

Conceptualisations of Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Education in China

Yan Li¹⁾

Ghent University

Michel Vandenbroeck

Ghent University

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.

Key words : parent involvement, early childhood education, Chinese culture, social inclusion.

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ yan.li@ugent.be

On the Monoculturalism of Parent Involvement in a Multicultural World

Ever since the much-cited Coleman 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 and in policy (European Commission, 2018; Janssen & Vandenbroeck 2018; Van Laere, Van Houtte, & Vandenbroeck, 2018). Parental involvement 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 conceptualizations, parent involvement 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). In today's China, parent involvement has become a priority in policy documents. 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). Since 220 BC, 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. 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). 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).

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 time (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 are congruent with the needs of marketization and globalization of economy and constructions of the good citizen. The diffusion of the Coleman Report, 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 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 socio-economic disparities in countries. In China, disadvantaged parents are to be found in agrarian rural areas. 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.

Literature Review

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 31st, December, 1990 and 31st, December, 2017 and this resulted in 25 English language 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.

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.

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 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:

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 and Ma (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, 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), favoring school-family relationship and contributing to educational equity and social harmony (as a social dimension) (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. 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. 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).

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, 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, 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, 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).

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.

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.

***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 strengthen 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 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.

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 (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. 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.

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.

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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