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## Researching the Everyday Educational Lives of Low-Income Families: The Importance of Researcher and Participant Contexts

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*ABSTRACT:* This paper highlights the importance of considering both researcher and participant contexts when exploring everyday educational lives. It emerges during a period of increasing and sustained social inequality in England, and against a backdrop of increasingly tight research timeframes and resources in higher education. Drawing on a project engaging low-income families in Greater London, the paper takes the everyday as its conceptual focus and questions how we can be critically attentive to everyday educational lives if we struggle to access and develop research relationships with particular social groups. We offer empirical insight into the hesitations towards, and avoidances of, research participation that centre around knowledge, fear, and trust, and which are heightened concerns where aspects of family life, parenting, and children come to the fore. The paper considers how these can be mitigated in an academic environment where limited time and resourcing shape possibilities of research engagements and offers practical moves linked to research relationships, relevance and presence for how researchers can address these challenges to enable research to be more inclusive.

*Keywords:* inclusive research, research engagement, low-income families, research participation, parents, funding context

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights the importance of considering both researcher and participant contexts in research, and argues that this is especially vital when undertaking work that focuses on everyday educational lives. Low-income families in England find themselves in a post COVID-19 period of rising social and educational inequality (Blanden *et al.*, 2023), while higher education (HE) researchers are increasingly working with tight timeframes and limited funding (Heny and Poleykett, 2022) in an environment of financial constraint (PWC,

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2024). This paper considers the material circumstances and implications that stem from both these sets of contextual conditions to explore the challenges they create and how they shape the research process. In so doing, the paper argues for explicit recognition and discussion of how researchers can work within and through these linked contexts.

Recent research, especially that which has advanced from the COVID-19 pandemic, has demonstrated how a sense of shame can penetrate the everyday lives of families who face real and immediate struggles to ‘get by’, and is highly pertinent when, as researchers, we want to discuss with families their everyday educational lives (Wainwright and Hoskins, 2023; Wilson and McGuire, 2021, 2022). Strong’s (2021, p. 75) argument that shame exists in a ‘socio-spatial nexus’, is experienced affectively and linked to a broader politics of inequality that persists in England, is especially relevant. The COVID pandemic exacerbated existing social and educational inequalities (Darmody *et al.*, 2021), with home and family-related factors, of limited resources, capital and space, critical in deepening these (Dimopoulos *et al.*, 2021; Hoskins and Wainwright, 2023). Post pandemic, the continued loss of schooling is a current concern in England with children’s school attendance not reaching pre-COVID levels (Department for Education, 2024). This COVID context is coupled with broader socio-economic challenges, with nearly 300,000 more children plunged into absolute poverty in 2023 due to increases in the cost-of-living, leading to soaring levels of hunger and food bank use (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024).

Given these disparities, it is even more critical that researchers engage with and listen to the stories of low-income families to better understand their challenges. In particular, there is a need to consider the intersectional challenges of family poverty and the impression this has on children’s everyday learning and educational encounters beyond school – or what we refer to here as ‘everyday educational lives’ – and the importance of highlighting these in and through research. It is this need to engage all families and voices in educational research that motivated the study on which we draw here.

At the same time, and as a means of positioning ourselves, in this paper we reflect on our own limited funding and short research timeframe which required research ‘at speed’. These research conditions are not uncommon in HE but raise important questions and impose significant constraints around what type of research is possible. With an academic climate where impact and engagement are central expectations of university research, this paper queries institutional expectations of research, and how we work with both research participants and partners (Heny and Poleykett, 2022). These are ethical and moral questions which impact research integrity as well as matters of individual Research Excellence Framework<sup>1</sup> (REF) compliance. This, as we argue, impacts upon and shapes the possibilities of engaging with the everyday in educational research.

The paper employs everyday educational lives as a conceptual lens to position our research process and participant findings within the broader discourse of educational sociology that examines the intersection of social inequality and family dynamics. Our exploration of the challenges of engaging low-income families in educational research emphasises micro-level intricacies for both researchers and participants that are often overshadowed in macro-level analyses. Importantly, this conceptual lens allows us to reflect on the limits of our own researcher context to consider how we can research everyday lives and what is possible through short-term research engagements. Following a detailing of our project, we provide an extended reflection of our researcher context and the temporalities and rush of research that exist within HE and which crucially shape the potential for research. Then, by drawing on interviews with 13 low-income parents in the Greater London area, we provide empirical evidence on participant context that forms an ‘importance-reluctance’ dialectic for their being involved in research. The paper concludes with a discussion of the need to explicitly recognise these linked researcher and participant contexts to consider how we can work within and through them, and offers some practical moves for how we can best ensure research on the everyday is inclusive.

