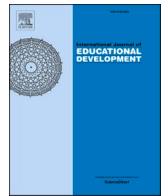





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# The power of structure: Institutionalization and parental involvement in chinese urban primary schools

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## ABSTRACT

Family-school collaboration in China's primary schools has become increasingly institutionalized. Grounded in Scott's institutional theory and Bourdieu's field framework, this study investigates how institutionalization shapes parental involvement. Drawing on in-depth interviews with managers, teachers, and parents from four primary schools, the findings reveal that institutionalization significantly enhances the generalization and formalization of parental involvement, consolidating a school-dominated governance logic. However, notable disparities in parental involvement persist across regions and schools, stemming from differences in how institutional elements are combined and enacted. While institutionalization provides a baseline framework that supports "low-involvement" families to some extent, it embeds implicit cultural thresholds and normative expectations. Moreover, the process has contributed to rising parental rights consciousness, leading to increasingly negotiated and interactive institutional spaces. This study argues that institutionalization's effectiveness depends not solely on normative consistency, but on whether institutional structures foster resonance, recognition, and cultural inclusion in everyday family-school interactions.

## 1. Introduction

Extensive research demonstrates that parental involvement significantly enhances student learning motivation (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005), academic achievement (Boonk et al., 2018; Fan and Chen, 2001; Kim, 2018), and socio-emotional competencies (Cosso et al., 2022; Martinez-Yarza et al., 2024). Moreover, parental engagement contributes to improving educational quality (Buchmann and Hannum, 2001) and promoting educational equity (Fenton et al., 2017; Holloway and Park, 2014). Consequently, policies that encourage parental involvement and family-school partnerships have been widely implemented in many countries across the globe.

In China, this global trend is profoundly shaped by a unique socio-cultural context characterized by "education fever", which means Chinese parents' enthusiasm for their children's education and their

extremely high expectations for their children's academic school performance (Chen, Huang, Lu, and Zhang, 2020). This phenomenon, deeply rooted in the Confucian heritage that views education as the primary path to social mobility, is amplified by the high-stakes Gaokao (national college entrance examination) system, which creates intense, top-down pressure that permeates all levels of schooling (Lu, Shi, and Zhong, 2018). This environment fosters widespread parental anxiety regarding educational investment, leading to a more intense focus on in-school performance and family-based parental support, which makes the dynamics of family-school collaboration more critical than ever.

Recognizing the growing importance of this collaboration, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee explicitly incorporated "The Improvement of The Family-School-Community Collaborative Education Mechanism" into the national 14th Five-Year Plan and the 2035 long-term development goals, positioning family-school

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cooperation as a strategic priority for the country's educational development (Zhong Gong Shijiujiu Wuzhong Quanhui, 2020). Over the past decade, family-school collaboration in China has entered a strategic development phase, with its significance and value elevated to new heights, reflecting a clear trend towards institutionalization (Bian and Zhou, 2021), which is the process by which certain behaviors, rules, procedures, and organizational forms become embedded and stabilized through formal and informal institutional arrangements.

Corresponding with this policy, schools at various levels have begun promoting the institutionalization of family-school collaboration practices, including establishing parent committees, organizing parent schools, developing family education guidance platforms, and extensively utilizing digital platforms for communication and coordination. On the one hand, schools continue to dominate resource allocation, rule-making, and performance evaluation, forming a governance pattern characterized by "school-dominated." On the other hand, the increasing emphasis on parental educational responsibility, along with the rise of parentalism (Brown, 1990), which highlights parents' central role in school selection and resource allocation, has led to a heightened awareness of parental rights. Fueled by technological platforms and educational anxieties, parental involvement and advocacy have expanded rapidly, leading to conflicts with school-dominated governance logics and practices. Parental roles are no longer viewed as peripheral participants in education but are increasingly redefined as active agents and key collaborators within the foundational education system (Brown, 1990).

Parental involvement also demonstrates notable disparities. Previous studies on disparities in parental involvement predominantly analyze these differences from perspectives focused on parents themselves, including social class distinctions through cultural capital (Lareau, 1987; Lareau and Horvat, 1999; Lareau, Weininger, 2003), social capital (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; McNeal, 1999), and perceptions of educational value (Lareau, 1987). This study moves beyond frameworks that focus primarily on individual or familial characteristics to examine how parental involvement is intrinsically shaped by institutional and organizational structures.

