

Another consideration of *xiguan* was described as learning to live together. The parents in the sample perceived *youeryuan* as a social institution exposing children to the collective life of peers and they expressed their aspiration for their children to learn to share.

> *“ Now the particular sad part of the only child is that he wants to find friends to play together, but he is used to be alone at home and everything belongs to himself. He does not want to share and he does not know how to share. The youeryuan conducts mixed-age education. One group in the class has three children of different ages. The children can learn how to share and how to live together. (FG2)*

The quote illustrates a typical Chinese phenomenon of the one-child family and the growing concern about a possible increase of self-centeredness. A recurrent view of teachers and parents in the sample was that children had poor self-care abilities because children are treated as treasures and are spoiled by parents or grandparents. Therefore, some teachers in our sample considered that learning how to live together and how to interact with others was very important. The high SES parents in our sample highly valued setting limits in education. They expressed that setting limits to a child is essential to acquire social norms and to consider the rights and needs of others. Both parents and teachers were rather unanimous about the importance of teaching pro-social behavior in *youeryuan.*

> *Nowadays children are exposed to a lot of things and information. And that there are more adults to spoil one child. So, it is needed to have rules to regulate children's behavior at home to collaborate with teachers. Children should have clear boundaries about what can and cannot be done, and they can enjoy their life on the prerequisite of not harming others' interest and following social norms. (FG1)*

However, not all comments were consensual. Some teachers stated that not all parental behaviors at home were consistent with what they expected. Teachers complained that some parents had an adverse influence on children's *xiguan* formation. Typical comments were:

> *These children cannot adapt to youeryuan and often have some conflicts with other children. The teacher solves the problem and helps children learn to share and live together. However, during holidays, weekends and the time after school, parents will break children's good habits forming in youeryuan. (FG12)*

> *When children begin their first year, parents can accompany the children to adapt to the transition from the family. The children are often in conflict with each other over toys. Only one mother told the child he should share the toys with others, because the toys belong to youeryuan, not to himself (like the teacher told children). Most of the parents would tell the child cannot take this toy and to catch other toys. (FG15)*

Some teachers reported that parents had too little time and that grandparents were responsible for taking care of the children. They stated that grandparents were too protective of their children, resulting in children lacking autonomy and not being able to do anything by themselves in *youeryuan*, which was believed to jeopardize the *youeryuan's* educational idea that 'I can do it'. Teachers in our sample explained that the difficulty of communicating with grandparents contributed to this inconsistency.

> *The children are so clever and are sensitive to different environments. Such as when the child is together with parents, he can do the things he does as parents require. But when they are together with grandparents, they just lie down on the sofa and requires grandparents to wait on him hand and foot. (FG12)*

> *When grandparents pick up children, it is difficult to communicate with them and they will not tell children's parents. The questions cannot be solved. (FG14)*

When speaking about inconsistencies, many of the teachers in our sample used generalizing terms such as 'parents always…' and 'parents should not…'.

4.4.2 Diverse concepts about learning

The data in the study suggest that there are two distinct ways of conceptualizing learning: play-based learning and academic-based learning. The question of how to balance both produced different responses from teachers and parents and among parents, responses differed between lower SES parents and higher SES parents in the study.

4.4.2.1 Play-based learning

In general, play-based learning was the routine in *youeryuan* in Qingyuan, aiming to cover five major areas: language, arts, health, society, and sciences. The curriculum was organized in the form of themed activities, which can be regarded as a 'package', representing the teacher's ideas about children's early learning. Children involved in the activities are expected to learn through play. In the teacher's words:

> *Children can have art lessons, handwork lessons, and read picture books to stimulate their imagination, their operational and expression abilities. These lessons are designed to motivate children to observe, practice and express. The curriculum gamification has been widely accepted. We create a colorful play environment, inspire children to use multiple senses to learn, and children develop through play. (FG13)*

Parents with high SES in our sample tended to reproduce the same educational pattern by sending children to have extracurricular interest-oriented classes such as eloquence training course, Rubik's cube class, or Lego class. These parents were sensitive to issues of children's development and seemed to attach more importance to play. Strikingly, all parents who did not value play were from lower SES. The low SES parents in the sample conceived of play as different from learning, as for instance expressed in 'After finishing homework, he can play. Play is just for fun' (FG3); 'Whenever I go to the classroom, I find my child is just playing' (FG5); 'It is unnecessary to send children to have interest class for play'

(FG8). These descriptions reflected their view of play as something unrelated to learning.

> *“ After school, the child's grandparents will take care of him. After finishing homework, he can play. He plays mobile phone or plays with friends. He is unwilling to do homework and learn. He only wants to play. (FG4)*

In contrast, high SES mothers in our sample claimed that experiencing was a significant way of play-based learning. They tended to 'provide their children opportunities to experience through different activities in daily life' (FG7). High SES parents in our sample deliberately supplied numeracy and literacy learning experiences to their children, e.g. by making a shopping list for the child and let the child shop alone to stimulate expression ability through communicating with the shopping assistant and develop the skill of numeracy by supermarket checkout and bearing the list in mind. In contrast, low SES parents in our study expressed that their educational degrees were low and that they were not able to provide learning experiences in the family. Some of these parents had little time and therefore could only rarely organized activities that could contribute to children's learning. It was clear that play-based, child-centered practice potentially advantages families who were familiar with the pedagogy, which was in line with the argument of Brooker (2002, p.19): 'the pedagogic discourse of the classroom, which aims to be inclusive and egalitarian, has already allowed some children to experience disaffection and failure.'

4.4.2.2 Academic-based learning

All parents in our study stressed academic learning more than the teachers did. Without exception, the transition to primary school was emphasized by all parents in our study. Many parents – and particularly those whose children were in the last year of *youeryuan*, expressed the hope that their children would learn letters and numbers through direct teaching in *youeryuan*, as they were concerned that their child could be left behind in primary school.

> *“ It is not allowed to teach spelling in youeryuan and playing is the main activity in youeryuan. but I think it is necessary to teach children some basic academic knowledge in youeryuan in case children will fall behind in primary school. (FG5)*

The disagreements about learning between teachers and some parents in our study was framed by top-down policies. The teachers in our study argued that, although they were sympathetic to parents' perspectives, they had to follow policies. One teacher explained:

> *"In primary school, the policy advocated zero-based teaching which does not need children in youeryuan to learn knowledge. But when children go to primary school, they have to do homework and keep a diary. If they cannot spell and write, it is difficult to adapt to the life of primary school. Some children in private youeryuan learned some knowledge and skills, there is a big gap among children when they start primary school. (FG10)*

As a result, high SES parents in our sample tended to teach their children some knowledge and skills at home by parent-child reading, listening to the radio together with the child, paying attention to children's homework, and watching TV show. Some parents reported preparing a quiet learning environment and buying primary school books so that their child could learn. The low SES parents in the sample described that they could not contribute to their children's learning at home. A typical response to questions related to their role was: 'I cannot do some of his homework, so I cannot teach him to do his homework.' Parents in the sample were also concerned about the exam-oriented education in the Chinese school system.

> *"In public youeryuan, teachers pay more attention to improve children's practical ability. They teach little knowledge. But I think now it's exam-oriented education. It is better for children to learn some knowledge. (FG2)*

In addition, the lower SES parents in the study, did not express their anxieties in a dialogue with the teacher. Rather, they remained silent and conformed with the implicit and explicit rules, norms, and routines of *youeryuan*, which was considered by Freire as 'internalized oppression' (1970). This is in line with the findings of Van Laere, Van Houtte and Vandenbroeck (2018). Lower SES parents stated that 'to start earlier is better for the child's future' and they experienced a complicated dilemma: they had both high expectations for their children and felt powerless themselves.

In summary, it seems that high SES parents believe more in play-based learning but offer other learning activities at home and in extracurricular activities that lower SES parents cannot afford. From that perspective, the request of more academic learning in preschool by lower SES parents is understandable, yet is not heard by teachers. This may be one of the ways in which, as Tobin (1995) claimed, experiential learning privileges those who are already privileged.

4.4.3 Teacher's negative view about parents

Teachers in our study expressed that parents were their children's first educators and claimed that PI was important. They believed that the family environment had a greater influence on the child than the school as the time parents spent with their child at home was longer. Typically, teachers in our sample claimed that habits formed at home were hard to change in the *youeryuan*.

> *"When we have an art lesson, we require children to place the tools to the original position and throw the rubbish into the dustbin. One child said my mother often throw garbage anywhere. And the child imitates parents' behavior. The parents' quality is lower than parents in the city. The rural parents cannot realize their behavior will have how much big influence on their children. (FG11)*

In general, teachers spoke about parents in rather derogative terms, such as 'the education degree of rural parents is low', 'some parents cannot understand teachers' and 'it is difficult to talk with parents'. As one teacher stated:

> *"Some parents considered that it is enough as long as children eat their fill, wear warm clothes, do not endure grievance, and learn more knowledge. Some parents regard teachers as babysitters and they pay them. And some parents report they have limited involvement because they do not have time and the youeryuan should have the full responsibility of taking good care of children. (FG14)*

In this context, teachers in our sample were struggling to work with some parents. The teachers in the study commented on the social media that often-reported negative news about *youeryuan* teachers (including items about corporal punishments or child abuse) and complained that this contributed to their low social status and to the fact that some parents did not trust them.