## 2. RESEARCHING EVERYDAY EDUCATIONAL LIVES

While the COVID-19 pandemic was in many ways exceptional and remarkable, this extraordinary event was folded into and became embedded in the ordinary, in the everyday, of our lives. Findings from recent studies which have extended from this period highlight the intensification of existing socio-economic disparities in educational contexts (Blaskó *et al.*, 2022; Hoskins and Wainwright, 2023; Stevano *et al.*, 2021). These studies provide a backdrop to our inquiry, reasserting focussed attention on everyday family life as individuals’ and families’ spheres of activity were scaled down, giving scholars renewed emphasis on the home and everyday life as an important arena of study (Barn *et al.*, 2023; Gammel and Wang, 2022).

Everyday life is a staple of sociological research (Kalekin-Fishman, 2013) and is heralded as a ‘key site of academic analysis’ (Pink, 2012, p. 143). It is both a theoretical concept and an object for exploration; a useful point of entry into understanding a range of subjects, including education. The growing focus on the everyday, as Pink (2012) discusses, marks an interest in what is hidden, what goes unremarked, what is very ordinary. Indeed, the everyday has too often been linked to the banal and mundane which has led to it being both overlooked in research (Neal and Murji, 2015) and considered not important by research participants (Brownlie, 2019).

More recently, this disregard has been confronted through a reappraisal of the banal and mundane (Neal and Murji, 2015) with a growing literature that

recognises how everyday life always occurs in a social context and is therefore a critical site for enquiry into normative behaviours, pressures and resistances. As Chaney (2002, p. 10) asserts, everydayness is ‘the forms of life we routinely consider unremarkable and thus take for granted’, yet it can provide rich insight into persistent social inequalities and their implications for daily life.

Research on ‘everyday austerity’ (Hall, 2014, 2019) effectively captures the everyday implications for families of the shifting of social responsibility from the state to the family, exerting material pressures and stresses. Growing rates of poverty and child poverty in the UK (Child Poverty Action Group, 2023; DWP, 2024) reiterate the need to attend to the everyday to better understand how socio-cultural factors like class, gender, ethnicity, nationality have social and material effects on everyday experiences.

The everyday is particularly important for current educational research as everyday educational experiences were scrutinised during, and have been scrutinised since, COVID-19 school closure periods, with challenges for low-income families linked to multiple factors, from provision of digital devices and reliable Wi-Fi to parents/carers perceptions that they were less equipped to teach their children at home (Weale *et al.*, 2021). Low-income families struggled significantly during this period with their available care and education choices shaped and restricted by material circumstances (Radey *et al.*, 2021; Wainwright and Hoskins, 2023). Following the pandemic, attention is being given to increased and persistent student absenteeism, with implicit attention to the role of parents/carers and what happens at home and in the everyday lives of children who are missing from the school system (McDonald *et al.*, 2023).

Education forms a large part of children’s and parents’ everyday experiences, and a sociological lens in education has directed attention to the everyday and wider lifeworlds of children beyond institutional contexts (Lee and Saltmarsh, 2023). As policy discussions of learning and education have increasingly figured around the everyday – of home-school engagement, intergenerational learning, and parental responsibility, of what goes on in the home as a form of ‘good parenting’ (see Daly, 2010; Marandet and Wainwright, 2016) – the connections and practises of education and learning beyond schooling are necessary considerations.

Education, in the form of formal schooling, therefore stretches beyond school to cut across and draw together different spaces and environments. Lee and Saltmarsh (2023, p. 3) reflect on this, calling for broader considerations of education that take the everyday seriously:

Education is ... situated at the nexus of multiple spheres that are simultaneously global and local, public and private. Within and across these spheres, the time children spend at school is but one aspect of the ebb and flow of everyday life, where school-related activities, aspirations and concerns are also embedded in the contexts of family, home and community life. (Lee and Saltmarsh, 2023, p. 3)

The permeable boundaries of these spheres render school an ‘intercontextual space’ (Marsico *et al.*, 2013) where boundary crossings between family life, policy, and wider social contexts are always occurring (Lee and Saltmarsh, 2023). In this sense, the everyday is a vital consideration for educational research as social and educational policies deeply impact everyday life for families with school-age children, and everyday experiences talk back to social and educational policy.