Institutionalization plays a complex and dual role in parental involvement in education. On one hand, institutional policies and designs promote the formalization of family-school collaboration and reinforce the role of parents within the educational system (Edwards and Alldred, 2000; Wang, Yin, and King, 2025). On the other hand, institutionalization may marginalize some children, reinforce social class disparities, and even function as a mechanism for the reproduction of inequality (Goldstone, Baker, and Barg, 2023; Lareau, Weininger, 2003). Studies suggest that institutional structures not only shape the forms and possibilities of parental involvement but also provide the structural context within which both children and parents strategically respond to these arrangements. In China, rural parents often remain passive in school involvement due to weak policy implementation, lacking concrete mechanisms, and facing information and resource barriers (Xie and Postiglione, 2016). These studies underscore the profound influence of institutionalized family-school collaboration on parental involvement, particularly regarding disparities and equity issues.

However, nearly a decade has passed since that study, and few international publications have reexamined the effects of institutionalized family-school collaboration in China. Over this period, the landscape has evolved: many urban schools have established regularized institutional arrangements for parental involvement. Moreover, while previous research centered on rural communities, the present study focuses on mid-level urban settings. This raises the question of whether institutional "loopholes" can explain disparities in parental involvement, or whether new patterns have emerged that reflect shifts in regional and temporal contexts.

Based on this background, this study aims to address the following questions: 1) Compared with the past, what new characteristics does parental involvement exhibit within the framework of institutionalized

family-school collaboration in Chinese cities? 2) What role does the institutional framework play in shaping these new characteristics and dynamic changes within this collaboration?

## 2. Definition and literature review

### 2.1. Distinctive features of parental involvement in China

In November 2024, China's Ministry of Education issued a national policy that aimed to build family-school-community collaboration alliances across all counties by 2027. While this reflects the government's growing emphasis on integrated educational governance, in practice, collaboration remains largely school-dominated, with limited mobilization of community actors. As such, families and schools continue to be the core participants, often navigating coordination challenges and role ambiguity.

Existing studies suggest that Chinese parents display distinctive patterns in their willingness to participate, modes of involvement, and capacities. Rooted in the traditional belief that "education changes destiny," parents across social classes place high value on academic achievement, educational attainment, and employment as key avenues for upward mobility (Lin and Qian, 2025; Li and Curdt-Christiansen, 2024). This challenges the applicability of the "culture-of-poverty" thesis, which assumes that lower-SES parents devalue education. In response, some scholars have introduced the concept of subaltern cultural capital, arguing that underprivileged youth and their families exhibit strong intrinsic motivation, moralized self-discipline, and academic resilience, fostering close relationships with teachers and strong performance in school (Cheng and Kang, 2016). While this framework remains contested (Wang et al., 2023; Shen and Lin, 2023), it reframes social class-based assumptions of educational disengagement.

However, high aspirations do not necessarily translate into active school-based involvement. Low-income and migrant parents often face structural constraints, including limited resources and unfamiliarity with school expectations (Huntsinger and Jose, 2009). Migrant families in particular experience pronounced barriers rooted in deficits of economic and social capital. Studies using WeChat, China's dominant social platform, show that technology-mediated parental involvement adds further complexity to the relationship between social class and educational inequality (Huang and Lin, 2019).

In terms of involvement styles, Chinese parents tend to favor family-based involvement, such as supervising homework and structuring study routines, over participating in school governance or extracurricular activities (Lau et al., 2011; Yamamoto et al., 2022). This tendency is a pragmatic response to the high-stakes academic environment; parents often perceive direct academic support as the most critical contribution to their child's success in a hyper-competitive landscape. This tendency is especially prevalent among rural and migrant families and reflects a cultural framing of education as a collective family responsibility, with academic performance tied to family honor (Hong and Ho, 2005). Parents may express frustration with the absence of standardized grading systems in U.S. schools, underscoring a cultural preference for quantitative evaluation (Huntsinger and Jose, 2009). While schools encourage involvement in disciplinary or cultural activities, many Chinese parents view such efforts as peripheral to core academic responsibilities (Constantino et al., 1995).

Overall, Chinese parental involvement is characterized by a family-dominated model, a strong academic orientation, and limited involvement in school governance. This interaction model reflects cultural strengths, such as educational discipline and institutional trust, while also revealing structural tensions within current efforts to promote coordinated family-school collaboration.

