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Engaging low-income families in education research: examining the challenges in Beijing and London

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ABSTRACT

This comparative paper considers the similar challenges encountered in Beijing (China) and Greater London (England) when engaging low-income families in education research. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 parents/caregivers in Beijing and 13 parents in Greater London, we explored perceptions of the barriers to participation, the influence of identity on involvement, and ways to better enable their contribution to education research. We found that key barriers to research participation across both cohorts centred on practical issues of a lack of time and childcare support and a sense of the pointlessness of research. Despite these commonalities, subtle differences emerged in how these barriers were experienced in each context, influenced by local socio-cultural factors. We conclude by reflecting on the forms of support that would encourage and enable socio-economically disadvantaged parents/caregivers in different country contexts to take part in education research. Our findings contribute new, comparative knowledge to best practice approaches, highlighting specific policy interventions that could improve the diversity of research participation.

Introduction

In 2021, two of the authors of this paper carried out a small-scale qualitative study (Hoskins and Wainwright 2023; Wainwright and Hoskins 2023) to examine the impact of homeschooling on low-income families. We noted that much of the research published on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education had centred quantitative analyses of the likely impact of missed learning for low-income families (e.g. Goudeau et al. 2021), highlighting a gap in qualitative research that examined the lived experiences of low-income families during successive periods of lockdown and homeschooling. Our qualitative findings confirmed that participants felt reluctant to engage in research due to a sense of shame around their perceived inability to home school their children. They reported a lack of time, resources and knowledge to support their child's educational

needs which, in turn, made them hesitant in taking part in educational research. Engaging low-income families in education research is crucial for developing equitable and inclusive policies. These families often experience unique challenges that can significantly impact their children's educational outcomes. Understanding their perspectives is essential for creating interventions that address their specific needs and circumstances.

This hesitation, and the challenge to recruitment that it posed, provoked our interest in barriers to research engagement experienced by low-income groups and whether these were context and location dependent. Similarly, in another project that four of the authors conducted about children's experiences of COVID-19 in England and China (author ref), we noted that recruiting families and children beyond a predominately middle-class population presents challenges in both countries regarding accessibility and the aforementioned reluctance by potential participants. This study examines the participation of low-income families in education research in London and Beijing, focusing on the challenges they face and the strategies that can enhance their engagement. The choice of London and Beijing as study sites is strategically justified due to their distinctive socio-cultural and economic contexts, which provide a rich comparative basis for examining the challenges faced by low-income families in education research. London, a major global city with a diverse population, represents a context where socio-economic disparities are pronounced despite robust social welfare systems. As China's capital, Beijing offers a contrasting environment with different social support mechanisms and educational structures. The juxtaposition of these two cities allows for a deeper understanding of how diverse socio-political contexts influence the participation of low-income families in education research.

We therefore sought to examine and qualitatively understand the reluctance to participate in education research more broadly than just the pandemic context and focused on low-income families in the diverse urban cultural contexts of London and Beijing, with a small research grant awarded by Institute of Communities and Societies, Brunel University of London. The selection of Previous research has shown that low-income families are less likely to participate in education research (Dearing et al. 2006; Garcia and de Guzman 2020; Halle, Kurtz-Costes, and Mahoney 1997). This lack of participation can lead to biased findings, resulting in policies that do not adequately address the needs of these families. For instance, Hill, Jeffries, and Murray (2017) found that underrepresentation of low-income families in educational studies can perpetuate inequalities, as the resultant policies may not consider their unique challenges. The current study aimed to explore the barriers to participating in education research and to understand how these might be overcome through socially and culturally sensitive research engagement.

To analyse our empirical findings, we draw on social capital theory (Putnam 2000) to examine the reluctance to participate in research by low-income families who do not possess high-value social capital. Social capital theory suggests that individuals with higher levels of social capital are more likely to participate in community activities and research studies due to their established networks and trust within the community. In addition to social capital, other factors such as employment status, work hours, and educational aspirations for children are closely related to one's socioeconomic status and tendency to participate in education research. Employment status and work hours can significantly impact a parent's availability and ability to engage in research activities.

Educational aspirations for children also play a crucial role, as parents with higher aspirations may be more motivated to participate in research that could potentially benefit their children's education. By examining these factors alongside social capital, we aim to comprehensively understand the mechanisms influencing participation.

Increasing the participation of low-income families in education research can improve the representativeness of the findings and enable more effective policy-making. Thus, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

(a) What are the unique barriers, challenges and issues impacting on socio-economically disadvantaged parents'/caregivers' participation in education research?
(b) How do social class and gender influence these challenges?
(c) What would support, encourage and enable socio-economically disadvantaged parents/caregivers to take part in education research?