An expanded knowledge of the everyday must necessarily be coupled with consideration of how we research it. Research on the everyday has emerged from anthropological and sociological traditions of ethnographic research whereby longer time periods of embedded engagement with participants are considered the cornerstone of research (Hammersley, 2018). This has been pushed further with approaches that centre participatory action and emancipation, and research collaboration and co-production, as attempts to rebalance power inequalities between the researcher and the researched (see, for example, Truman *et al.*, 2000). With a focus on engaging with the everyday educational lives of low-income families, this paper explores what is possible when these elongated and time-rich processes of researching are not possible. What some researchers have called short-term ethnography (Pink and Morgan, 2013) or focused ethnographies (Knoblauch, 2005) offer useful conceptualisations for the *doing* of research and the *knowing* of participants through particular intense but short-lived research encounters. These offer useful frameworks through which to reflect on our own manoeuvrings as we engaged low-income families in a project about their own reluctances to participate in research exploring everyday educational lives. In the next section, we detail our project, which we follow with an extended reflection on the challenges of and possibilities for researching the everyday in time-limited circumstances.

### 3. RESEARCH PROJECT

Our research project was funded through a small institutional research grant and focused on the challenges of engaging low-income families in educational research.<sup>2</sup> It was undertaken in 2022 as the UK emerged from COVID lockdown periods where school closure meant that learning had been moved into the home for the majority of children. The project was directed by three research questions which required insight into everyday educational lives: 1. What are the unique barriers, challenges and issues impacting on socio-economically disadvantaged parents’/caregivers’ participation in education research? 2. How do culture, social class, gender and ethnicity influence these challenges? 3. What would support, encourage, and enable socio-economically disadvantaged parents/caregivers to take part in education research? The framing of these questions recognises that parents have been constructed as ‘policy levers’ whereby they have been encouraged to raise their voice and exercise choice

within the education system in England, as elsewhere (see Lee and Saltmarsh, 2023, p. 2), yet not all feel confident in doing so (Wilson, 2020). This emphasis also recognises that parents/carers' interest in and consent to participation determines their children's potential research involvement. Prior to commencement, the project received ethical approval from the University's ethics committee and followed BERA ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association BERA, 2024).<sup>3</sup>

Our recruitment of low-income families was based on a stratified sampling method, aimed at ensuring a diverse representation of experiences within the annual income bracket of £7400 or less after tax and before state benefits. We recognise that this operates as a crude measure that does not indicate the complexity of everyday lives and fails to capture the precarity of families who are reliant on insecure or low-paid work, and without additional financial security. However, as the project focused on education, and with a small sample size, this measure could be consistently used to draw a parallel across participants. We hoped that the interviews would expound everyday complexities to allow a more nuanced understanding of family context.

At the outset of our project, we initially accessed participants in Greater London through staff affiliated with a national charity. This approach was instrumental in establishing initial contact with the target communities. However, for several important reasons, we chose not to use these charity staff to secure participant consent or conduct the interviews. Although charity staff are trusted by the participants and could facilitate easier access, we were concerned that their involvement might influence the responses of the participants. The existing relationships between charity staff and participants might cause participants to feel pressured or biased in their responses, potentially skewing the data towards socially desirable answers rather than personal reflections. Moreover, the nature of academic interviewing requires training in neutral questioning and handling sensitive discussions, which charity staff may not possess. Ensuring the quality of data collected meant investing significant resources in training charity staff to perform these tasks to academic standards, which could be impractical within the project's time and budget constraints.

With the support of community workers, authors 2 and 3 were invited to talk to a group of parents who accessed the charity's family support sessions. With parents' agreement, authors 2 and 3 re-visited the group and conducted on-location interviews with 13 parents (12 mothers, one father – see Table 1). A study of this scale was not designed to be representative but to explore parents' understandings of research, and some of the barriers to participation in it, and hence the limitations for researchers trying to engage in everyday educational lives. Though the sample was economically homogenous, as Table 1 highlights, it was diverse in terms of ethnicity and background, with a diversity that is not uncommon in Greater London. Family size varied from 1 to 4 children, with an average of 2.3 which, compared to the national average of