### 2.2. Multiple influencing factors of parental involvement

Parental involvement is shaped by a complex interplay of factors

operating across multiple levels. Rather than offering another comprehensive review, this study builds on existing syntheses to provide an up to date analysis of current explanatory models.

A widely used framework is [Hornby and Lafaele's \(2011\)](#) four-dimensional model of barriers, which classifies obstacles into parent and family factors; child-related factors; interactional factors between parents and teachers; and broader socio-structural factors. [Lareau, Weininger \(2003\)](#) outlines three key perspectives explaining class-based disparities in parental involvement: the culture-of-poverty thesis, which sees limited participation as culturally driven; the institutional discrimination thesis, which attributes exclusion to systemic bias, though Lareau refutes this with data showing similar school demands; and the cultural capital perspective, which remains dominant and highlights how middle-class families convert cultural practices into educational advantage. These frameworks often blend with social capital analysis: middle-class parents use language, confidence, and networks to dominate school interactions, while working-class parents tend to remain passive due to limited capital ([Lareau, Weininger, 2003](#)). [Lareau and Horvat \(1999\)](#) further show how race and class intersect to shape how cultural capital is activated in racialized institutional settings. In China, this intersectional lens reveals how migrant parents, shaped by rural backgrounds and working-class identities, develop habitus that are often stigmatized in urban school environments ([Yu, 2020](#)). Guanxi, as a culturally specific form of social capital, also plays a significant role in shaping access to educational opportunities, especially in rural regions ([Xie and Postiglione, 2016](#)).

Despite the strength of these frameworks, existing research faces several limitations. First, it often overemphasizes parents' individual willingness, behavior, or competence, while underplaying structural constraints. Second, it sometimes places disproportionate blame on schools and teachers, assuming they are systematically biased. Third, class-based explanations are inconsistently applied across contexts and often lack conceptual clarity.

Therefore, this study moves beyond the binary of individual verses institutional explanations by reframing parents both as "actors within schools" and "subjects shaped by the education system." Parents are embedded in both meso-level organizational contexts and macro-level institutional structures.

### 3. Theoretical framework

To analyze the dynamics of institutionalized parental involvement, this study constructs a theoretical framework that integrates [Scott's \(2014\)](#) institutional theory with Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital. This approach moves beyond individualistic explanations of parental behavior to examine the interplay between institutional structures and the power relations embedded within them.

[Scott's \(2014\)](#) theory provides the tools to dissect the "rules of the game" in family-school collaboration. We utilize his triadic model, comprising regulative (formal rules and policies), normative (social obligations and expectations), and cultural-cognitive (shared meanings and scripts) elements, to understand how institutional arrangements are structured. These elements work in concert to provide stability and legitimacy, but can also generate contradictions.

Complementing this structural view, [Bourdieu's \(1990\)](#) theory illuminates the "game" itself: a competitive field where actors (schools and families) are positioned differently and vie for influence. The educational field is not neutral; it is a space of power relations where actors mobilize various forms of capital (e.g., cultural, social) to defend or improve their positions. This lens is critical for revealing how the school's structural dominance is established and how families, with their varying levels of capital, must negotiate their involvement within a framework they do not fully control. This framework is further refined by [Hoffman's \(1999\)](#) concept of the organizational field, which helps conceptualize schools and families as distinct yet interdependent organizations whose boundaries and roles are continuously negotiated in

response to policy and governance pressures.

By integrating these perspectives, this study positions parents not as isolated individuals, but as embedded actors within a school-dominated institutional field. This robust theoretical framework allows for a nuanced analysis of how institutional norms are shaped, enacted, and contested through the dynamic interaction between institutional structures and parental capital in everyday practice.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Research design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach to understand how social realities are subjectively constructed and interpreted by individuals ([Ravitch and Carl, 2021](#)). Following theoretical and purposive sampling strategies, cases were selected to capture variation across regional contexts, socioeconomic backgrounds, and models of family-school collaboration ([Yin, 2018](#)).

The theoretical framework integrates Scott's institutional theory (2014) with Bourdieu's theory of field and capital (1990). Scott's three elements provide a lens to examine the structure and legitimacy of family-school collaboration practices. This is complemented by Bourdieu's theory, which foregrounds the competitive dynamics of institutional fields where actors (families and schools) mobilize various forms of capital to maintain or improve their positions. This integrated framework allows for an analysis of how institutions shape parental involvement, and in turn, how parents negotiate institutional norms based on their social positions.