This paper begins by providing a comparative socio-economic and geographical context of London and Beijing. Next, we consider the experiences of education amongst low-income families in London and Beijing. We then define key concepts and outline our theoretical framework and methodology. Finally, key findings are shared drawing on the interview data. Lower participation rates among low-income families in education research can have several detrimental effects. Firstly, it can lead to biased findings that do not accurately represent the needs and experiences of these families. Consequently, policies and interventions developed from such research may fail to address the specific barriers faced by low-income families, thereby perpetuating educational inequalities (Easterbrook and Hadden 2021). Furthermore, the lack of diverse perspectives can hinder the development of comprehensive strategies that promote inclusive educational practices. We conclude with recommendations for changes to research practice, reflecting on the forms of support that would encourage and enable socio-economically disadvantaged parents/caregivers in different country contexts to take part in education research.

Context – London and Beijing

The aim of this section is to briefly contextualise the socio-economic and geographical contexts of London and Beijing. Understanding what it means to be on a low income in these cities provides a crucial context for our study.

London's population was just under 9 million in 2022 and was estimated to return to the same level by 2022 following the Covid pandemic (ONS 2022). London is a metropolitan city characterised by a great degree of diversity in population demographics, economic activities and lifestyles (Cole and Payre 2016). Despite not having a segregated neighbourhood system, property values and rents in London vary significantly by location, and many areas of deprivation exist (Cole and Payre 2016). A recent report noted that London has overcrowded houses, 'far worse than other regions of the United Kingdom' (UK) (HM Government, Levelling Up the UK, 2022, 74). Self-reported wellbeing in London has fallen behind the rest of the UK (HM Government, Levelling Up

the UK, 2022, 71), and the highest house prices and worst pollution in the UK can be found in London.

Beijing is one of the largest cities in the world, with close to 20 million inhabitants recorded in 2018 (UN DESA 2018) and is becoming increasingly urbanised, leading to structural changes in relation to power and control with some instances of the expulsion of low income people from parts of the city. Li (2023, 4) examines urbanisation in China, focusing on Beijing, and notes that:

> . . . the case of post-reform China is unique, as its scale and speed of urban redevelopment are tremendous compared to other cases; it entails massive reconstruction, enormous amounts of capital, and the relocation of huge amounts of residential populations. In China's political context of so-called 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', the role of the Chinese state in the process of urban redevelopment may differ from those of developed Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

In London the middle classes are typically at the heart of any gentrification efforts. In parts of London, the reduction of segregation between areas has improved, with many parts of the wealthy neighbourhoods located next to deprived areas (Sturgis et al. 2017). In comparison, Beijing has stricter boundaries between its 16 central districts (e.g. Old City) and suburban areas (e.g. Tongzhou and Mentougou) (Wang and Liu 2023). A contributing factor is the *hukou* system of residence permits in China. Lo (2010) argues that reforms are essential to the *hukou* system, which denies migrant workers access to health and education services in China's cities. Beijing is becoming an increasingly significant actor in the global economy, especially in the East Asian region (Chen and Kanna 2012; Y. Li and Jonas 2023). Despite affordable housing policies, there is a need for ongoing infrastructure improvements (Rong and Jin 2023), particularly in terms of transport connections for suburban low-income housing projects, increasing job provision in areas where disadvantaged groups are concentrated, and providing good quality public facilities and services soon after or even before new low-income housing is built.

Whilst the socio-economic and geographic contexts of the two cities are distinct, the daily effects of material deprivation are strikingly similar.

Experiences of education amongst low-income families in London and Beijing

In this section we examine the experiences of education reported in existing research in Beijing and London to illustrate the challenges encountered. We are arguing that challenges of educational inclusion lead to the reluctance of low-income families to participate in research, as they often view themselves as outsiders to the education systems in their countries.

For low-incomes families, securing access to high-quality education can be problematic in both cities. In England, early childhood and care provision expanded under New Labour (1997–2010). Penn (2007, 1281) divided the reasons for the government to increase the provision of early education and care and improve its quality into three categories: (1) 'to improve educational attainment'; (2) 'to help parents of young people into employment, especially single mothers in receipt of state benefits'; and (3) 'in order

to combat child poverty'. The Conservative-led coalition (2010–2015) and Conservative government (2015-present) reforms have centred on growing the market further still and providing more support for the expenses of childcare for working parents (Lewis and West 2017). In England, children aged three and four are entitled to 15 hours per week of free ECEC for up to 38 weeks per year (Koslowski et al. 2022). However, the uptake of places is low and falling amongst low-income families for a range of socio-economic reasons including proximity, availability and reluctance amongst some minority ethnic families to engage.