Table 1. Greater London research participants

Pseudonym	Ethnicity/ background	Children
Sofia	Albanian	Four children – 21, 20, 18 and 14 years
Solana	Spanish Pakistani	Four children – 9, 7, 4 and 2 years
Rida	British Indian	One child – 6 years
Halima	North African	Four children – 17 and 16 years, and 14-year-old twins
Jemma	Ugandan	Four children – 14, 13, 5 and 3 years
Hanan	British Indian	Three children – 15, 3 and 1 years
Nuria	British Pakistani	One child – 9 years
Irina	Romanian	Two children – 1 and 2 years
Corina	Romanian	Two children – 3 and 7 years
Mandy	White British	One child – 3 months
Michelle	White British	Two children – 4-year-old twins
Aleena	British Pakistani	Two children – 2 years and 4 months
Yamil	British Pakistani	Four children – 9, 5, 7 and 2 years

1.77 dependent children per family (Office for National Statistics, 2021), gives a sample of larger families. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Participant consent was raised in the initial visit and then reiterated in the second visit prior to parent interviews. Recognising the resource and financial struggles of these families, participants were given a £50 shopping voucher as a thank you. Issues of anonymity and confidentiality were prioritised, and as discussed below, were vital in their considerations of research participation.

The research was conducted at relatively close range to the university which gave the participants some familiarity with our local location, despite some nervousness of engaging with academics. However, our reflexive approach acknowledges that our positions as university-affiliated researchers might have impacted the data collection process, possibly affecting the candidness of participants' responses. Furthermore, as researchers with our own educational, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds, we must consider how these factors shaped the interpretation of the data we collected. The dynamic interplay between our positionality and the participants' experiences necessitated an ongoing critical assessment of how our presence altered the research environment. The two researchers were positioned differently to one another and the group. Author 2 is a white British female academic of working-class background, and author 3 is an international doctoral student of Turkish heritage. While author 2 has a permanent university position, author 3 was employed on the project while working as a doctoral researcher. Author 2 is a mother, and author 3 has long standing care commitments and this was perceived to ease conversations in an environment where babies and young children were being played with,



fed, and cared for. Author 3, who uses English as her second language, was able to encourage interest from some parents who were more nervous about their own English language competence. As we highlight in the next section, the introductions made and support given by charity staff eased initial conversations and made the presence of researchers more accepted and comfortable.

Interview data was fully transcribed and transcripts analysed by the research team to enable links to be made across them. Analysis was based on a provisional framework of codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) which related to our key research aims. For this paper, the provisional codes linked to understandings of research and barriers to participation and became more focused and refined through discussion across the entire research team. Following Kvale (2012) we built verification into the research process through asking open-ended non-leading questions in the interviews and linking our data back to the extant literature.

In what follows, we consider two sets of contextual circumstances that shape the research process. The first, for us as researchers, figures around the challenges of short research timeframes with limited funding, and was a vital point of discussion through our regular project meetings, most notably in preparing for and undertaking data collection. The second, for research participants, relates to recognising the importance of educational research, but a reluctance to participate in it. As we argue, both these sets of challenges have implications for one another and the possibilities of engaging with the everyday educational lives of low-income families, and require more open and critical discussion.

#### 4. RESEARCHER CONTEXT

The first set of challenges relates to those that immediately affect researchers. The institutional funding we received had a five-month timeframe linked to the end of the financial year and cut off for research spend. Short timeframes requiring research at speed are not uncommon, but raise questions and impose constraints around what type of research is possible and is expected with such a quick turnaround.

We recognise that this context is by no means limited to our own institution, but is an example of the dominance of technocratic time in university. As Rosen (2021) argues, time is seen as an empty space onto which research activities are perceived to smoothly transverse. A temporal disconnection marks contemporary academia; technocratic time and research time are very different, and the processes of doing research are complex and take time. The *rush to* research which we all encounter, and by this we mean the need to demonstrate our research productivity (for purposes of the REF, but also for job security, promotion and other target driven agenda), becomes the *rush of* research. This is a critical element of academic capitalism that

creates tensions in the daily work of HE researchers (Ylijoki, 2003). Unless we are fortunate to win large grants with longer stretched out timeframes, or are in the position to engage in unfunded research, this does raise dilemmas about what is best. Should we do research in these time-pressured conditions?

As noted earlier, much of the literature on researching everyday lives and activities argues for and uses multi-method, ethnographic and participatory approaches (Lee and Saltmarsh, 2023; Sztompka, 2008) that require time. However, such ways of researching are not always possible or practical in context, especially as universities are experiencing a slowdown in grant funding (PWC, 2024). This raises inevitable questions about what we do and should do when they are not possible. For us, this raised considerations around the demands of our funding and the terms on which we can engage with everyday educational lives. Our decision to go ahead and to fit with the funding deadline, regardless of the rush of research, was linked to issues of urgency and engagement.