### 4.2. Case selection and context

The research was conducted in four public primary schools with established family-school collaboration frameworks, located in non-first-tier, non-rural Chinese cities. The schools were situated in Central (School A), Southwestern (School B), Eastern (School C), and another Central region (School D) to reflect diverse economic and educational conditions. These locations represent "middle-ground" urban contexts, making them broadly representative of China's urban education landscape beyond the metropolises.

The schools were deliberately chosen for their diversity in type, history, and student profiles to enable a comparative analysis. For instance, School A is in a rapidly developing tech hub, and School B is in a region with rich educational resources. In contrast, School C (in a city facing economic decline) and School D (in a resource-based city) offer insights into how traditional structures impact family-school relations. This comparative design allows for an analysis of how macro-level socioeconomic structures shape meso-level school practices and parental involvement.

To construct a multi-faceted perspective, data were collected from a range of stakeholders, including principals, administrators, teachers, and parents. Students were not included as participants. The participant sample was designed to ensure diversity in terms of both experience and role. Specifically, 11 school leaders (principals and vice-principals), 16 teachers (both senior and younger), and 12 parents (with varying levels of school involvement) were selected. Teachers were chosen to ensure both senior and younger voices were captured, as these two groups exhibit distinct approaches to family-school collaboration. In particular, senior teachers and younger teachers showed different attitudes and behaviors toward parental involvement, making it essential to include both in the sample. School leaders were selected based on their roles in guiding family-school collaboration, typically vice-principals or directors responsible for school-family relations. For the parents, we ensured a mix of those who are highly engaged in school activities and those with lower levels of involvement, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the varying dynamics of family-school collaboration.

### 4.3. Data collection and analysis

We collected data primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with principals, administrators, teachers, and parents, supplemented by documentary evidence such as school policies and activity records (Ravitch and Carl, 2021). The interview guides, informed by institutional theory, were tailored to each stakeholder group and explored their perceptions of parental involvement, role boundaries, and the dynamics of collaboration and conflict. Interviews, including individual and focus group sessions, were conducted online, lasted 60–90 min, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Chinese with participants' informed consent.

Data analysis followed the grounded theory procedures of open and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 2015). Using the constant comparative method, we systematically analyzed data within and across cases to identify emergent patterns and refine theoretical constructs. For example, during open coding, concepts like 'parent committee has no power,' 'parents follow teacher's lead,' and 'school selects cooperative parents' were identified. Through axial coding, these were interconnected to form the core category of a 'school-dominated governance logic,' which explained the power dynamics within institutionalized collaboration.

Perspectival triangulation was essential for validating our interpretations. For instance, a principal's view of a program as a 'driving force' (Principal B) was triangulated with a teacher's perspective of it as an 'added workload,' and parents who found it either 'really worth learning' (Mother Ab) or 'impossible' to attend (Father Cc). Comparing such divergent views allowed for a more nuanced and trustworthy analysis of the program's function. Throughout this process, we maintained reflexive awareness to mitigate bias, carefully navigating our role as the research instrument in a context marked by potential tensions between school and family interests (Ravitch and Carl, 2021).

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. The extensive institutionalization of family-school collaboration activities

This study finds that family-school collaboration in primary schools in non-first-tier Chinese cities has become deeply institutionalized. Mechanisms such as parent committees, parent meetings, parent schools, and daily communication via WeChat and DingTalk are normalized aspects of school governance. While some schools introduced innovations like parent volunteers, the overall structure remains stable and school-driven. All four schools have established similar foundational systems of family-school collaboration. This part primarily introduces Schools B and C as examples for elaboration, as the emphasis in this section is on the commonalities among the four schools. Compared to the situation proposed by Xie and Postiglione (2016), where schools as institutions provide few formal channels for parents to participate in school affairs and help their children achieve academic success, urban schools, or those in China after undergoing extensive urbanization, now have relatively well-established formal channels for parental involvement.