Liu, Liu, and Yu (2017) analysed education policies aimed at supporting migrant children in Beijing, noting that social justice regarding education and other social welfare is not a top priority for the current government. The more disadvantaged a rural-to-urban migrant family is, the less likely their child will attend a public urban school. They suggest that urban public school systems should enable all students, regardless of *hukou* status, to receive a public education (Liu, Liu, and Yu 2017). The findings of Liao, Dou, and Guo (2021) indicate that families in rural areas, those with low incomes, those where the mother has limited education, and families with girls are more likely to cut back on education expenses if they experience personal challenges, for example, a health crisis. They highlight that negative health has a more severe effect on education spending in rural families, low-income families, and families where the mother has limited education in China.

The structural inequalities experienced by low-income families in Beijing and London mean that, compared with other socioeconomic groups, these families are less likely to take part in education research. Comparable international studies have noted that low-income families are underrepresented in research trials. For example, Walter, Burke, and Davis (2013) conducted a study with 2,150 low-income people and members of racial/ethnic minorities in the United States found underrepresentation of low-income people in the sample. Habibi et al.'s (2015) research with Latino children from Los Angeles in the US indicates that low-income families are underrepresented in neuroimaging research due to recruitment, involvement, and retention challenges. Another study by Spoth and Redmond (1993) compared families who took part in a family-focused intervention project against those who did not, identifying time demands and research requirements as factors limiting participation in family-focused research. Despite low-income children being overrepresented in various statistics on psychological needs, a study including 154 low-income children and families reveals that low-income families are less likely to participate in mental health services and education intervention research (Jones et al. 2016).

Existing research confirms that low-income families are typically underrepresented in research across the social sciences. This study aims to address the research gap in understanding this underrepresentation through qualitatively-rich data collected from interviews with low-income families.

Defining low-income families in London and Beijing

At the outset of this research, we were aware that the definition of low-income families is problematic. For example, in his introduction to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Macedo criticises the language used to refer to oppressed people, arguing against the

terms like 'disadvantaged', 'disenfranchised', 'economically marginal', 'minority', and 'at risk' (Freire 2018, 17). To counter these challenges, Wilson (2020) uses the phrase 'hard to reach' with apostrophes to highlight that these families are not always difficult to reach. More recently, Elliott-Major and Briant (2023) referred to low-income families as 'under-resourced' to counter the deficit discourses associated with viewing families as disadvantaged. Our research confirmed the complexity and problematic nature of defining what constitutes a low income in London and Beijing.

The definition of 'low income' has been varied, as evidenced by the existing literature. Jones et al. (2016) point out it can be used as a more objective monetary amount (such as a financial outcome) or a more subjective indicator of financial burden or hardship. In terms of objective criteria, some studies define low income based on UK poverty statistics for a certain region. For example, in London, according to the *Census 2021 household Deprivation* (2022) report, a household is deprived if it meets any of the following four parameters: (1) employment: if any member of a household is not a full-time student, is either unemployed or chronically ill; (2) education: no one in the home has at least a level 2 education (five or more GCSE passes or higher) and no one between the ages of 16–18 is a full-time student; (3) health and disability: any member of the household has 'poor' or 'very bad' general health or a long-term health issue; (4) housing: The household's living place is either overcrowded, located in a shared residence, or lacks central heating. Taking account of the role material deprivation plays in families' lives in England, we used the income threshold of £7,400 excluding benefits to define low income, as this is the most reliable economic measure for sampling families with children aged 0–13.

Similarly, in China, we used economic measures. Originally, we followed the low-income definition of an annual income of RMB¥40,000 or less for urban households. However, in the context of Beijing, we noted that those on an annual income of RMB ¥40,000 even in a suburban area would find it impossible to meet basic living costs, meaning official numbers do not reflect lived experiences. Upon discussion with the local charity stakeholders who had extensive experience working with low-income families in Beijing, we adjusted our criteria to include parents/carers of an annual family income of RMB¥100,000 or less. Despite this seemingly substantial family income, there is very limited disposable income for these families due to the lack of benefits available only to Beijing *hukou* holders. These families are struggling financially as a result of high costs for renting, education and health care. Generally, Beijing *hukou* holders do not fit into the group of people who can be defined as disadvantaged in China according to the official indicators. Whilst we followed the low-income definition of RMB¥100,000 or less to recruit our sample, we note the limitations of this criterion.