> *We are not the service industry. We are professional educators. We need that parents respect us and we are not babysitters. Some behaviors should be improved at home and we cannot accept parents to put all responsibility to us. Our social status should be enhanced.(FG12)*

Many teachers in the study called on the parents' responsibilities to learn more about how to educate children, and they hoped parents would communicate with them. The *youeryuan* in the sample offered workshops and lectures on ECEC to convince parents about the value of play-based learning and other strategies used in the *youeryuan*. This was in line with parents' reports during the interview:

> *Youeryuan organized parent's lectures in order to tell parents some advanced educational concepts. Before the beginning of activities, teachers will ask parents to be involved by explaining the educational purpose of their activities. (FG6)*

4.4.4 Parent's positive view about teachers

All parents in this study said that they fully supported the teacher's work. They often equated cooperating with teachers as 'trusting teachers' and 'fully supporting school activities' for they believed that teachers as educational experts possessed authority. In our sample, parents' views about teachers and about themselves conformed with the cultural and historical traditions of relationships between professionals and parents, namely that parents and children should honor the teacher and respect their teaching, and that parental factors are considered more influential than other environmental factors concerning children's achievement (Wei, Wu, Lv, Zhou, Han, Liu & Luo, 2016). Parents expressed appreciation for teachers for communicating with them about their children's needs, taking the responsibility for learning, and providing the opportunities of coming to the school. In short, the parent's view about teachers was particularly positive. Usually, high SES parents felt personally responsible for their child's problems, and believed – just as the teachers did - that they should learn and improve themselves to contribute to their child's development. As one parent stated:

> *“ I learned from the TV show ‘Hailan super parenting’. If the child does well at home, I will award him with a smile. If he does badly, I will label him a crying face as punishment. But the teacher will not use this method in school. I am wondering whether I should talk with the teacher to have a common way in order to cooperate with the teacher. (FG7)*

The finding that parents’ educational ideas and behaviors were influenced by social media, educational experts, professional books, TV-shows and other parents was consistent among parents in the study. However, there was a distinction between high SES parents and low SES parents in how this played out. Low SES parents wanted to improve their educational ideas and behavior, but may have found it more difficult to do so:

> *“ I think a parent is a mirror for a child. Parents influence their children by words and deeds. Although I am aware of this, it is hard to do it. Such as I can't help losing my temper with my child when I'm angry. (FG8)*

4.4.5 Pedagogicalization of parents

Most of the teacher-parent interactions, described by parents were unidirectional in nature: receiving information from teachers, being allowed to attend activities organized by the school, and being asked to support teachers by preparing materials. These interactions should be seen in light of the idea that parents are those who should receive training to function as an extension of the school context. This line of reasoning which gives a lot of responsibility to parents, was defined by Popkewitz (2003) as the pedagogicalization of the parent. In our study, when we asked teachers about parent-teacher relationships and the strategies they used to communicate with parents, the teachers responded with a similar list of ways they worked with parents: parental meetings, spontaneous communication before and after school, open days for parents, and various parent-child activities (such as parent-child games, participation in the Children's Day, and parent-child charity sale). Parents in our study reported that they were never involved in the decision-making process or in making changes to the school’s curriculum. Teachers in our sample agreed that parents conformed to their expectations regarding PI, yet they considered some parents as too passive. What PI is, is implemented in a mandatory requirement rather than in a cooperative way.

> *Some parents highlight children's education and these parents will be more involved in youeryuan, but some parents are rarely involved in youeryuan and they perceive youeryuan as unimportant. There are some parents that I have never met. They are not interested in ECEC. If the kindergarten conducts some activities related to parental involvement, we will require parents - not grandparents - to come. Most of them will participate. (FG11)*

The quote illustrates a common belief among teachers that a lack of PI is a problem as it might be seen as an expression of a lack of interest of the parents in their children's early education. This was particularly so in the case of low SES parents. In general, it was solely the teacher who defined how PI was to be played out. As one teacher explained:

> *I told them we are a team. When I require them to do something, I will tell them they must do as I demand. I am the boss of the team. I will not compromise with parents, because it is necessary to set up some rules to let parents obey in the future two years. You have to be serious to the parents in order to ensure parents obey the rule, otherwise, you cannot control the team. (FG12)*

The quote illustrates the power asymmetry between teachers and parents, and that involvement was conceived as school-centered rather than a reciprocal, symmetrical, dialogic relationship, which is in line with the related literature (Crozier, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa 2009). While there were a few instances of schools responding to parents' concerns (e.g. whether the menu of the canteen should be renewed and whether the noticeboard should be placed where every parent can see it), most of the examples of involvement in our study were about parents expected unilaterally to support the school's work.

4.5 Discussion

There is an increasing attention for PI before compulsory schooling as a means to equalize educational opportunities. However, the literature seldom considers cultural differences in these matters and not often parents' and teachers' voices are listened to. In this paper, we aimed to contribute to the debate on culturally

sensitive PI by analyzing the perspective of parents and teachers in *youeryuan* (kindergarten or preschool) in rural China. We explored their conceptualizations of learning, of PI as well as their views on each other.

We found consistent consensus among parents and teachers about the importance of *xiguan* to acquire good habits. Yet, less consensus was found on what *xiguan* means when it comes to social behavior and the responsibilities of teachers and parents. Lacking perseverance and social skills - as highly valued in traditional Chinese agricultural society - was reported by many parents as a characteristic of children (Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa, 2009). Teachers tend to consider the home environment as the most important place to acquire pro-social skills and blamed parents and grandparents when this was not achieved. Overall, the *youeryuan* was regarded as the site where this cultural tradition and emerging ideas of industrial society intersect, a site thus where traditional Chinese values struggle in the transformation of society.

Regarding learning, all parents were eager to have academic training. However, high level SES parents in our sample had no problem in complementing the play-based learning in school while for low SES parents that was more difficult if not impossible, due to a lack of self-esteem, skills, money and/or time. Creating a 'home-learning environment' was easier for high SES parents, combining both playful extra-curricular activities and academic learning in the home (Jeynes, 2010). As a result, in *youeryuan* as in other social institutions and public domains, there is a tendency to project problems of the larger society onto rural parents (Tobin & Kurban, 2010). While differences in the appreciation of play-based versus academic learning between teachers and low SES parents are understandable from that point of view, they are judged by the teachers as a deficit of low—SES parents (see also Cheng, 2014; Jin, 2011), which jeopardises reciprocal relations between parents and teachers.

Educators, parents, and social scientists typically conceptualize PI as a set of deliberate, overt actions and most programs designed to implement PI focus on the more overt expression of parental attendance at school functions (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2010). The *youeryuan* in this study recognized the importance of parents and implemented activities to improve parents' awareness and their skills about helping children's development. On the other hand, most rural parents in our study tended to ask for relatively modest changes to conform to the teachers' requirements. The way in which the cooperation between parents and the school is arranged can here be seen as a form of parental governmentality, where parents are indirectly recruited into the

teachers' project to foster children in line with the conventions of the schools (Dahlstedt, 2009). As Stewart Ranson stated: 'The social space that schools establish for parent involvement is limited and typically shaped by deep codes that reinforce professional authority' (Ranson, Martin & Vincent, 2004). Including the voices and perspectives of rural parents and teachers helps revealing differences, frustrations, disagreements, and compromises. Teachers and parents of lower SES do not always share a common cultural background or language, yet a policy of listening and dialogue can be helpful. As not all parents want the same, being responsive to parents, therefore, should accept the cultural diversity.

Our study has some limitations. The differentiation of parents by gender, SES, and origin is a simplification of the diversity of rural China that refers to both of region (the eastern, central and western regions of rural China, the southern and the northern regions of rural China) and population composition (majority and minority). Therefore, our findings cannot be generalized in China. Moreover, in the sample parents with a migration background were underrepresented. Another limitation is that we reached the *youeryuan* and teachers with the help of the local education authority, which may have produced a selection bias that can have resulted in biased data.

Despite these shortcomings, we highlighted the need for listening to parents on their view on what is good for children in ECEC in rural China and in doing so we contribute to diversifying the voices in the international debates about PI, as well as about what ECEC is about. The absence of space for negotiating disagreements and tension and the ambivalent views about relationships between parents and teachers, as well as the pedagogicalization of parents in the study can be regarded as signs that the participants are not yet really engaging with each other.

4.6 References

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CHAPTER 5

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

Abstract

Over the past few decades, scholars have paid attention to how parental involvement (PI) 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.