As the principal of School B explained:

*"From the beginning, we have set high-quality development and refined management as our foundational order... We rely on the 'three driving forces': parent meetings, parent schools, and parent open days. This semester, we have already held 12 sessions parents school courses."*

The principal of School C added:

*"Every semester, we organize parent school courses tailored to different grades... Parent meetings occur regularly, and the parent committee meets once per semester. We also conduct home visits during breaks for special cases."*

These mechanisms signify a transition in family-school relations from problem-driven interactions toward institutionalized, and routinized forms of involvement. The frequency and scope of parental involvement have increased markedly, with some parents even taking time off work to attend school-organized events (School B). This shift reflects a move from voluntary engagement to a moralized responsibility. Such transformations are the result of the interplay between regulatory and normative institutional elements. This process of institutionalization has been primarily driven by successive layers of national policy. From the 1952 Elementary Education Regulations (Trial) to the 2021 Family Education Promotion Law, the state has consistently reinforced the institutional foundations of family-school cooperation. These mandates are disseminated through the administrative hierarchy, translated and localized by local education authorities and implemented by individual schools. This idea of localized policy interpretation is central to the functioning of China's education system, where provincial governments play a key role in reformulating and implementing central policies based on local conditions (Ma and Liu, 2021; Sun, Lei, and Yin, 2018). In this context, schools serve not only as implementers but also as interpreters and constructors of institutional norms in practice.

Within this framework, parents have evolved from reactive participants to routine actors in school life, more frequently "entering" both the physical and symbolic space of the school. Although involvement remains non-mandatory in legal terms, the sustained emphasis on parental responsibility in policy discourse, reinforced by school-level expectations, creates a powerful sense of moral obligation. Lareau, Weininger (2003) argue that one impact of the institutionalization of family-school cooperation in the United States is that when families are assigned the role of "equal partners," schools may blame educational failure on the family (especially lower-income families), thus avoiding responsibility themselves. Similarly, this is also true for family-school cooperation in China. Institutions tend to presume that parents have flexible time, digital competence, and communicative ease, which are assumptions that pose real challenges for those with inflexible working conditions, limited resources, or lower confidence in school-based involvement.

As one parent noted:

*"Our work is special, we're never home during the day and don't have weekends off. School activities are scheduled during working hours; we want to participate, but it's just impossible."* (Father Cc)

This illustrates how inclusive institutional designs may, in the absence of sensitivity to diverse family circumstances, exacerbate structural inequalities under the appearance of formal equality. Family-school collaboration mechanisms reinforce a school-dominated governance logic: cooperation is framed as mutual, but unfolds within asymmetrical distributions of power and resources. Although parents show interest and concern for their children's education, they are excluded from school management and organizational decision-making, including important matters related to themselves and their children (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002). Schools, as dominant actors in the educational field, set the terms of involvement.

As one teacher at School B candidly observed:

*"You misunderstand, the parent committee has no real power and certainly cannot make decisions... It mainly helps teachers and the school manage parents and deliver institutional requirements."* (Teacher Bb)

Another teacher added:

*"Sometimes parents don't listen to us teachers, so we ask the parent committee to step in. Their identity is appropriate, and other parents are more willing to listen to them."* (Teacher Ba)

These remarks highlight a commonly overlooked reality: although parent committees are formally presented as representative bodies, they are often composed of school-selected, "cooperative" parents, those with

**Table 1**  
Basic Information on Sample Schools.

School Name	City	District	School brief information
School A	In a city positioned between "new first-tier" <sup>2</sup> and second-tier status; rapid growth in science and technology sectors.	A newly developed district with a mid-range GDP level within the city. The area has shown strong development momentum in recent years.	A newly established member school within an educational group. In the past five years, the school faced significant tensions in family-school relations, but recent reforms have improved the situation.
School B	In a city ranked between "new first-tier" and second-tier; known as a regional hub for quality educational resources.	One of the city's top GDP districts with abundant educational resources.	A branch campus of a well-known primary school, founded less than 20 years ago. The school is recognized for its distinctive school culture.
School C	In a city ranked between second- and third-tier, currently undergoing industrial restructuring and experiencing slight economic decline.	District with upper-middle-level GDP, benefiting from certain geographical and policy advantages.	A modern public primary school with advanced facilities and progressive educational philosophy. Despite this, the school's academic performance is not among the top in the district.
School D	In a fourth-tier, resource-based city with average provincial economic development.	A medium-level GDP within the city, though economic development has been slowing in recent years.	A long-established school with historical roots. Due to regional stagnation and development of new residential areas elsewhere, the school has experienced a significant decline in student enrollment.