In Beijing, the social stratification mechanisms are complex and multifaceted. Low-income families in Beijing include both migrants without a Beijing hukou and local residents with a Beijing *hukou*. For migrants, the lack of a Beijing *hukou* restricts their access to public services, including education. Migrant children are often unable to attend public schools or take transition exams in Beijing, which significantly impacts their educational opportunities and creates a sense of exclusion from the local education system. On the other hand, low-income local residents with Beijing *hukou* face different challenges. Educational resources in Beijing are unevenly distributed across its administrative districts. Local residents typically attend schools based on the district of their *hukou*, resulting in significant

disparities in the quality of education available to them. These distinct mechanisms of stratification shape the motivations and experiences of low-income families in Beijing differently (Z. Li, 2023). In our study, nine of the ten Beijing participants were migrant workers without Beijing *hukou*, reflecting the significant barriers they face in accessing quality education and other public services. The remaining participant was a local resident with a Beijing *hukou*, who was a low-income individual with a disability. This participant's challenges were related to the limited resources available in their specific district.

While low-income families in both cities face financial hardships and limited access to resources, their experiences show notable differences. In London, more comprehensive social welfare programmes provide a level of support often lacking in Beijing. However, the stigma associated with being low-income and persistent class inequalities are significant barriers. In contrast, low-income families in Beijing contend with the added challenges of the *hukou* system, which restricts their access to essential services and opportunities. Similarities exist in low-income families in both contexts, including the common struggle for affordable housing, access to quality education, and the impact of economic disparities on their daily lives (Z. Li 2023). Both groups also face systemic barriers that hinder their full participation in educational research, making their voices underrepresented in academic studies.

Social capital

This study focuses on social capital as a key factor influencing participation. Social capital, which includes the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enables individuals to gain access to resources and support. It plays a crucial role in fostering trust and encouraging participation in various social activities, including education research.

We use Putnam's social capital theory (2000) to theorise the data. Social capital, in various iterations (Bourdieu 1990; Coleman 1988), is used to 'call attention to the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties' (Putnam 2000, 19). Through these social ties, individuals and communities can gain a relative advantage by gaining access to civic virtue. Putnam describes two core aspects of social capital, namely its potential for bonding and bridging (2000). Bonding networks entail close ties with friends and family and have the capacity to provide affective and material support, whereas bridging networks have weaker ties, but are outward-looking and can include contacts from diverse social backgrounds.

Social capital theory is used in our research to understand how the participants draw on bonding and bridging capital as 'features of social life networks, norms and trust' (Putnam 2000, 302) and highlights the importance of the reciprocal relationships existing within networks, noting the material and social impact of not having these relationships. In the context of our study, these impacts range from the practical support, such as a lack of childcare to enable engagement with research, to a perceived lack of knowledge and understanding of the purpose of research. As discussed throughout our work, our participants are from low-income families and experience significant poverty. According to Putnam, poverty is one of the biggest obstacles to benefitting from reciprocal and high value social capital.

Methodology, method and ethics

The study is underpinned by a qualitative research methodology that seeks to understand lived experiences in depth and detail. We wanted to examine the rich and nuanced experiences of participants to understand how they view education research and its relevance to their lives. The method used to gather the data was semi-structured interviews. We followed the work of Brown and Danaher (2019, 86) and carried out interviews underpinned by the CHE principles of Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy, which is of 'value to others in helping to audit and to reflect upon their respective decision-making prior to and during their engagement in qualitative, semi-structured interviews.' We found these principles were indeed 'invaluable in assisting in producing rich and authentic data, ensuring benefits for multiple stakeholders and offering new possibilities in rendering semi-structured interviews more dialogical.' Indeed, through adopting this approach, we gathered rich and detailed accounts that have been widely disseminated to stakeholders in England and China.

Several strategies were implemented throughout the research process to ensure the data's quality and trustworthiness. Before conducting the main interviews, pilot interviews were conducted with a small number of participants from both London and Beijing. This helped refine the interview questions and ensured they were clear, comprehensible, and relevant to the participants. Additionally, the diversity of participants in London compared to those in China was noted. This diversity may explain the varied experiences of low-income families in the two contexts, highlighting the role of cultural factors.

In England, the interviews took place in person at a local charity's offices. The location was convenient for the participants as they were attending a playgroup session with their younger children. Staff reassured them that their participation in the project was entirely voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw at any time.

In Beijing, due to the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, interviews were held online using Zoom or WeChat. Participants were similarly reassured that participation was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw from the project. The use of semi-structured interviews provided a useful aide memoire to the research team but also provided flexibility for participants to define some of the coverage of their responses according to what was important and significant to them.

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, the native language of the participants. To ensure that the meaning was not lost in translation, the interviews in China were conducted by bilingual researchers fluent in both Mandarin and English, which helped bridge any language gaps and ensured accurate communication during the interviews. A professional translator initially translated all interview transcripts from Mandarin to English. The bilingual researchers were also culturally sensitive, understanding the nuances and contextual meanings behind the participants' responses, which was crucial for maintaining the integrity of the data. During the data analysis phase, bilingual team members continuously validated the translated data to ensure that the original meanings were preserved, maintaining the authenticity of participants' voices.