5.1 Introduction

Over the past few decades, scholars have paid attention to how PI 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 PI could and should be (Barge & Loges, 2003). According to Lawson (2003), this explains why PI 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 & 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 & Horvat, 1999). Choi (2017) pointed out that PI 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, PI 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 & 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 & Perez, 2013). Moreover, PI in schooling tends to function as a mechanism through which socioeconomic advantage is reproduced across generations (McGrath & 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 & 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 & 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, PI varies by social class and ethnicity (Lee & Bowen, 2006; McGrath & 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 & Litwack, 2007). Aside from a few exceptions (for example: Durand & Perez, 2013; Vandenbroeck & 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 differs 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 has 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 the educational success of rural children during the transition from a planned to a market economy (Xie & Postiglione, 2016). Gaining better understandings of how to conceptualize PI 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 conceptualise PI. This study explores socioeconomic status (SES) differences, not just in the conceptualisation of PI 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 & Vandenbroeck, 2020).

5.1.1 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 & Huang, 2012), upward mobility seems out of reach for an increasing number of people, thereby 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 policymakers (Li, Li, Devlieghere & Vandenbroeck, 2020; Wang, Feng & Jin, 2016). Interestingly though, is that in the midst of these debates about 'what is good for children', policymakers and researchers overwhelmingly agree that parental involvement is a critical strategy for developing children's early learning (Li, Liu & 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 & Kilderry, 2018; Lau, Li & Rao, 2012). This is illustrated in official documents, such as *the teacher's professional standard* in *youeryuan* (The Ministry of education, 2012). Notably, PI in *youeryuan* has generally portrayed parents to be 'helper', 'supporter' or 'learner' (Chen & 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 & Kilderry, 2018; To, Lu, Tsoi & 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 & Kilderry, 2018).

This rhetoric has led to a pathological form of so-called parental anxiety (Chen & Xiao, 2014), a phenomenon of universal collective fear, which reflects the utilitarian culture and the epitome of social anxiety (Jin & 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 & 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 & Huang, 2015). Increasingly, researchers are raising concerns about the impact of *guanxi* on their children's educational opportunities (Xie & 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 & Vandenbroeck, 2020; Vandenbroeck & Van Laere, 2020).

5.2 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 into 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 & 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 the 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 the confidentiality of their responses. No school personnel was 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.

5.3 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.

5.3.1 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 storybooks 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 tends to be associated with higher SES parents (Vincent & 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 & Lareau, 1988).

5.3.2 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 suggests 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).

5.3.3 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 childrearing 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 & 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 & Lamont, 2010).

5.3.4 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).

5.4 Discussion and concluding reflections

There is abundance of research about the impact of PI 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 PI 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 & 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 the 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 & 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* teaches, 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 & Pierson, 2019; Thomas 7 Gregory, 2006).

Our study suggests that the discourse on PI 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 PI 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 PI, 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. *Guanxi* 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 colleagues than are those of their higher SES counterparts as *guanxi* networks tend to be homogeneous about class (Horvat, Weininger & 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 & Gobeyn, 2013). Sociologists, 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-teacher 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 PI will not happen without concerted effort, time and commitment of both parents and teachers (Harris & 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 Arzubiaga, 2013).

5.4.1 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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CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

In contemporary times of rapid demographic transformation and super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007), the democratic consultation of parents is regarded as an indispensable feature of ECEC's social dimension (Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018). As participatory processes are at the heart of ECEC, parental involvement (PI) is considered a process of conversation, or, as Tobin (2005) puts it: a process of involving parents in discussions of best practice. However, as Geiger, et al. (2014, p. 498) argue:

> *"It is important to acknowledge that we live in a society where fundamental inequalities persist, and therefore we cannot separate parental involvement from the actual ECEC conditions and the context."*

To date, only few studies have focused on specific aspects of parent-teacher relationships in ECEC in non-Western settings and particularly in marginalized areas such as rural China. Remarkably, although parents living in these areas are often framed as the predominant objects of intervention for policymakers and scholars (Kou, 2005; Vandenbroeck & Van Laere, 2020), their perspective is seldom taken into account. Therefore, the overall aim of the study was to build a multifaceted understanding of the complexities that come with PI, and to reflect on local values and concerns against a concept of ECEC that wishes to respect diversity and difference, and that strives for equity and social cohesion (Vandenbroeck et al., 2011). By conducting an analysis of academic literature and by organising focus group interviews with parents and ECEC teachers in rural China, we explored the following research questions:

- How is PI in ECEC conceptualised by the academic literature?
- How do parents and teachers in rural China perceive PI?
- How do parents' conceptualisations of PI facilitate or hinder social inclusion?

In this final chapter, we present our overall conclusion, by focussing on three interrelated findings along the three research questions, with a specific interest in widening theoretical and empirical insights to address parents' diversity and social inclusion within rural areas. Furthermore, this chapter also contains a

discussion of the results, a section on limitations and recommendations for further research and it concludes with a section on implications for policy and practice.

6.2 Main findings

In this section, we briefly discuss the main findings of our study. We summarise our findings under three topics, guided by the three questions of this research.

6.2.1 Parents as objects of intervention

Notions about the child cannot be seen apart from notions about parents and what they want for their children and how they can and have to support their children's learning (Geinger et al., 2014; Huang & Ma, 2011; Piotrkowski, Botsko & Matthews, 2000). In the last two decades, PI in ECEC has received much attention both from the public and from academia due to its rapid worldwide increase and its potential as a critical educational remedy against school failure of children (de Carvalho, 2000; Epstein, 1995; Paananen, Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2015). Research shows PI in schooling is the main way in which parents can know what is happening to their children in preschool (Lareau, 1987; Vandenbroeck, De Stercke, & Gobeyn, 2013).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how PI in ECEC in China is conceptualized both in dominant English academic literature as well as in Chinese scholarly work, we conducted a qualitative literature study on this matter. The findings of this study are reported in Chapter Two and Chapter Three of this dissertation.

By scrutinizing the academic literature on PI in ECEC, we found that most studies tend to examine PI practices by using a predetermined list of activities (Kim, An, Kim & Kim, 2018) and, as such, present a rather technical and uni-directional view on PI. Indeed, research has demonstrated how schools use structural mechanisms to implement PI programs, which mainly serve schools' interests (Sheridan, Knoche, Kupzyk, Edwards & Marvin, 2011). We found this trend in both Chinese and Western scholarly work. However, such a technical or school-oriented focus on how to increase PI, described as 'readying for school' (e.g. Moss, 2012), risks to obscure important nuances.

With regard to how parents are perceived in these conceptualisations, our systematic literature review demonstrates that parents tend to be

instrumentalized for promoting their children's educational success and decreasing achievement gaps caused by socioeconomic and racial or ethnic disparities. Paradoxically, while the proclaimed rationale behind this kind of conceptualizations is an attempt to include more parents and disadvantaged parents in particular, our analysis suggests that this literature in fact holds a deficit view on disadvantaged parents, which is linked to processes of exclusion rather than inclusion.

Our study also found that while policies and schools convince parents of the benefits of being involved in their children's education, parents are rarely asked about their views on the school (Cui, Valcke & Vanderlinde, 2016; Vincent, 1996). As Gross et al. (2020) argued, PI is predominantly regarded as a parent responsibility rather than a shared responsibility between parents and schools. Too often, when teachers talk to parents, the discussion tends to be hierarchical rather than reciprocal, with teachers demanding parents to do what they consider is best for children, giving parents tips, and correcting parents' so-called 'misperceptions' (Adair & Tobin, 2008). More importantly, while parents do have concerns about how education is provided in schools, there are several barriers that hinder parents to actually discuss these with the teachers (Van Laere, 2017). Furthermore, Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) found that even when teachers say they believe in PI, they react nevertheless rather defensively when confronted with a parent who sees things differently, rather than actually altering their relationships with parents.

The implementation of PI in *youeryuan*, which is strengthened as an important task of teachers, can currently be observed in policy documents in the Chinese context (Liu, & Chen, 2017; Xue, 2014). We noted that there are hardly any studies in Chinese language literature that give a voice to the parents themselves on how they conceptualize their involvement. In rural China, where traditional configurations such as teachers' status as experts and their assistance to parents to find solutions are widely accepted, the parents' reliance on them contributes, in part, to the institutionalization of these traditional ideas in ECEC. In this sense, parents in rural China may prefer to adopt the strongly school-oriented concept dictated by practice and policy. This means that our finding that the parents' voices are often neglected in the conceptualisation of home-school relations, needs to be contextualized to understand why this is the case and how these dynamics work. In this situation, policy and practice choices are reduced to narrow and impoverished technical questions of the 'what works?' (Moss, 2007). Such interventions tend to perceive parents as objects.

Our study shows that the ways parents are perceived by teachers and teachers are perceived by parents in rural China may lead to the enforcement of processes of exclusion of some parents, paradoxically reinforcing the very low-level involvement problem it claims to solve. It is necessary to question what the absence of dialogue and debate between parents and teachers means for ECEC and for democratic politics.