<sup>2</sup>New first-tier cities" and "second-tier cities" are classifications commonly used in China to distinguish between levels of urban development, economic activity, and population size. These terms do not correspond directly to official administrative divisions but are based on composite indices including GDP, infrastructure, consumer behavior, and business attractiveness. "New first-tier cities" typically refer to economically dynamic urban centers that, while not designated as top-tier cities like Beijing or Shanghai, play increasingly important roles in national development. "Second-tier cities" usually refer to moderately developed cities that are significant regionally but rank below both national and new first-tier cities in influence.

**Table 2**  
Information on Research Participants.

SchoolName	Principals and other leaders	Tenure(year)	Teachers	Tenure ( year )	Parents	Generation	Occupation
School A	Principal A	15–20	Teacher Aa	15–20	Father Aa	post-90s	Educator
	Vice Principal A		Teacher Ab		Mother Ab	mid-to-late 1980s	Service Worker
	Moral education masterA		Teacher Ac		Mother Ac	post-90s	Service Worker
School B	Principal B	20–25	Teacher Ba	30–35	Father Ba	mid-to-late 1970s	Civil Servants
	Vice PrincipalB		Teacher Bb		Mother Bb	mid-to-late 1990s	Educator
	Moral education masterB		Teacher Bc		Mother Bc	post-90s	Homemaker
School C	Principal C	20–25	Teacher Ca	20–25	Mother Ca	mid-to-late 1990s	Civil Servants
	Vice Principal C		Teacher Cb		Mother Cb	the late 1980s	Worker
			Teacher Cd		Father Cc	post-80s generation	Worker
School D	Principal D	30–35	Teacher Da	30–35	Mother Da	post-80s generation	Researcher
	Vice Principal D		Teacher Db		Mother Db	post-90s	Homemaker
	Moral education masterD		Teacher Dc		Father Dc	post-90s	Service Worker
			Teacher Dd				

higher cultural capital, communication skills, and alignment with school norms. In practice, they function more as conduits for institutional compliance than as genuine bridges between families and school authority.

A particularly noteworthy finding of this study is that, within China's distinctive institutional context, parents employed within the national system (tizhinei体制内) enjoy significant advantages in family-school interactions. The term tizhinei refers to individuals holding formal, state-sanctioned positions, such as public-school teachers, civil servants, employees of public institutions, or permanent staff in state-owned enterprises. These parents typically possess stable employment, standardized modes of communication, and a strong understanding of bureaucratic procedures. They generally occupy middle to upper socioeconomic strata. Familiar with organizational logic and adept at navigating institutional discourse, these parents are often regarded by schools as reliable partners. In some schools, teachers even proactively seek their input or relay important information to them. Moreover, such parents are more capable of engaging in school affairs through informal channels, allowing them to participate more effectively in feedback or decision-making processes.

This finding is consistent with the work of Liu and Ma (2018), who note that tizhinei jobs, which include positions in government or state-run enterprises, represent high social capital and stability in Chinese society. Although direct evidence that tizhinei parents are more engaged in school activities are not found in previous researches, their social position and familiarity with bureaucratic processes seem to grant them advantages in family-school interactions.

As one teacher from school C candidly shared during an interview:

*"He's a deputy director at a government office, who is very easygoing and great to talk to. Whenever he brings something up, the school leaders really pay attention."*

While such mechanisms may enhance administrative efficiency, they simultaneously create symbolic boundaries between "core parents" and "ordinary parents." The latter, though institutionally included, remain substantively excluded from meaningful involvement in school decision-making processes.

### 5.2. Regional and school differences in parental involvement: institutional reproduction

All four schools have formal family-school systems, yet the quality differs (see Table 1). This disparity stems not only from the schools' own governance capabilities but, more profoundly, reflects how different regional economic dynamics, policy traditions, and social ecologies shape the schools' institutional capacities and room for action. School A stands out for its deep integration of cultural-cognitive elements. School A is in an economically developed district, and more critically, the