Triangulation was employed by using multiple data sources to enhance the robustness of the findings, including interviews with participants from different backgrounds and cross-referencing data with existing literature and secondary

data sources. After the interviews, member checking was conducted by summarising the key points and themes identified during the interview and asking participants to confirm the accuracy of our interpretations. This helped ensure that their views were correctly captured. Regular meetings were held with research team members to discuss and critique the data collection process and emerging themes, refining the analytical framework and ensuring rigour in data interpretation.

The study received ethical approval from [redacted] to undertake the research. Participants were approached through gatekeepers, as discussed above, and were provided with an information sheet detailing their involvement in the study. They were asked to sign a consent form confirming their participation. They were reassured that their data would be held confidentially and anonymously throughout the data gathering and publication phases of the project. We followed BERA (2018) guidelines to ensure that we adhered to best ethical practice throughout the design, data collection, analysis and dissemination stages of the project.

Research participants

We carried out semi-structured interviews with 13 parents in London and ten parents/caregivers in Beijing. As noted above, sample recruitment was structured around the following income variables:

- An annual family income of £7400 or less in London.
- An annual family income of RMB¥100,000 or less in Beijing.

It was challenging to locate willing participants, so we used a well-established charity in England to help support our recruitment efforts. In China, we reached out to two local charities to gain access to potential participants and then deployed a snowballing approach to locate further families. Participants were given a £50 Amazon voucher (or equivalent Chinese vouchers) as a thank you for their involvement in the research. We note the ethical concerns related to rewarding participants (Head 2009), however given the vulnerability associated with our sample group we argue that the vouchers enabled us to recognise the time commitment they made to our study.

The demographic profiles of the participants in London were more diverse than those in China, reflecting the broader ethnic and cultural diversity of the city as evident in Table 1.

Findings and discussion

Lack of time

Despite the very different cultural contexts of London and Beijing, the barriers and challenges to participating in education research were strikingly similar. These challenges were centred around a lack of time, concerns that their voices might not be heard and the effects of their social identities on participation. All our participants

Table 1. Below highlights the demographic features of our sample.

Pseudonym	Location	Gender	Ethnicity
Aleena	London	Female	Pakistani
Corina	London	Female	Romania
Halima	London	Female	North African
Hanan	London	Female	British Indian
Irina	London	Female	Gypsy
Jemma	London	Female	Ugandan
Mandy	London	Female	British
Michelle	London	Female	British
Nuria	London	Female	British Pakistani
Rida	London	Female	British Indian
Sofia	London	Female	Albanian
Solana	London	Female	Pakistani
Yamil	London	Male	Asian Pakistani
Dong	Beijing	Male	Han
Shuhua	Beijing	Female	Han
Fang	Beijing	Female	Han
Hua	Beijing	Female	Han
Lijun	Beijing	Female	Han
Lijuan	Beijing	Female	Han
Linlin	Beijing	Female	Han
Liyuan	Beijing	Female	Han
Xin	Beijing	Male	Han
Shanyun	Beijing	Female	Han

referred to at least one of these challenges as a key barrier to contributing to research. The following quotes highlight some of the challenges related to a lack of time in both contexts:

I'll be like; 'No, I haven't got time I need to pay attention to my children'. But yeah, that's one of the reasons we're just busy either with children or with work. (Hanan, London)

I think for people who have work [the barrier] is time. For people in Beijing, we all live in the suburb but work in the town and it is very long commute. It is almost 8–9 pm when get home and then we need to take care of the child. (Linlin, China)

The time management only for me, the issue is the time management . . . You know with the small kids, it's very difficult . . . so I will avoid these things. (Solana, London)

I have to work and have no time, but in general, I have more time than their father. [. . .] He [the father] is too busy, he doesn't have time [to participate]. (Shuhua, China)

If it's after-school time when parents tend to get busy, like a single mother like me, I'm choc-a-bloc after my child comes home, so that sort of thing. (Rida, London)

Time, they don't have the time, they feel like [. . .] their main focus might be looking for work and finances and doing research is probably at the bottom of their list. (Nuria, London)

With limited time came limited opportunities and energy to participate in research. These limitations were practical in terms of lack of childcare and a lack of support to free up their time and economically in terms of the pressures to work long hours in low-paid jobs. Participants indicated that their limited social networks, a component of social capital, further exacerbated their time constraints. For instance, Hanan mentioned that she did not have anyone to help with childcare, which directly impacted her availability. This lack of support

networks, or bonding social capital, meant that participants could not rely on friends or family to help manage their time better:

> I don't have family nearby who can help me look after my children. If I had someone to trust, I might have more time to participate. (Hanan, London)

In Beijing, Linlin expressed a similar sentiment, indicating that her long commute and work hours left her with no time, and without extended family support, managing childcare and work was even more challenging:

> My parents live in our hometown, and I have to rely on myself to take care of my child after a long day of work. It's exhausting. (Linlin, China)

Social capital plays a crucial role in providing practical support such as childcare. The lack of these supportive networks among low-income families directly affects their ability to participate in research.