6.2.2 Multiplicity of perspectives on what is good for children

In order to fully grasp existing discourses on PI, and to add to our literature review, we held focus groups with parents and ECEC teachers from rural China. This helped us gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives on what is good for children in ECEC in rural China. Indeed, recognizing and valuing PI from diverse perspectives has the potential to ultimately improve the overall education being offered to all children, which is currently being emphasized in both policy documents and research (OECD, 2012; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). However, it should be no surprise that we found that prevailing conceptualisations of PI focus on 'school readiness activities' for parents in the home environment such as 'reading to the child' and 'supervising the homework'. Interestingly, all parents in our study emphasized this and focused on academic-based learning. We discovered that this should not be regarded as developmentally inappropriate, but as an indicator of the parents' concern that their child would fall behind in primary school. This goes to show that 'school readiness activities' always play an important role in school success or the success thereafter in China and as such should be given priority.

In today's China, the anxiety about education is spreading wildly (Chen & Xiao, 2014). Some of the families that took part in our study, clearly show frantic attempts to dedicate a load of manpower, material resources, and financial resources to support their children's learning. In a highly competitive society like the Chinese one, parents tend to perceive that the more they invest in their children's education, the more chances for success this will bring. Furthermore, our study is consistent with previous studies that found that parents often place a greater emphasis on academically-oriented skills than the teachers themselves and that parents are increasingly oriented towards their child's academic progress (Jose, Huntsinger, Huntsinger & Liaw, 2000; Piotrkowski, Botsko & Matthews, 2000; Tobin & Kurban, 2010; Vincent & Martin, 2002). Likewise, the parents in our study expressed their anxiety about their children's learning and

some of them increasingly planned their child's day, limited TV-watching, and putting academic work ahead of their children's spare time.

The fact that teachers thought play-based learning is the best, did not mean all parents thought the same way. A pivotal finding in our study was the difference in appreciation of play-based versus academic-based learning between parental involvement practices of high SES parents and low SES parents in rural China. In the parents' focus groups, we found that the desire for more explicit emphasis on academic-based learning is expressed by many lower SES parents. They believe that academic-based learning can keep their children's focus on the development of academically-oriented skills such as reading and math skills. High SES parents seem to attach more importance to play, while low SES parents tend to regard play as something unrelated to learning. This is neither to say that play-based learning has not been conceived as the best way of learning among all parents, nor that low SES parents should be blamed. Rather, it is to say that play-based learning opportunities are given to those who are already privileged and do not necessarily decrease existing inequalities but can in fact give rise to new inequalities. Compared to low SES parents, high SES parents can offer learning activities at home and reproduce *youeryuan*'s educational pattern by letting their children join extracurricular activities that lower SES parents cannot afford. As such, low SES parents seem to experience a dilemma: they have high expectations for their children but feel powerless themselves. From that perspective, lower SES parents' request for more academic-based learning in *youeryuan* is understandable. However, they tend to be judged by the teachers as a deficit of low—SES parents. Our findings are somewhat consistent with Chi and Rao (2003), who found that most rural parents (mainly lower SES parents) believe that it is the teacher, not the parent, who should undertake the major responsibility for children's learning. This can be explained by the scholarly work of Goossens (2019), who found that low SES mothers believe that children's proficiency in basic skills through learning is more than difficult enough to develop by parents given the circumstances in which they and their children found themselves in.

Some scholars, including Lareau (1987) and Irwin and Elley (2011), have argued that the participation of children in organized activities is regarded as a parental involvement practice among the middle-class and is considered to be a form of their cultural investment. These activities may reflect the tendency of emphasis on the parent's role of consumers, as a response to the commercialization of educational services. Apparently, lower SES parents in our study are more likely to be in a disadvantage, as a lack of time, coupled with financial hardship, often

leads to a hesitation to be involved in the case of commercialization. In line with Drummond and Stipek (2004), our study shows that parents value education as a tool for economic and social mobility, but that lower SES parents' involvement often falls short of expectations held by the school. Some lower SES parents recognized that they want to improve their educational ideas and behavior, but find it difficult to do so.

Moreover, many high SES parents in our study emphasized that they initiate different ways to establish interpersonal social connections with the teachers, while lower SES parents reported that they rarely communicated with teachers except when their children had problems in the *youeryuan* or in the family. It should be mentioned that, in line with previous studies (Hu, Yang & Ieong, 2016; Yamamoto & Li, 2012), parents in our study prioritize their children's physical and emotional wellbeing more than anything else.

From the teachers' perspective, our findings show that teachers think parents should be supportive of them and in favor of the mandate of the school. Teachers in our study complained that it is difficult to communicate with some rural parents, whom they described as 'hard to reach'. Some teachers felt discouraged by parents who did not fulfill a certain set of expectations and values, indicating that some teachers seemed to have rather one-dimensional conceptions of parents. Whether parents' willingness to collaborate with teachers in the *youeryuan* is weakened by negative attitudes from teachers is not demonstrated in our study.

However, by getting acquainted with the perspectives of the parents themselves, our study clearly shows that all the parents try to remain involved and supportive of their children's education at home, but that the teachers are not fully aware of the various efforts of all the parents (except when parents explicitly copy the teachers' educational patterns themselves). For example, some high SES parents are involved in daily educational activities by providing their children with opportunities for extracurricular activities which are regarded as important ways of learning by teachers. With regard to low SES parents, our study suggests that teachers think that low SES parents tend to be less interested in their children's early education. This kind of judgment means that some teachers may affirm the responsibility of all parents in their children's ECEC, despite the parents' individual contexts. Another typical example in our study was that when children's *xiguan* is not achieved, teachers view parents in rather derogative and incriminating terms.

In line with other studies (e.g. Cui, Valcke & Vanderlinde, 2016), we found that the parents in our study were satisfied with the teacher's work and had particularly positive attitudes towards them, in the sense that they see teachers as educational experts who possess authority. Consequently, they tended to trust teachers and follow the teachers' advice, in compliance with *youeryuan* standards. However, in our study, some teachers held negative views about rural parents. This seems to suggest that parents trust teachers, while the teachers mistrust some parents. File (2001) argued teacher mistrust of families represents a barrier toward collaborating with parents. Because trust in parents is a crucial aspect of home-school relations and is related to children's achievement and their feelings toward school, for building teacher trust in parents, teachers should be aware of parent dedication to education and providing a positive academic home environment, and as such can significantly contribute to the development of trust in parents (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Forsyth, Barnes & Adams, 2006; Van Maele, Forsyth & Van Houtte, 2014). The difference between parents and teachers centered on play-based and academic-based learning debates and teachers' negative views on parents, which may reflect the lack of communication between parents and teachers about the curriculum. Furthermore, in line with Adams and Christenson (2000), we agree that improving home-school communication plays a significant role in enhancing parent trust in teachers and improving home-school relations.

We also consistently found a consensus among parents and teachers about the importance of *xiguan* to acquire good habits and to learn to live together. Insight into rural parents' perceptions contributes to our knowledge of this under-researched group. Adding to the literature (Connors & Epstein, 1994; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Guo & Kilderry, 2018), our study suggests that some rural parents view the school as an authoritarian agent, rather than as a partner they can cooperate with. From the parents and teachers in our study, we learned that PI is mainly shaped by the unidirectional expectation that parents should support the school's work, which is strengthened by parents' positive views on and compliance with teachers. This line of reasoning, which gives a lot of responsibility to parents, was defined by Popkewitz (2003) as the pedagogicalization of the parent. This seems to illustrate that teachers of ECEC provisions in rural China have a long way to go in trusting and building reciprocal relations with diverse parents. In line with Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack (2007), our study highlights that the way parents become involved with schools may be more important than the extent to which they become involved.

6.2.3 *Guanxi* and inequality in parent involvement in ECEC

An increasing body of research and policy documents has highlighted the potential of PI in ECEC to equalize opportunities, prevent future problems of children and consequently break the cycle of poverty (CPC and the State Council, 2019; Hartas, 2015; Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2015; the State Council, 2019). Also, PI has been placed at the heart of advancing children's learning, increasing children's life chances and social mobility, as well as breaking intergenerational disadvantage (Hartas, 2015). Studies PI and social problems (e.g. Irwin, & Elley, 2011) have given rise to important questions concerning the diversity of parental perceptions of involvement within rural parents and how they relate to social inclusion and class circumstances.

In our study, we focused explicitly on the role of *guanxi* in PI practices. Notwithstanding the fact that a few researchers have started to provide insights and tools that enrich our apprehension of *guanxi* (e.g. Bian & Huang, 2015; Xie & Postiglione, 2016), a systematic understanding of the concept is yet to be developed. We have used our interview data with parents and teachers from rural areas to build upon existing field research, which focused on the ways in which parents' *guanxi* networks may be implicated in the production of educational inequality and social inclusion.