Urgency was what propelled us to apply for institutional funding in the first place; a sense that certain groups in society were being overlooked, marginalised, and not included in research. Emerging from the turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic, it seemed imperative to ensure a diversity of social and educational experiences were being considered through research. This, we argue, is a point of priority for researchers; to ensure those often referred to as 'hard to reach' are not overlooked for being too difficult to research and involve (Wilson, 2020). To enable the research to be undertaken we drew on an existing connection with a national charity which had been established through an earlier project. We were therefore relying on our close relationship with a third-sector gatekeeper in the field, rather than having the time to nurture and establish new relationships with research participants. The timeframe forced us to move beyond the 'projectification' of university research (Ylijoki, 2016) whereby research is broken down into discreet and separate project times to a more longer-term and engaged way of working.

Through the charity's support some of the challenges of recruitment were mitigated (Wilson, 2020). Here, we took heed of the scholarship on short-term ethnography (Pink and Morgan, 2013) and focused ethnographies (Knoblauch, 2005) which argue that it is possible to work ethically in shorter timeframes, and undertake swift data collection that follows ethnographic methods including observations and interviews. Our relationship with gatekeepers enabled us to be present in the field and to observe the family activities support programme the charity runs. It also enabled informal discussions with parents and practitioners, before the more formal interview stage, giving us further insight to some of the everyday challenges faced by families. It was during our second visit to the charity's family support programme that in-situ interviews were undertaken.

In terms of engagement, our time-pressed project was informed by what Phillips (2023) refers to in her critique of the tendency towards romanticising collaborative, co-produced research processes. Close relationships cannot always be forged with, nor are they always wanted by, research participants. With engagement in research sometimes, though by no means always, an emotional and affective process, not all potential research participants seek research involvement, nor are willing to expend their time in/for research. On a practical level, researchers cannot always be ‘in there’ as proponents of ethnographies would wish (Pink and Leder Mackley, 2014, p. 146). While shorter research engagements ensure close relationships cannot be forged, these are not always desired by research participants. As Hall (2014, p. 2191) notes, there are complex ‘ethics of entering, being in and then leaving the field’, and shorter-term research engagements avoid potential ethical and emotional complications that can extend from longer and repeat ethnographic encounters. Moreover, our relationship with gatekeepers held us in the position of researchers, and though they were keen to support our work, they did not themselves have the time, space or desire to become project interviewers given their own priorities and community engagements.

Our funding research constraints therefore shaped the research decisions we made and shaped our encounters in the field, and they serve as a useful reminder of the need for a reflexive approach to our own context as researchers and the implications it has for what we do.

## 5. PARTICIPANT CONTEXT

### *Everyday Realities*

The second set of challenges revolves around what came through our project findings – the importance-reluctance dialectic of participation in educational research that broaches everyday life and the place of education within it. This linked to a participant context of socio-economic disadvantage and resource limitations with challenges of constrained finances, lack of work/difficult work hours, insufficient housing and general resourcing, and a sense of not being supported:

I have just Universal Credit, child benefit . . . . My social worker helped me with the bed and washing machine. (Irina)

I think it’s a real struggle with not getting help from anywhere for anything. And having a young family it’s very, very difficult and challenging. (Hanan)

I have to think of what my kids will eat. (Solana)

Going through a PIP assessment was one of the most gruelling and worst experiences of my life . . . . I felt so dehumanised. So utterly thrown away. . . . Going through the system and being homeless, and in temporary accommodation was absolutely so harsh. (Michelle)

These everyday realities determine what is possible in terms of supporting children's at-home learning, with attention given to direct resourcing: 'they [schools] should provide us the resources' (Yamil). It is this context from which research participation is considered and often declined.