Social capital 'is all about networks', and the higher the social value of the networks, the more productive they are (Putnam 2000, 171). Without access to valuable networks of reciprocity, compounded by the negative effects of the material and social insecurity experienced by participants, engaging with research was unlikely.

Nothing changes: the expectation of not being heard

Alongside practical challenges were deeper concerns associated with the expectation of not being heard. Many of the participants reflected that there was little incentive to engage in research as there is so little tangible social change. The following quotes provide an illustrative summary of the points raised in this theme:

> . . . people don't see things working at a local level. They don't see their voices being heard. It's hard. Our council is bankrupt here. So any time anyone says, 'We need this,' there's no budget for it. (Michelle, London)

> So their identity, I think something about their identity, being frail. I don't know . . . or being out there in the open . . . 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, London)

> Some people, they just ignore it, even though with the rewards, as well, they said, 'Yes, it's just a waste of my time'. (Yamil, London)

> They think they cannot contribute to the world. (Jemma, London)

> Does our research have follow-up feedback? Or is it finished and it's over? Do you have any follow-ups or something? (Dong, China)

With limited economic capital, these families experienced first-hand the pressures of the global cost of living crisis, particularly acute post COVID-19. They are the first to experience cuts to local welfare provisions (for example, after-school clubs, libraries, childcare facilities and play areas) and they bear the brunt of reduced state support (see for example Etherington et al. 2022). To participate in research is to make

themselves vulnerable by sharing their experiences of hardship, and then to find that nothing changes is difficult and disillusioning for them. Across the sample the shared view was why would they make the effort. The challenges noted in existing research confirm that a sense of frustration permeates their lives and research participation can compound these feelings.

The influence of identity: gender and social class

Through the interviews, we were able to gain an understanding of the role that class and gender play as a barrier to participation. In both London and Beijing, participants' gender significantly influenced their ability to participate in education research. Many women, especially mothers, reported feeling the burden of balancing childcare and work responsibilities, which left them with little time for additional activities like participating in research. This is evident from the following quotes:

> I am right now talking to you in a friendly way, and you are talking to me in a friendly way, no hesitation. If there is a man, I can't speak with a man confidently or openly. (Aleena, London)

> So, me coming from where I come from, I'm a woman, I come from a modest background, and I'm a Muslim as well, and I wear a headscarf, and when you see those men who are overconfident, it makes you feel like – it's intimidating. (Halima, London)

> Although it's meant to be an equal society, it's really not. As a single mum, I now struggle, and I wonder, will I ever be able to go up in my job role? (Mandy, London)

> It's me, mainly who takes care of the children. My husband and I are immigrants. We do immigrant work in Beijing. The grandparents are all at our hometowns. So it is always that the daddy works outside to feed the family, one of us has to sacrifice to take care of the children. (Linlin, China)

In both London and Beijing gender differences are apparent in the data. Both societies are patriarchal, reflecting this inequality in the participants' lived experiences. These quotes illustrate the discomfort felt by some participants in the possibility of speaking with a man in an interview context and of managing the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid labour. This finding resonates with Liu and Wang's (2015) research which found that traditional Chinese society has a distinct gender hierarchy where fathers have more authority and mothers are more subordinate. This dynamic was reflected in our Beijing participants, where mothers were primarily responsible for childcare, further limiting their ability to engage in research activities. In contrast, in London, while women also faced significant childcare responsibilities, issues of gender intersected with other aspects of identity, such as being a single parent or a member of an ethnic minority, to create additional layers of marginalisation and exclusion. In Beijing, as in London, mothers are still usually the main caregivers for young children, although Liu and Wang (2015) note that fathers have become more involved in their child's lives in recent times in China. In London, Wilson and McGuire (2021) investigated the negative judgement that working-class mothers perceive they receive from teachers. The mothers in their study felt that

they were considered inferior somehow because of being a single parent, a young mother, unemployed or a combination of all three.