In our study, we found that parents tend to develop strategies to be involved in the educational processes of their children in their homes, in schools, and in the communities through their g*uanxi* networks. Our study suggests the *guanxi* networks are homogeneous with respect to SES. All parents in our sample talked about using kinships partly because familiar ties are the most important *guanxi* relations for PI. This is in line with the scholarly work of Luo (2011), who articulated that, in general, parents choose instrumental exchange partners according to the degree of familiarity.

However, we found that low SES parents were more likely to use kinships to take care of the children because of the financial pressure they experience by being unemployed or because they lack time to be involved in their children's ECEC. When confronted with a need, low SES parents would strategically make use of the kinships to create social connections with the teachers of their children. This does not mean that high SES parents do not have financial or time constraints, but it suggests that they are more often able to be involved in their children's ECEC compared to low SES parents. Interestingly, our study also suggests that

high SES parents have more 'useful' social networks for their children's education: the high SES parents in our study highlighted the importance of colleagues and friends in obtaining information about their children in *youeryuan*. This was not the case for the lower SES parents. Moreover, a recurrent finding in our study was that parents' *guanxi* networks link parents of *youeryuan* peers. This outcome is contrary to that of Horvat et al. (2003) who found that it is in fact a middle-class phenomenon.

Remarkably, the parents in our study would extend their *guanxi* networks and strategically use *guanxi* from higher SES for their child's education, which contrasts the finding that families in rural areas may have poorer *guanxi* networks and are often in disadvantaged conditions (Xie & Postiglione, 2016). Our finding seems to confirm that parents are not passive recipients in their children's education. This means that parents do make efforts for their children's education by adopting strategies to widen and to improve their *guanxi* network for their children's educational benefit. This 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). When low SES parents prefer to turn to someone beyond their *guanxi* network, it may well place them in a disadvantaged position because of a lack of economic capital. The complexity of the *guanxi* network therefore challenges us, then, to figure out what kind of *guanxi* can be most confidently reported and how various kinds of educational resources provided by parents can be exchanged for their child (Ream & Palardy, 2008), as well as how inequality questions relating to *guanxi* are posed.

6.3 Discussion and concluding reflections

As noted by Guo et al. (2018), the view of Chinese teachers' on the role of parents as well as on their relationship with parents is largely absent in current research, especially with regard to the field of ECEC. To address this knowledge gap, the present study used a sample of parents and teachers in rural China to explore their perceptions and to illuminate the various conceptualisations of PI teachers and parents hold by looking into their behaviors and reasoning. Indeed, when studying the conceptualisations of PI in ECEC, it is not possible to separate the reasons why parents are involved from what parents actually do (Choi, 2017; Kim, An, Kim & Kim, 2018). We were straightforward in our assertion of the importance to rethink the conceptualisations of PI and to make the voices of teachers and parents in disadvantaged areas heard. Consistent with the literature (e. g. Crozier, 2001; Lareau, 1987; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006;

Tobin, 1995, 2009), our study shows that the sociocultural background of both teachers and parents affect the interaction between them and influences how parents are viewed and thus how the process of PI is constructed.

As argued in chapters two and three, parental involvement in the early years may continue to promote later school success, regardless of children's background characteristics (Hartas, 2015; Miede & Reynolds, 1999). This coincides with an emphasis on parents' responsibility in today's neoliberal Western society and Chinese society in which parents need to be aware of the considerable influence they have on their child's learning and later life chances. Consequently, schools should reinforce the assumption that 'all parents matter' and contribute to the realization of an effective PI (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Martin & Vincent, 1999; OECD, 2012; Tveit, 2009; Urban et al., 2011).

Our literature study also suggests that PI is seen as an important driver for children's academic success and an "equalizer" of educational opportunities. We found that in practice, the expression of the voice of parents is often controlled and restricted. As Vandenbroeck and colleagues (2013) state, parents see this kind of involvement as unsatisfactory. However, PI activities often tend to ignore the culturally specific perspectives of minority populations. The quest for PI and the limited ways in which parents can actually participate as well as the exclusion of minority groups create a paradox: while PI claims to be a remedy against school failure, it seems that the very concept of PI may very well contribute to widening the educational gap.

In this study, we have linked family socioeconomic status with the early learning of children and *guanxi* networks, as well as PI in ECEC. Previous research that focused on low SES parents' school involvement has often been problem-oriented towards parents, stereotyping them as unable to be involved in their child's education (Durand & Perez, 2013; Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Miede & Reynolds, 1999). Our study suggests that the teachers' views of rural parents may cause them to have difficulty working with some parents. However, our analysis also shows that while teachers tend to look at rural parents in a very negative way, parents themselves view teachers in a particularly positive way. When rural parents communicate with teachers, they try to conform to the teachers' expectations. This means that it is solely the teacher who defines how the interaction with parents unfolds. As such, the unidirectional way in which the cooperation between parents and the *youeryuan* is arranged can produce the very problems it claims to solve (e.g. missing voices of parents). Yotyodying et al. (2020) found that parents consider a welcoming

and inviting culture and respectful communication as important assets to be involved in the school. From this point of view, it is important to look for the most appropriate ways for every parent to be involved in the education of his/her child in a meaningful way, considering parents as partners of teachers (Kohl, Lengua & McMahon, 2000; Swick & Freeman, 2004; Vandenbroeck, De Stercke & Gobeyn, 2013; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017). Central to this is the issue of communication between ECEC staff and parents, which is a particular example of a more general difficulty of dialogue across power differences (Tobin, Arzubiaga & Mantovani, 2007). This is especially true in a Chinese society where respect for teachers is of paramount importance, especially for low SES parents in rural China.

Our study suggests that low SES parents are less likely to initiate a relationship with the teachers than high SES parents. This does not mean that they do not seek the teacher's advice when their children have problems in the *youeryuan* or in the family. On the contrary, they do this even more than high SES parents, as they expect their children to be deferential to the teacher. We found that low SES parents find it more difficult to complement the play-based learning in school and they experience several barriers that hinder them to send their children to extracurricular interest-oriented classes. As such, a play-based, child-centered approach that is highly valued in contemporary ECEC, may potentially disadvantage families who are unfamiliar with this pedagogy. In this sense, school activities, which in fact have been institutionalized to involve parents, too often ignore the needs of underrepresented groups who are unfamiliar with the school's expectations (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Indeed, conceptualisations of PI have been criticized for ignoring the diversity of values and perspectives associated with a diversity of parents (Scott-Jones, 1984; Van Laere, Van Houtte &Vandenbroeck, 2018; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016; Wong & Hughes, 2006).

The implication of not considering the diversity of parents might be narrowing the plurality of teachers' and parents' roles (Tveit, 2009). In practice, working with parents from diverse backgrounds who have limited time, financial problems, and varying expectations for their child's ECEC has proven to be particularly challenging (Oke, Butler & O'Neill, 2020). Evidently, the collaboration between parents and teachers is not likely to go well if it is based on the assumption that parents who are not involved lack cultural capital to provide adequate home learning environments for their children, or that they are not able to be involved in their children's schooling in the first place (Lee & Bowen, 2006). An acceptance of reciprocity and diversity can only partially lead to a better understanding of the concepualisations of PI. The question is not, whether the

conceptualisations of PI in ECEC are culture- and class-bound (for of course they are), but rather what can we do to widen the perceptions to a multiplicity of perspectives on what is good for children (Tobin, 1995)?

Referring back to Lareau's (1987) theory of social and cultural reproduction in home-school relations, one prominent question arises: Can policies and practices disrupt the logic of cultural capital in home-school relations? (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002). Whilst reducing educational inequality and improving the educational achievement of disadvantaged children can be partly addressed by PI (Hartas, 2015; Hong, Zhu, Wu & Li, 2020), these issues are less likely to be solved without figuring out the fundamental causes of inequality such as the urban-rural dual structure, inequality of opportunities and outcome, and lack of equalization in the distribution of educational resources, as well as an imbalanced development of ECEC services in the Eastern, Central, and Western regions of China.

6.4 Limitations and recommendations for further research

Whereas our study contributes to a more in-depth understanding of the various ways in which PI can be conceptualized, there are a few limitations worth mentioning. We also formulate some recommendations for future research.

A first limitation concerns the literature study. Considering the overwhelming and increasing amount of literature, we limited our selection to the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and China National Knowledge Internet (CNKI). Although this is a reasonable choice, restricting our review to the SSCI and CNKI may entail a biased view. When we refer to 'published' articles, it needs to be recognised that there are of course many research results that remain unpublished (Rosenthal, 1979). As we found in our literature review, within the SSCI, a cross-country coverage (specifically regarding non-English speaking countries), is questionable. Moreover, when we included the articles, a pragmatic criterion was the availability of articles in languages that are accessible to the researchers (English and Chinese). As a consequence, although our findings do reflect existing assumptions in the dominant literature, they cannot be generalized to all countries or cultures. Nevertheless, some gaps have been identified that may call for further elaboration on reciprocity, diversity, and multiplicity in future research on the home-school relationship. An interesting pathway for future research would be to explore the relations between

perceptions of parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in marginalized countries and the dominating assumptions in the literature.