### *Recognising the Importance of Research*

In sharing these everyday realities, what emerged was recognition of research as an important and vital part of a functioning democracy and civil society with the need to take part in it and to speak up, but numerous reasons linked to circumstances why there was a reluctance to do so. This dilemma is captured in the following interview excerpts:

If people don't speak up now, how long is it going to go on for? (Mandy)

Because you're researching and you're going to find out things, which are for the better ... the people who do research, which is going to come in the end with something good and valuable. (Sofia)

My parents are immigrants to the UK; we've come from a very different culture than the British culture. Research, to me, is very important, when it's based on different ethnicities, different age ranges, different kinds of backgrounds that families have ... The UK's very diverse and having done research on English – British born people – isn't always fair, because it doesn't capture everyone's background. (Nuria)

If it's all types of people, then you have a better understanding on what's happening. (Hanan)

This set of quotes focuses on the importance of speaking up and speaking out. As Mandy forcefully yet with some resignation notes, there is a vital need to speak up otherwise people from low-income groups will just continue to be ignored. Within this, there is recognition that if they are not included in research then 'the system' further works against them (Wilson and McGuire, 2021). Nuria, whose family was originally from Pakistan, commented on importance but recognised that research did not always involve people like her. In spite of her being a second-generation immigrant, she considered research to exclude people like her, prioritising those perceived to be English, a term used to infer whiteness. Hanan reiterated this desire for research to be inclusive, to better capture and understand the diversity of opinions and everyday experiences. The sense of the importance of research was therefore marked by intersectionality and permeated the interviews among this socio-economically aligned, but ethnically diverse group (Brah and Phoenix, 2004).

*Being Targeted and Feeling Embarrassed*

Linked to these intersectional markers and with particular reference to educational research, some participants felt they could be targeted for being a ‘problem’:

Sometimes they might think that they’re being targeted because they’re low income which might makes them feel a bit at unease, maybe ashamed that they’re low income. (Nuria)

You feel like that, especially when you have a kid and when you’re having problems in school, and you feel maybe they think because you have a different culture and then they have a different culture. You don’t want to speak too much, this is what makes you – you don’t want to think something bad of you . . . (Sofia)

These quotes give a sense of being ‘gazed on’ by researchers and educational professionals. Over the past 20 years, educational discourse and policy has increasingly linked to and perpetuated public understandings of good and bad parenting, good and bad environments for children’s learning and development, and so on (Daly, 2010; Goodall, 2021), all of which signal interest in everyday homelife. As such, reluctance to participate in research was linked to fear of being ‘othered’, fear of being targeted for research because they are seen as being a problem (Verduzco-Baker, 2017), as articulated here by Nuria and Sofia. This can lead to a wariness of speaking too much, with the need to keep themselves in check to deflect negative judgement (Ellis-Sloan, 2014). This works to further marginalise particular groups in the education system and can feel further stigmatising (Wilson and McGuire, 2021), distancing them from research participation.

Other than Yamil, the only male participant, and Michelle who was very politically engaged and active, none of the participants felt confident about being involved in educational research:

Especially those academics and stuff, they’re too too formal; you’re like, no, I don’t want to get into this! Because maybe . . . I’m not going to be good enough for them. Too formal, I don’t know, it’s a bit scary. (Halima)

They think they know nothing. They think they cannot contribute. (Jemma)

I am very restricted because of the language barrier; I am trying to learn . . . I feel I’m a bit bound, that I can’t convey whatever I want to say. (Solana)

It was a language barrier more . . . you don’t feel comfortable to ask some questions because maybe you’re not asking correctly . . . maybe I am going to harm my kids . . . if I talk. (Sofia)

Embedded within these interview discussions was a general narrative of self that must be understood within a broader set of power relations. Participants had a general perceived sense of lacking – in language, in knowledge, in the importance of their voice and opinions – which culminated in a sense that

research is not for them; research is a space in which they do not belong. As Sofia notes, this perceived deficit position – of lacking as a parent – could have harmful implications for her children, if she were to say or do the wrong thing. This ties to pervasive discursive constructions of low-income, working class, and migrant parents, and notably mothers, as lacking (Goodall, 2021; Jupp, 2016), reiterating a feeling of being a ‘problem’, especially in relation to their children and what they can and cannot do to support their children’s education.

There is also an emotional strain here; this reluctance stemmed from embarrassment, of not wanting to share with people the fact that your living with everyday struggles that make life difficult:

People are embarrassed. That’s what it is. It’s a pride thing. You don’t want to have to sit there and tell people how you are struggling and what’s going on within your personal life and whether you can afford to heat your home for your children. (Mandy)

Mandy questions why she, and others in a similar socio-economic position, would want to share these challenges with researchers. This is especially pertinent where families, already struggling from years of austerity (Hall, 2019), are being impacted by the current cost-of-living crisis driven by inflation and coupled with longer term-benefit freezes (Hill and Webber, 2022).