The impact of social class on research participation was profound and multifaceted. Working-class families in London and Beijing faced numerous barriers related to economic instability, lack of access to resources, and societal stigma. These factors significantly influenced their willingness and ability to participate in research. In terms of the impact of social class status on research participation, we found that it similarly contributed to a sense of reluctance:

> There are some people from a lower class. They don't have jobs. They cannot move up. But they may also want to [participate in research], but they don't have access. They can't find help. (Dong, China)

> Yes, we are working-class family . . . the barriers are there. The year before last, in order to send my child to kindergarten, and also to make it convenient for my parents to send and pick up the child, we bought a flat and had to take on a mortgage. Me and my partner have to rely on ourselves completely. [. . .]We wanted to send our child to a good primary school.[1] In order to do so, we are thinking about changing the flat, but need to borrow money. The pressure is huge. (Lijun, China)

> There's a lot of problems. The people that say, 'Money doesn't buy happiness,' I know dozens of people who would all say that a stack of money right now would actually solve every single one of their problems, and I think that there's a huge barrier with social class . . . Having a better social and economic class can completely insulate you from a lot of the policy issues that you would face as a working class in terms of identity, homelessness, disability and that. (Michelle, London)

Class status has an impact on the potential for research participation in London and Beijing. In London, working-class families often struggled with the high cost of living, which limited their disposable income and ability to afford childcare or transportation to participate in research. They also faced societal stigma and discrimination, which impacted their self-esteem and confidence, making them less likely to engage in activities that might expose them to further judgement. In Beijing, the *hukou* system complicated the situation, which restricted access to education and social services for migrant families. Most of our Beijing participants were migrant workers without Beijing *hukou*, which meant their children were not eligible to attend public schools or take transition exams in Beijing. This lack of access to educational resources created significant frustration and a sense of exclusion from the educational system, further diminishing their motivation to participate in research.

According to Du (2016), social strata in China is used as a proxy for social class to depoliticise class formation and its effects on daily life. Despite these attempts, class differences were identified amongst our Chinese participants, who described themselves as working class due to their income and employment status. They note the class barriers that exist and shape their decisions on education, economic choices and research participation.

The intersectionality of gender and social class created unique challenges for our participants. For example, low-income mothers in Beijing, who were often migrant workers, faced compounded barriers due to their gender, economic status,

and lack of *hukou*. These intersecting identities led to a heightened sense of marginalisation and exclusion, making it even more difficult for them to find the time, resources, or motivation to participate in research. In London, single mothers from working-class backgrounds often felt overwhelmed by their dual responsibilities of caregiving and providing for their families. This intersection of gender and social class created a scenario where their voices were often unheard, and their needs unmet, leading to a lack of trust in research processes and scepticism about the potential benefits of participating in studies.

Enabling participation: recommendations for change

A supportive environment

In the final data section of this paper, we consider what would support, encourage and enable low-income parents and caregivers to take part in education research. The key message from participants was the need for a flexible approach to enabling participation to ensure that parents were at ease. This started with a supportive environment in which to carry out the research:

> Maybe things like having an event where there's things for children to do; make it really relaxed. Make it like a fun day, and then parents will turn up, and then you're able to capture them as they're playing with their children – so there's things for them to do and engage with while you're doing the research. (Nuria, London)

> [...] those that can be useful for parents to learn something about educating their children [during the process]. (Hua, Beiing)

To compensate for the limited social networks participants had access to, the importance of a supportive environment cannot be underestimated. The need to ensure that within that space there are trusted individuals to help look after children and to encourage the adults that participation is safe and ethical. These practical needs are a form of collective social capital provision akin to the sense of civic duty found in communities that is so diminished for low-income families in contemporary society (Putnam 2000).

Gatekeepers and trusted relationships

Of key importance was the role of NGOs in both contexts to enable us to access participants.

Irina had benefited from a referral to the research project from her social worker. It was this encouragement that persuaded her to be involved, highlighting the important role that trusted gatekeepers play.

> If you get more close to them, maybe they will talk – and they will talk, most of them. (Sofia, London)

> I trust Ms. X [the charity stakeholder's name]. She said someone wanted to interview us, so I said yes. (Xin, China)

> I don't usually trust anybody. Because we met in a place where I trusted the place that we were at. It makes a difference. If you were from the street, I don't think I would trust any

research on the street. But it was a good place to meet. And you could explain what you're doing. And I was happy. I think it was a trusted environment. (Hanan, London)

This friendly approach and the caring approach as well, make it as light as possible. (Halima, London)

The need for a trusted gatekeeper was crucial in the absence of social capital that would support research participation. By this we mean that they have limited knowledge of the higher education context in which research takes place, and consequently the families we interviewed had little trust in us as researchers. Their networks do not encompass universities and they have little time and energy to engage with research reports and articles due to the pressures of daily life. The only reason several on them decided to get involved was due to the encouragement of staff in the NGO settings we gained access to. To follow Putnam (2000, 21) 'trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalised reciprocity'. By accessing participants in the context of the charity and NGO settings, we were able to benefit from an established form of reciprocity that existed for the vulnerable parents and carers we interviewed. This is an important finding as it raises questions about the likelihood of successfully completing research with low-income families without gate-keeper access.