Our literature study suggests that parents seem to be instrumentalised as objects of policy intervention and share the responsibility of educating children. In order to understand parents' own perceptions of the responsibility of educating children, future research may investigate what teachers' perceptions and policies in ECEC may mean for parents. We found that ideas on including more parents in preschool as a means to decreasing achievement gaps caused by socioeconomic and racial or ethnic disparities, may challenge the proclaimed 'including more parents' by holding a deficit view on disadvantaged parents. We therefore advocate that future research takes on a more systemic approach towards PI that explores how parents experience the process of exclusion rather than inclusion. This also suggests it would be interesting to research how PI in the context of unequal power dynamics may affect inclusive practices for a diversity of children, families, and communities. 'Readying for school' is often believed to be a rationale of PI in the scholarly work. Future research needs to elaborate on this, showing how this kind of perception influences ECEC and how parents perceive it by giving voice to parents themselves.

A second limitation concerns the research sample. The data in this study were obtained from a relatively small number of parents and teachers from six *youeryuan* in rural China, mainly in eastern China. As such, this research represents but a small number of the various perceptions parents and teachers might hold about their relationship in ECEC. Moreover, our study is geographically focused on one region of China, which makes it impossible to understand our findings without taking the context into account. Thus, it is not clear whether the results can be generalized broadly to middle and western China, nor that the identified practices will be effective with parents whose children do not have access to *youeryuan*. Another issue with the sample is the fact that the participants are ethnically homogeneous, and that all of them identify as *han*, which is only one of the 56 ethnic groups in China (but accounts for over 91% of the total population). As such, the extent to which our findings can be generalized to the other 55 minorities is not clear. Further, our sample predominantly consists of mothers and female teachers who wanted to participate, which may have resulted in gender-biased data. Lastly, our sample is not necessarily representative of the rural population of the whole of rural China.

However, our study aims to unravel insider-perspectives and create in-depth knowledge, which is why a small sample is somewhat inevitable. Moreover, because the fact that it is not generalizable lies in the nature of our methodology, to some extent the small sample is not really a weakness.

To address the limitations concerning the sample, future research could engage a more diverse group of rural parents, teachers, and children and investigate how parental involvement differs among them. Future studies might explore constructs of PI in culturally and ethnically diverse populations. It would be interesting to give more focused attention to parents with a migrant background and examine not only the perceptions of parents and teachers but to also explore children's reports about the dynamics of the home-school relations. Although we conducted one focus group interview with migrant parents, both broader and deeper studies on the perceptions of migrant parents and left-behind parents (mostly mothers who migrated without their child's fathers and who take responsibility of their children) whose children attend a *youeryuan* are needed to fully understand the challenges of 'being involved in schooling'. Given the fact that grandparents (who can be regarded as a part of *guanxi* networks of parents) share the responsibility for childrearing in contemporary China, further research could employ multiple measures and multiple participants to explore the mechanism of grandparent involvement in schools in rural China (Luo et al., 2020). Also, considering the significant role school principals (*yuanzhang*) potentially play in policy-making and creating supportive conditions in relation to PI in school, their views on parents and ECEC should be studied further. Lastly, further research might also explore the perspective of (local) policymakers on PI, because they determine the educational policies and curriculum, which are applied universally in all schools across the county. Remarkably, discussion of issues such as freedom, creativity, discipline, and parental involvement in ECEC can be multicultural and socially changeable. Therefore, it is important to employ comparative historical designs in cross-cultural studies of parent-teacher relations to examine potential patterns in both cultural and social fields.

A third limitation worth noting concerns the research methods. Our data were mainly collected through focus group interviews and were not combined with other sources of data collection. As such, our understanding of the parent-teacher relationship in ECEC stems from an in-depth exploration of perceptions of parents and teachers alone. It could be interesting to complement the interview data with e.g. site visits or observations of parents' efforts to be involved at home and at school and of teachers' efforts to involve parents in the schooling of the child (Epstein, Galindo & Sheldon, 2011). Indeed, although our

study unraveled various ways in which teachers and parents perceive PI, the extent to which parents' and teachers' perceptions actually play out in practice is still unknown. Further longitudinal research is required to understand the practical implications of conceptualisations of PI in ECEC. Moreover, it is worthwhile to mention that travel was restricted because of the COVID-19 pandemic and hence it was not possible for us to go back to the country to complement the data. Also, as it was impossible to ask for feedback from the parents and teachers in our study, interpretations of their discussions could not be checked back with them.

As our data were collected in a limited time span and from a *youeryuan* with diverse populations, it is possible to draw initial insights about the relations between parents' conceptualisations of involvement and social inclusion. However, future research should include return visits to the *youeryuan* and parents to test the results reported in the study. During our study, we were particularly concerned about inequalities and power relations that surround Chinese rural parents' involvement. Our study reveals some interesting topics such as educational anxiety, *tinghua* and *guanxi*. We also uncover some differences between low SES parents and high SES parents regarding these topics. However, future research should not only focus on the analysis of parents' and teachers' voices but also pay attention to the question why parents' and teachers' voices about that what is good for children is that they perceive. Although we tried to create conditions that would allow as many parents and teachers as possible to get acquainted with the researchers and feel comfortable to speak up in the focus group interviews, it is possible that some parents and teachers would have said more if they had been given more time or if they had come together in smaller groups. Future research might include individual interviews to help participants open up more. Further, an important topic that emerges from this study that has not been studied systematically is the relations of *Guanxi*, parental involvement, and Chinese culture. Thus, additional research is needed on this.

With regard to the position of the researcher, it needs to be recognised that doing this research is not a totally neutral process for several reasons: first, we had gained a preliminary understanding of the conceptualisations of parental involvement through the literature review before engaging with the participants. Second, the researcher's position, a Chinese female scholar studying at a Western university, is one that places respect for diversity and attention to disadvantaged groups and social inequality in ECEC first. Although co-researchers involved in data-collecting, data-analysing, and discussing the

findings strengthened the reliability of the insights we gained, the research was undoubtedly affected by this. However, as described in chapter one, the researcher's position was an invaluable asset in relation to elaborating and conducting the doctoral study. In future research, more attention should be paid to how researchers' personal stance influences the research process, as doing research is never a neutral process.

6.5 Implications for practice and policy

In the following, we elaborate some implications that emerge from our research findings. We formulate recommendations for policy and practice, and structure these according to different stakeholder groups, including management and teachers, as well as central, regional, and school level policy-makers.

6.5.1 Avenues for practice

An extensive body of research indicates that many aspects of schools can be redesigned to be more inclusive of PI (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Lasky, 2000). However, parents in general and disadvantaged parents in particular are found to be hesitant to speak up in discussions with teachers, because they are afraid to offend their children's teachers and thereby provoke teachers' anger and retaliation (Tobin et al., 2013). In our study, most of the examples of involvement showed that parents were unilaterally expected to support the *youeryuan*'s work. Also, *youeryuan* offered workshops and lectures on ECEC to convince parents of the value of *youeryuan*'s strategies. Our study sheds light on the ignorance in setting up dialogical spaces for rural parents and teachers in practice, which had had not been explored before. This calls for a collaborative relationship that embraces multiplicity of perspectives on what is good for children, instead of school-centered practices. Especially in the context of parents and teachers with different perceptions in relation to learning, it is recommended that teachers and managers of *youeryuan* become more attentive when they work with parents. It should be noted that because of China's long 'respect for teachers (*zunshi zhongdao*)' tradition, some parents tend to follow the teachers' advice and comply with *youeryuan* standards. The idea of *zunshi zhongdao* as well as parents' compliance with *youeryuan* standards do not contribute to dialoguing with parents. There is a need to rethink parent-teacher relations from a sociocultural perspective, instead of blaming parents when they do not speak up.

For teachers, dialoguing with parents is a process that takes time and cannot be achieved overnight (Tobin et al., 2013). Before parents can speak up and be heard in a meaningful way in *youeryuan*, teachers need to get to know parents, recognize their common interests, and become a community, rather than a collection of individual voices (Tobin, 2009). Moreover, teachers should change their negative views on disadvantaged parents and recognize the advantages of parents and teachers working collaboratively (Pena, 2000). In addition, teachers' ability to communicate with parents and meet their needs in a respectful and non-judgmental way is of utmost importance for involving parents in schooling (Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). The fact that lower SES parents are less capable of initiating connections with teachers and have less useful *guanxi*, raises the question how to understand and connect with every parent and how to include parents in children's education in meaningful ways. We therefore recommend that teachers become more attentive to lower SES families' needs and are actually held responsible for responding to these. Teachers invest in a constant dialogue with parents which gives them an insight into the social and cultural context in which children grow up and which allows teachers to consider the family's perspective in their pedagogical actions (Vandenbroeck, et al., 2015).