#### *Distrust of Researchers and Research Processes*

Other concerns flagged by interviewees figured round trust, in relation to anonymity and confidentiality, and more general mistrust of researchers and the work they do:

I wouldn’t really know if they would keep my identity that much private. (Halima)

I’m Romanian, my husband is Romanian and because we’ve been raised in Communism part of our lives, people are very ... they don’t trust researchers. (Corina)

Halima points to increased concerns about the sharing of personal information and data that has become so central to research ethics (Wiles *et al.*, 2006). Despite consent forms that explain issues of confidentiality, anonymity and data protection, university-driven structures and systems can be counterproductive in raising alarm over the issues they are trying to address, especially with requests for signatures and contact details, including addresses. Borne out of an upbringing in communist Romania, Corina depicts an ‘us and them’ research relationship which denotes the perceived power imbalance in research, a sentiment supported by her friend Irina who was also Romanian. This has led to a deep-seated scepticism of state-funded or driven research prying into daily life, creating a mistrust of researchers.

Even before our ‘formal’ interview conversations, participants intermated that our processes were off-putting; the length of participant information sheets and consent forms that are required for us to get through institutional ethics panels, created remoteness between the lives of researchers and participants. This was despite the practitioners welcoming us into their space and encouraging parents to participate. Information sheets and consent forms can work to further distance potential participants from research and heighten concerns about formality. As academics working in the social sciences have argued (e.g., Miller and Bell, 2012), we need to develop negotiated ethical processes to allow for more relational and in situ consent to be given and discussed, that sit within BERA (2024) guidelines but are not overwhelming and off putting in content and length. Indeed, we must ensure that our ethical processes meet the needs and circumstances of research and its participants, rather than being institutionally led (Mauthner *et al.*, 2012). However, this remains a challenge when needing to comply with our own institutional requirements that straight-jacket ethical processes.

### *Nothing Changes*

This ‘us and them’ framing is further exemplified through a sense of not being listened to, and therefore research participation being considered a ‘waste of time’ as nothing changes as a result of participating in it:

We don’t know exactly where it [the interview] goes. (Nuria)

Why should I bother? Why should I waste my time saying something, and even having hopes that my opinion is going to be taken into account if it’s not. (Corina)

I do think that a lot of people just don’t see the system working for them and I think they don’t really think it’s worth spending 20 minutes talking about it because nothing’s going to change. (Michelle)

Here the relevance of research emerged strongly through this project. This was linked to a focus on the research itself, what it was about and what we were asking, ensuring that it felt relevant and meaningful to potential participants. Relevance is often considered and critiqued in relation to researchers and the field of education (Akkerman *et al.*, 2021; Winch, 2001), but less so in relation to participants themselves. We found the need to ensure research, as well as researchers, were accessible and approachable, with a focus on mitigating the fear of not knowing or responding in the ‘right way’, emphasising the importance of their voices being heard and carefully listened to.

Research participation was often framed by outcomes and wanting to know the outcome of participation. For Nuria, there was uncertainty about where her voice and experiences would go. With a system perceived as being stacked against poorer families, the above comments from Corina and Michelle flag class-based power inequalities that leave them with a sense that nothing will

change. Participants clearly wanted to know that there would be some outcome to their research participation, not in terms of academic output, but a positive change to their everyday lives. This is perhaps a more challenging aspect of research. The establishment of collaborative partnerships with local educational authorities and/or community groups to discuss and implement research-driven changes that can have a direct and positive impact on the participants' lives is an important localised means through which outcomes can be encouraged. The development of a participant feedback loop, where findings are shared and discussed with participants post-study, is then one important means for allowing participants to see the tangible outcomes of their involvement.

At the same time, despite critiques of the REF driven agenda of impact immediacy (Watermeyer and Chubb, 2019), academics increasingly need to make their research 'impactful'. What is perhaps more problematic is demonstrating change to our participants, when what they are looking for is a change in the material circumstances and structural conditions of their struggles. Arguably, the REF's emphasis on three- and four-star impact takes the focus away from meaningful and positive social change at local, community and individual levels. Substantial local and regional change that enhances the lives of those precariously positioned in society has an important part to play in 'levelling up' and social justice policy agendas. Thus, the value of our and similar small-scale studies in their potential to effect change should have a larger role to play in REF impact agendas that tend to drive university's focus and support for impact. So while we cannot promise large systematic and institutional changes, we can affect more localised change through the immediacy of research partners, the services offered and support given to participants. Participants want a clearer understanding of where the research goes that holds their voices and their everyday lives and experiences. This localised scale of research impact warrants further consideration.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has highlighted the usefulness of the everyday as a conceptual lens to consider both researcher and participant contexts in research and which, we have argued, is especially vital when undertaking work that explores the everyday educational lives of low-income families. The everyday context is a crucial consideration for researchers and features strongly in educational discourse on children's learning, and the role of parenting, resources and the home environment. Educational activities, aspirations and challenges are rooted within the home and family, as much as through school, community and policy. We must therefore consider how we access and engage with the everyday lives of groups typically considered harder to reach, including low-income families. As this paper has argued, this requires making explicit the contexts of both participants and researchers, recognising that these contexts