Feeling participation will lead to change

Participants need to feel that their voices would be heard. Without a sense of tangible change at the community level, there was little incentive to get involved, even with the reward of vouchers. The quotes below highlight the need to know participation will make a positive difference.

I'm passionate to help make the change in the first place and I think unless you can ignite that passion in people, you're not going to, and people don't see things working at a local level. They don't see their voices being heard. (Michelle, London)

Yes, [the research] it should be oriented towards practical reality. Because every parent has different conditions, for example, different work. Some are at the bottom. But they want to make [changes]. But they can't find ways to do this, can't find anyone to help them. (Dong, China)

It was interesting to note that in the different geopolitical contexts of London and Beijing, a need for social change was identified. Whilst achieving social change is 'slower, more subtle and harder to reverse' (Putnam 2000, 34) evidence that it can happen is an important component of agreeing to participate. The need to feel heard and to see tangible changes to the social context in which they were situated was of the utmost importance across the sample in London and China. These families feel socially disenfranchised and are always the first to experience cuts to local services. Without a sense that their voices can contribute to positive changes in their local communities, there is little incentive to participate. Indeed, participation can serve to reinforce feelings of powerlessness and frustration at the lack of positive, affirmative action within their daily lives.

Conclusions and recommendations

This comparative study has provided valuable insights into the complexities and dynamics of low-income families' participation in education research within the distinct socio-cultural and political contexts of London and Beijing. Such an approach provides a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and issues faced by parents/carers from diverse groups. The data confirms striking similarities in the experiences of low-income families in both cities, suggesting that the lived experience of material deprivation takes place in parallel across these contexts. These experiences were influenced by the effects of gendered and classed differences and their impact on participation. We primarily interviewed mothers, and all our families identified as working class despite efforts in both England and China to move away from the discourse of classed inequality.

We have employed social capital theory to make sense of the data. This theoretical approach has enabled us to argue that in the absence of high-value, reciprocal bonding and bridging networks, the use of a trusted gatekeeper is crucial. These contacts acted almost as a proxy for social capital in our study, enabled our vulnerable participants to benefit from bridging networks in an environment of pre-existing and pre-established trust. The use of a gatekeeper was the most important aspect of recruiting participants. However, social capital alone does not fully explain the reluctance of low-income families to participate. Employment status and work hours emerged as significant barriers, with many parents citing long working hours and job insecurity as reasons for their inability to engage in research activities. Additionally, educational aspirations for their children influenced their motivation to participate. Parents with higher aspirations were more likely to see the value in contributing to research that could benefit their children. By considering these additional factors, we better understand the barriers to participation and can develop more targeted strategies to address them.

A key aim of the project was to provide understanding and practical strategies to engage low-income families in education research to improve the representativeness of findings and recommendations made, thereby enhancing research impact on large-scale projects. To summarise, our key suggestions are the need for a supportive and trusted environment, a sense that participation leads to tangible social change to improve their circumstances and those of their children, and access to participants through trusted gatekeepers. The reason these parents spoke to us in Beijing and Greater London was due to the trust they had in the staff. We argue here that when working with low-income families there is a real need to adopt these research practices to improve recruitment and retention across the life course of the project. Moreover, we need these voices in social and education research to ensure that the findings and resultant recommendations reflect the lived experiences across all levels of society.

These findings have significant policy and academic implications. In policy terms governments and educational institutions collaborate with community organisations and NGOs to increase the participation of low-income families through intermediaries. Academically, we suggest that future research explores additional strategies to increase participation, such as providing financial incentives and flexible participation options. Furthermore, low-income families in different social contexts may face different challenges, so policies and research must consider these differences and develop targeted strategies. Although the specific socio-economic barriers in London and Beijing differ,

enhancing social capital and community support can achieve similar positive outcomes in both locations.

In conclusion, the characteristics of research that appeal to these families are highly relevant research topics (parents recognise its importance and usefulness) and have confidence that their participation will lead to change. Flexibility to accommodate their needs and reaching out to them (e.g. playgroups, drop-in centres) is crucial. Providing follow-ups and ensuring long-term practical impacts are also essential. By adjusting research practices and ensuring that the care of low-income and vulnerable participants is at the forefront of our approach before, during and after the study, it is possible to improve the recruitment, retention and engagement in our projects. For future research, it is recommended to focus on operationalising these insights in different cultural contexts, ensuring that the voices of all socio-economic segments are heard and valued. This approach is not only a matter of ethical research practice but also a crucial step towards addressing global educational inequalities.

Note

1. Chinese state schools adopt proximity enrolment policy. Families need to move to the catchment area of the school in order to get enrolled.

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