For the *youeryuan* managers, if they value parents as partners in the education of the child, opportunities should be created where the voices of parents and teachers regarding school policy and curriculum are heard and equally valued (Barge & Loges, 2003). *Youeryuan* should become more responsive to and supportive of families, children, and communities by consciously developing partnerships based on mutual accountability and responsibility (Noguera, 2001). In this respect, efforts in creating opportunities for joint activities, problem solving, and dialogue in which parents and teachers can learn and understand their different perspectives and develop a shared vision can be made by the *youeryuan* (Price-Mitchell, 2009). Meaningful relationships where both parents and teachers are valued seem to be founded upon effective two-way communication where both parties' needs and views are respected (Oke, Butler & O'Neill, 2020). A new paradigm of parental involvement that respects cultural diversity, acknowledges the strengths of every family, and makes place for diverse modes of participation should replace the current deficit model in which parents who are not involved in their children's school activities (set up by the school itself) are considered problematic and in need of remedial training (Kim, An, Kim & Kim, 2018).

6.5.2 Avenues for policy

In China as well as in other countries, the central policy development of PI has to be part of a broader project which gives space to diversity and difference to continuously explore equality-producing processes (Lamont & Pierson, 2019). *Youeryuan working rules* point out that 'ECEC should include various games and interesting activities. *Youeryuan* should communicate with and listen to parents' opinions (The Ministry of Education, 2016). However, the rules from the central government seem to be rather unidirectional in nature and formed in a top-down approach without listening to teachers, school managers, and parents. We therefore recommend to develop an inclusive approach to the region- and school-level stakeholders' perceptions. Also, the central policies as steering documents guiding regional policies and local school development, ways of regulating (private and public) *youeryuan* and increasing the number of high-quality ECEC teachers in rural areas should be legitimized. Since PI in ECEC concerns children's development, parents' rights to know what is happening in *youeryuan*, and the preschools' development, a broader scope with reference to other policies is necessary. For example, increasing PI can be supported by legitimizing that the employer should give enough time to parents to participate in *youeryuan*, which is within the scope of economic policy domains and outside the scope of educational policy. The regional policy on PI and ECEC has mainly been directed towards decreasing the gaps between rural and urban *youeryuan* and tends to neglect the context of rural areas. Ideas like 'The rural areas follow the cities' and 'Maximum urbanization of ECEC in rural areas' (Xu, 2017), were spelled out in some regional policies. Even though the investment in rural areas has been increasing, these regional policies still established a 'city-based fund allocation' (Hebei Provincial Department of Finance, 2020). As the rural regions are different in many ways, and the family is itself an important context but is embedded in other contexts (Scott-Jones, 1984), more attention should be given to how these policies relate to the actual living conditions of rural parents as well as preschools in rural areas that are in need of support. In doing so, regional policy-makers can become aware of the risks of decontextualization, marginalizing specific groups of children and parents, and reducing them to objects of intervention, rather than seeing them as meaning-makers in the educational debate (Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie, 2006).

On the level of school policy, schools claim to include more teachers and parents in the debate on what is good for children. Listening to the voices and perspectives of ECEC teachers is one piece of the larger need to listen to the voices of the children, families, and communities they serve (Adair, Tobin &

Arzubiaga, 2012). However, when teachers work with parents in rural areas, the methods teachers use may very well be to silence some of them. PI can refer to very different types of activities (White, Taylor & Moss, 1992). Some parents perceive teachers as experts in children's ECEC, therefore they are less likely to engage in a Western model of white, middle-class partnership, however, they make strenuous efforts to support their children's education (Whitmarsh, 2011). Chinese parents' high expectations and anxiety about education may foster their motivation to get involved (Wang, Deng & Yang, 2016). Unless parents and teachers discuss the differences regarding PI and early learning in meaningful ways and create some kind of consensus about these issues, it will be difficult to foster significant PI (Barge & Loges, 2003). It is important to acknowledge that when parents do not speak up this does not mean that they don't have different opinions. Considering China's context, it is important to develop spaces where rural contexts are taken into account and where parents, teachers, and school policymakers can interact, negotiate and resist.

6.6 References

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English Summary

(De)constructing parental involvement in early childhood education and care in rural China

There is a growing attention for parent involvement in education in general and in early childhood education in particular. However, the vast majority of scholarly literature originates from English language countries. This doctoral research leads to a deeper understanding of diverse conceptualisations of parent-teacher relations focusing on a group that is underrepresented in academia. The proposed research aims to reveal the conceptualizations of parental involvement in ECEC from the dominant literature and from the perception of parents and teachers in rural China, calling on them to speak up beyond the taken-for-granted assumptions of the relationship between school and family.

In Chapter 1, we problematize the unidimensional perspective of current practices and research. The doctoral study can be regarded as a multi-perspective analysis of parental involvement in ECEC by examining the research questions:

- How is parental involvement in ECEC conceptualized by the academic literature?

- How do parents and teachers in rural China perceive parental involvement?

- How do parents' conceptualizations of parental involvement facilitate or hinder social inclusion?

The first chapter also sketches the educational context in China and contextualises ECEC in rural China. It explains the qualitative methodology of the study, the research process, the position of the researcher, and ethical considerations. The research consists of three sub-studies: a literature search on parental involvement in English scholarly literature; an analysis of Chinese scholarly literature; and focus groups with parents and teachers in rural China.

In Chapter 2, *Beyond the veil of parents: deconstructing the concept of parental involvement in early childhood education and care,* the first sub-study is reported, analyzing the concepts of parental involvement in the English literature and it analyzes how parents are viewed within current conceptualizations of parental involvement. The study shows that parents are seldom included in the

conceptualization of parental involvement. We found parental involvement was perceived as a school-oriented concept. We question the in/exclusion of minority groups and the (missing) parents' voice in the conceptualisations. Parental involvement tends to be instrumentalized as a means for promoting academic success and as an 'equalizer' of inequalities. The chapter also discusses the lack of knowledge about how parents of heterogeneous cultural and socioeconomic groups perceive their involvement and relationships with teachers.

Chapter 3, *Conceptualisations of parent involvement in early childhood education in China*, is a report of the second sub-study, focusing on how parental involvement in China is perceived by academia. It sheds a critical light on the monoculturalism of parent involvement in a multicultural world and on the globalization influences on China. In the findings, we identify four analytical lines: the rationales for parent involvement; the implementation of parent involvement; *guanxi* and social inclusion; and the meaning of early childhood education. This chapter also highlights that Chinese and Western papers seem to share a common conceptualization of parent involvement as instrumentalized for children's school success. We also discuss that it is necessary to look at nuances that are embedded in specific cultural, political, and geographical historicities.

The next two chapters give an account of the focus groups. In chapter 4, *What parents and teachers say about their relationships in ECEC: a study in rural China*, captures both the parents' and teachers' perspectives on the meaning of *youeryuan* (preschool or kindergarten) and on the relationships between homes and schools in *Qingyuan*, a rural area in China. This chapter presents that despite profound changes in the social class structures, the inhabitants of rural areas are at the bottom of the Chinese society. In China's policy, accessible, high-quality ECEC provision is regarded as a way to address the demographic challenges of the urban-rural dichotomy. We used focus groups to give voice to marginalized groups. Five overarching themes are analyzed: *Xiguan* (a Chinese conception related to social capital) formation as the dominant rationale; Diverse concepts about learning; Teacher's negative views about parents; Parent's positive views about teachers; Pedagogicalization of parents. We also highlight the need for listening to parents on their view on what is good for children and in doing so, we contribute to diversifying the voices in the international debates about parental involvement, as well as the debates on what ECEC is about.

In chapter 5, *Parental involvement in early childhood education and care: exploring parents' perspectives in rural China*, we look at how parental involvement varies by social class and ethnicity and we also present the

challenge ahead by articulating that social structure in China is becoming less mobilizable and by introducing a pathological form of so-called parental anxiety about their children's education. In the findings, educational anxiety, parents' attempts to connect with the teacher, *guanxi*; and *tinghua* were articulated. The chapter confirms that parents in rural China perceive parent involvement in different ways, according to their social class. Our study suggests that how parental involvement in rural China is conceptualized, paradoxically may contribute to the inequality that it aims to counteract and therefore may need further exploration.

Chapter 6 concludes this doctoral study with discussions and reflections on the research findings: parents as objects of intervention, the multiplicity of perspectives on what is good for children, *Guanxi* and inequality in parent involvement in ECEC. We also highlight that the educational inequality and the educational gaps caused by SES or ethnicity are less likely to be met without figuring out the fundamental causes of inequality such as the urban-rural dual structure and inequality of opportunities and outcome. In the chapter, we also discuss the limitations and suggestions for further research as well as implications for practice and policy in China.