make this endeavour to ensure research is inclusive all the more challenging. In drawing together some conclusions, we reiterate why these contexts matter and consider how we respond to and work with them to allay some of the challenges they present.

First, in terms of the contextual challenges for researchers, the limited time we have in the contemporary university, and the time limits of funding mean that the type of research we want to do and the type of research we can do not always match up; the ‘impossibility of engaged research’, as Heney and Poleykett (2022, p. 179) persuasively argue. If they do not match up, then what do we do? While researching the everyday takes ‘slow time’ (Neal, 2015, p. 994), this is not always possible and was not possible with this project. With long embedded ethnographic engagement impossible, we took the decision to continue with the research; a decision linked to the sentiment that emerged from Mandy at the end of her interview: ‘It’s been a nightmare, and it’s only going to get worse’. The everyday for many families, but especially those on low-incomes, has been as she calls it a ‘nightmare’ and as such there is arguably no time to wait to undertake the ideal project. As Mandy previously explained, there is a need for ‘people like her’ to be given the opportunity to speak up and be more fully considered and understood through research in the hope that their lives can be made easier and improved.

When time is limited, there is a need to stretch research relationships across projects and engage in a prolonged process of relationship building with ‘gate-keepers’ and partners beyond the timeframe and life of an individual project. Moreover, relationships that allow a personal presence for participants, where trust with a research partner is extended to a researcher, proved vital (Emmel *et al.*, 2007). This has the potential to at least begin to smooth the process of participant engagement, with research becoming less physically intrusive and abrupt, as participants are already in a space and relationship that feels non-judgemental and non-shaming.

Second, in terms of the importance-reluctance dialectic expressed by the parents in this study, the substantive findings here – of fear, embarrassment, lack of trust and perceived lack of knowledge – are marked by class and gender, by cultural heritage and background, and by language. In some ways they reflect the area where the research was conducted – in a more deprived part of Greater London that has received immigrants over many decades. But the findings move beyond the boundaries of the study area to question how best we can engage low-income families to ensure those groups cast as hard to reach, do not become hard to research, and therefore not listened to (Wilson, 2020). This does have a particular inflection for educational research where this sense of stigma and of lacking in various respects of their lives is keenly shaped by intersectional positions. There are multiple effects of occupying a low-status position in relation to class, gender and race, and educational researchers need to better understand these in relation to the everyday. Moreover, we need to ensure that

potential distrust of the educational system (Wilson and McGuire, 2021) does not translate into a distrust of educational research and researchers.

There are limitations to this study. It was based on a small number of interviews with parents within Greater London and there is a clear geographical specificity to the localised demographics which, as noted above, shaped the conversations we had and the findings presented here. Additionally, parents are just one, albeit an important, part of the family; this research did not extend to consider children's perspectives, or more intergenerational understandings of educational research, and there is further research to be done to consider this wider familial context.

At a time when inequalities in wider society are increasing, our study underscores the urgent need for educational research to foster more inclusive practices that actively engage low-income families. There is a real need for educational research and policy to be more inclusive and representative of diverse populations and to critically address and ameliorate the everyday lives and pressures of families, particularly those who are marginalised economically (Lee and Saltmarsh, 2023). Education researchers need to be critically attentive to both researcher and participant contexts and recognise the challenges discussed in this paper, and the possibilities they present for engaging with the everyday lives of research participants, especially those who are excluded or disadvantaged in often multiple ways, to consider carefully how these can be alleviated, if not resolved. We have offered some practical moves to respond to these, focusing on research relationships, presence and relevance, and argue that these require further and continuing conversation to understand the everyday and its resonance for educational research.

## 7. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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## 9. NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Research Excellence Framework, previously known as the Research Assessment Exercise, is an assessment undertaken approximately every seven years on behalf of the UK government. Its purpose is to assess the quality of research carried out by universities and is used to allocate research funding (see Kelly, 2023).

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