Nederlandstalige samenvatting

Ouderbetrokkenheid in de voorschoolse voorzieningen in ruraal China (de)construeren

Ouderbetrokkenheid in het algemeen en in de voorschoolse voorzieningen in het bijzonder krijgt steeds meer aandacht. Maar de academische publicaties hierover komen haast uitsluitend uit Engelstalige landen. Met ons onderzoek willen we inzicht verwerven in de diversiteit van conceptualiseringen van de ouder-leraar[1] relaties en leggen we de nadruk op een groep die zelden in onderzoek opgenomen wordt. Ons onderzoek gaat de conceptualsiering van ouderbetrokkenheid na in de dominante literatuur zowel als vanuit het perspectief van ouders en leraren in landelijk China en het geeft dezen zo een stem die verder gaat dan de courante aannames over ouder-school relaties.

Het eerste hoofdstuk problematiseert het eendimensionale perspectief van heel wat onderzoek en praktijk. Ons onderzoek kan eerder beschouwd worden als een multi-perspectivistische analyse van ouderbetrokkeneheid in de voorschoolse voorzieningen en meer bepaald van volgende onderzoeksvragen:

- Hoe wordt ouderbetrokkenheid geconceptualiseerd in de Engelstalige academische literatuur?

- Hoe wordt de ouder-leraar relatie geconceptualiseerd in de Chinese academische literatuur?

- Hoe conceptualsieren ouders en leraren in landelijk China de ouderbetrokkenheid?

- Hoe beïnvloeden of hinderen deze ouderlijke conceptualiseringen de sociale inclusie?

Het eerste hoofdstuk schetst de onderwijscontext in China en contextualiseert de Chinese kleuterschool. Het legt de kwalitatieve methodologie uit, het verloop van het onderzoek, de positie van de onderzoekster, en de ethische beschouwingen. Het onderzoek bestaat uit drie deelstudies: een analyse van de

[1] We gebruiken de term “leraar” naar analogie van het Engelstalige “teacher”, dat vaak generiek gebruikt wordt voor alle vormen van voorschoolse voorzieningen.

Engelstalige academische literatuur; een analyse van de Chinese academische literatuur; en een reeks focusgroepen met ouders en leraren in ruraal China.

Hoofdstuk 2 (*Beyond the veil of parents: deconstructing the concept of parental involvement in early childhood education and care)*, geeft het eerste deelonderzoek weer: een analyse van de conceptualisering van ouderbetrokkenheid in de Engelstalige academische literatuur. Dit deelonderzoek toont dat ouders zelden betrokken worden bij de conceptualisering van wat hun betrokkenheid inhoudt. Ouderbetrokkenheid wordt doorgaans gezien vanuit een school-perspectief. We stellen de afwezigheid van minderheidsgroepen in vraag evenals het ontbreken van hun stem in de conteptualiseringen. Ouderbetrokkenheid wordt doorgaans geïnstrumentaliuseerd als een middel om schools succes te promoten en als een remedie tegen onderwijsongelijkheid. We bespreken tot slot ook het gebrek aan kennis over hoe heterogene culturele en socio-economische groepen kijken naar hun relatie tot leraren.

Hoofdstuk 3 (C*onceptualisations of parent involvement in early childhood education in China)* is een verslag van het tweede deel-onderzoek over hoe de Chinese academische literatuur naar ouderbetrokkenheid kijkt. Het werpt een kritisch licht op het monoculturele van ouderbetrokkenheid in een multiculturele wereld en op de tendenzen van globalisering in China. We analyseren vier grote thema's in de Chinese literatuur: de rationale van ouderbetrokkenheid; de implementatie van ouderbetrokkenheid; *guanxi* en sociale inclusie; en de betekenis van voorschoolse voorzieningen. Het hoofdstuk toont dat Engelstalige en Chinese academische publicaties er een gemeenschappelijke conceptualisering van ouderbetrokkenheid op na houden, namelijk als een instrumentalisering voor het schoolsucces van de kinderen. We bespreken tot slot de noodzaak om nuancereingen in acht te nemen die verbonden zijn met specifieke culturele, politieke, en gepgrafische geschiedenissen.

De volgende twee hoofdstukken handelen over de focugroepen. Hoofdstuk 4 (*What parents and teachers say about their relationships in ECEC: a study in rural China*) onderzoekt de perspectieven van ouders en leraren op de *youeryuan* (de Chinese kleuterschool) en op de relaties tussen thuis en school in *Qingyuan* (een locatie in landelijk China). Het hoofdstuk legt uit dat de inwoners van landelijk China nog steeds tot de onderlaag van de samenleving behoren, ondanks diepgaande veranderingen in de sociale structuren. Toegankelijke kleuerscholen van goede kwaliteit worden door het Chinese beleid beschouwd als een middel om de demografische uitdagingen aan te gaan

en de kloof tussen stedelijke en rurale gebieden te overbruggen. In deze context gebruikten we focusgroepen om een stem te geven aan gemarginaliseerde groepen. Vijf grote thema's kwamen naar voor: het verwerven van *Xiguan* (een Chinees concept voor sociaal kapitaal) als een dominante legitimering; diverse concepten van wat 'leren' is; negatieve oordelen van leraren over ouders; en positieve oordelen van ouders over leraren. We benadrukken het belang van het luisteren naar ouders over wat zij denken dat goed is voor hun kinderen en hebben op die manier bijgedragen tot het diversifiëren van de stemmen in het debat over ouderbetrokkenheid, zowel als in de discussie over waar de voorschoolse voorzieningen toe dienen.

Hoofdstuk 5 (*Parental involvement in early childhood education and care: exploring parents' perspectives in rural China*) bestudeert hoe ouderbetrokkenheid varieert naargelang de sociale klasse en de ethniciteit en op die manier tonen we de uitdagingen die gepaard gaan met het feit dat de sociale mobiliteit stokt en met de opkomst van een pathologische ouderlijke angst over de opvoeding van hun kinderen. De resultaten tonen volgende thema's: ouderlijke angst; pogingen van ouders om verbindingen met de leraar te maken; *guanxi*, en *tinghua*. Het hoofdstuk stelt dat ouders in landelijk China verschillende opvattingen hebben over ouderbetrokkenheid en dat die verschillen lopen langs sociaal-economische lijnen. De manier waarop ouderbetrokkenheid is geconceptualiseerd kan – paradoxaal – bijdragen aan de ongelijkheid die ze net wil voorkomen.

Hoofdstuk 6 besluit dit proefschrift met een discussie en met reflecties op de resultaten: ouders als object van interventie; de meervoudigheid van perspectieven op wat goed is voor kinderen; *quanxi* en de ongelijkheid inzake ouderbetrokkenheid. We benadrukken dat de onderwijsongelijkheid en de onderwijskloof die gelieerd is met de sociaal-economische status moeiljk kunnen bestreden worden zonder een meer diepgaande analyse van de duale structuur van stad versus platteland en de ongelijkheid van kansen en uitkomsten. We bespreken tot slot de beperkingen van ons onderzoek en geven suggesties voor verder onderzoek, evenals implicaties voor praktijk en beleid in China.

Data Storage Fact Sheets

Data Storage Fact Sheet (chapter 4)
Name/identifier study : What parents and teachers say about their
relationships in ECEC: a study in rural China
Author: Yan Li
Date: 28/01/2021
1. Contact details
==========
1a. Main researcher

- name: Yan Li
- address: Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent
- e-mail: Yan.Li@UGent.be
1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Michel Vandenbroeck
- address: Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent
- e-mail: Michel.Vandenbroeck@UGent.be
If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.
2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies
==========
* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:
Li, Y., Li, J., Devlieghere, J., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2020). What parents and teachers say about their relationships in ECEC: a study in rural China. European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 28(3), 332-348. DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2020.1755489
Li, Y. (2021). (De)constructing parental involvement in early childhood education and care in rural China (Doctoral Dissertation).

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?: The sheet applies to all the data used in the publication
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Data Storage Fact Sheet (chapter 5)
Name/identifier study : Parental involvement in early childhood education and care: exploring parents' perspectives in rural China
Author: Yan Li
Date: 28/01/2021
1. Contact details
==========
1a. Main researcher

- name: Yan Li
- address: Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent
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1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Michel Vandenbroeck
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- e-mail: Michel.Vandenbroeck@UGent.be
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* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:
Li, Y., Devlieghere, J., Li, J., & Vandenbroeck, M. (for submission to Journal of Child and Family Studies). Parental involvement in early childhood education and care: exploring parents' perspectives in rural China.
Li, Y. (2021). (De)constructing parental involvement in early childhood education and care in rural China (Doctoral Dissertation).
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  - [X] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: See the findings part in the study and the dissertation.
  - [X] files(s) containing information about informed consent: A blank copy is saved on my PC.
  - [X] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions: Research protocol was approved by the Ethical Committee of Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (reference 2019/34)
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* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without
intervention of another person)?
  - [X] main researcher
  - [X] responsible ZAP
  - [ ] all members of the research group
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