**Table 3**  
Parent Involvement and School Information.

School	Relationship with Parents	Parent Involvement	School Culture	Organizational Structure Feature
School A	Strong and positive relationship, low complaint rate	Active participation (breadth+depth)	Includes core cultural concepts; education philosophy; school curriculum system; education and child observation—a whole set of basic cultural systems, rooted locally with unique history and culture.	Democratic, multi-level
School B	From conflict to collaboration, low complaint rate	Active participation (breadth+depth)	Emphasizes cultural establishment, "Three Winds" training, complete educational philosophy, goals, and talent guidance, characterized by "refined management."	Emphasizing specialization in family-school cooperation work
School C	Some parent conflicts	Partial active participation	Lacks cultural foundation, no cultural system, irregular school openings and closings.	Traditional structure
School D	Overall balanced relationship	Neither proactive nor indifferent	Has a cultural foundation, but has not yet carried out theoretical refinement and systematic management.	Traditional structure

district government has been actively promoting family-school cooperation since the 1990s, establishing a deep-rooted policy tradition. In recent years, it has gone further by incorporating family education into the public service charter and establishing a "district-school-community" three-tiered coordination mechanism, which carries a strong "government-led" and "standardized" character. It has cultivated a strong educational community rooted in local history, aesthetic values, and a shared educational philosophy. Activities such as festival events, co-education projects, and a unique parent-storytelling initiative reflect a deeply embedded culture of mutual respect and emotional connection. As the principal explained:

*"I do not treat family-school cooperation as a separate task... It's really about creating, you feel like you're shaping a certain style, creating new possibilities. And that's interesting, it gives you a real sense of accomplishment. Once the school's atmosphere and culture evolve in a certain direction, you find that many things just naturally fall into place. Our key impact now is on parents, they need broader perspectives... So we developed an 'IP' format: educational micro-video films." (Principal, School A)*

This cultural leadership is reflected in how teachers and parents respond. A teacher shared:

*"Our principal is like a goddess to us. Every year during holidays, she personally prepares all kinds of thoughtful little gifts for us. She's very supportive of our growth and professional development. Of course, we do feel pressure at times, but it's the kind of pressure that helps us grow faster. When we know it's for the good of the school and the students, we see it as something even more valuable." (Teacher Ae)*

A parent added:

*"The principal and teachers voiced exactly what parents needed to hear and guided us on how to support our children. The principal even recommended Teacher XX's audio course 'Essential Lessons for Parents', along with some related books, it was all really worth learning. Homework is ultimately the child's responsibility. As parents, just getting angry doesn't solve anything, we really need to learn scientific methods from experts." (Mother Ab)*

Organizationally, School A also benefits from a well-structured system that balances strategy, implementation, and frontline execution, reinforcing shared purpose and institutional consistency. In this context, participation becomes spontaneous and internalized, enabled not by formal rules but by cultural resonance.

School B similarly emphasizes a "culture-based" approach but builds more heavily on regulatory and normative structures. This, too, is a product of its regional history and policy choices. This is inextricably linked to its regional environment. The school is located in the city's high-tech industrial zone, which enjoys rapid economic development. The region not only boasts superior educational resources but has also cultivated a culture that encourages innovation and openness. Concurrently, the district government provides solid policy and technological

support for the school's innovative practices through school-group management and a smart campus system. This enabling regional environment creates the perfect conditions for School A's principal to exercise her cultural leadership. Following a difficult period of family-school conflict, it adopted governance reforms, strengthened monitoring systems, and institutionalized teacher development through mentoring and rotation. Parental complaints dropped to zero for three years. Its manuals, quality checks, and rule-based planning represent strong regulatory elements, while shared values around well-being and diversified development foster normative legitimacy. However, it is precisely this top-down, regulation-first regional tradition that makes its family-school cooperation model lean more toward efficient "compliance" rather than the "co-construction" that grows from the bottom up in an open environment, as seen in School A.

In contrast, Schools C and D show weaker institutional foundations. School C suffers from declining enrollment and uncertain status due to regional economic shifts, The "school closure and consolidation" policy implemented by the district government to manage the crisis, while a rational reallocation of resources, has brought immense uncertainty to the school, destabilizing teacher-student relationships and administrative order. This regional-level "survival crisis" directly undermines the school's foundation for building stable institutions. The principal's sense of "powerlessness" and the mistrust and biases between teachers and parents are, in essence, projections of the collective anxiety and resource scarcity triggered by regional decline. Although policy documents also mandate family-school cooperation, these systems cannot be implemented amidst the turmoil of unstable faculty and declining enrollment, and family-school relations naturally become fraught with conflict. While School D's struggles demonstrate another form of "regional constraint." Its district suffers from sluggish economic growth and a scarcity of quality educational resources, which are concentrated in the old urban center. This leaves School D's area as a long-term educational disadvantage, with a high turnover of core teachers. The region's family-school cooperation policies, while existing on paper, are merely formal due to inadequate resource allocation and ineffective implementation. This regional-level condition of being "formal but not functional" leads directly to "fragmented management" and "teacher burnout" at the school level. As a teacher at School D noted:

*"Management seems fragmented... when parents cause trouble, blame falls on class teachers first." (Teacher Da)*

The principal at School C echoed this frustration:

*"I can no longer motivate the teachers—they have their own priorities. I feel powerless..." (Principal, School C)*

A parent shared a painful experience:

*"When my son clashed with classmates, the teacher said our class was 'excellent' and such students shouldn't be there... The teacher obviously has biases." (Parent, School C)*

Different social theorists have successively identified regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems as core elements of

institutions. All these institutional elements, in an interdependent and mutually reinforcing way, form a powerful social framework that not only accommodates but also demonstrates the strong power and resilience of these structures (Scott, 2014, p. 61). Both school C and D lack not only robust regulatory enforcement and shared moral norms but also the cultural-cognitive cohesion that enables trust and shared meaning. As a result, family-school collaboration remains superficial, fragmented, and prone to conflict. These cases demonstrate that the relative strength and integration of Scott's institutional elements shape distinct institutional types. School B exemplifies strong regulatory-normative institutions, effective in execution but limited in internalization. School A represents a cultural-cognitive model, where participation emerges organically through shared values. Schools C and D, by contrast, are institutionally imbalanced or weak, producing low engagement and frequent tension.

Integrating Bourdieu's field theory, the foregoing differences highlight each school's capacity, as the dominant actor within the educational field, to construct and shape institutional arrangements. The principal's educational vision and the economic context of the region, whether in the economically developed areas of Schools A and B, or in the economically declining regions of Schools C and D, play a crucial role in determining whether the school can maintain a balance across the regulatory, normative, and cultural dimensions. When school governance emphasizes openness, respect, and inclusivity, parents' sense of identity and willingness to engage are enhanced, facilitating genuine internalization of the institution; when such qualities are absent, parental involvement tends to become mechanical and fragmented. By selectively combining regulatory, normative, and cultural elements, different schools create distinctive patterns of family-school collaboration and continuously reshape the educational ecology and social relations on campus.

Schools act as both rule-makers and capital filters: when they validate parents' beliefs, styles and resources, cultural and social capital flow into collaboration; otherwise it is sidelined, reducing parents to passive compliance. Institutional design thus shapes not only whether, but how parents engage and the long-term trajectory of family-school relations. Institutional design not only determines whether parents participate, but also shapes the long-term trajectory of family-school relations, with this process continuously reproducing social structures through the interplay of regional differences and school practices.

### 5.3. The role of institutionalization among "low-involvement" parents

In daily interactions, the "low-involvement" parents are typically guardians of left-behind children, parents of children with special needs, and working-class families struggling with livelihood. Limited by distance, time, and education, they rarely attend school events or even talk face-to-face with teachers. Across the four schools, a shared strategy is "gentle accommodation": basic channels are kept open, but expectations are lowered. Guided by empathy and "teacher's love," staff assume extra moral responsibility and emotional care for these vulnerable families. As the principal of School B remarked:

*"There is also a group of 'left-behind' children, not those left behind in rural areas but children whose parents have gone away for work, and who are cared for by elders or relatives. We organize class teachers to provide remedial lessons, not in a strict sense but trying to encourage attendance at meetings. I believe principals need compassion. If parents do not come, it's important to differentiate whether it is due to rejection of the school or genuine inability to attend. For most, it's the latter. After parent school courses or meetings, our teachers often call or hold online chats with parents individually."*

Within Scott's institutional framework (2014), such practices reflect a coordinated application of all three elements. Regulatory elements include advance notice of events, online participation channels, and the preservation and dissemination of parent-school course materials,

ensuring that even absent parents retain access to core information and do not become disconnected from school life. Normative elements are reflected in the emotional and ethical obligations that teachers assume. As a teacher at School D noted:

*"Chinese culture values moderation, society is emotional. Humanistic education and empathy play a greater role in daily practice, putting oneself in others' shoes. Pure water won't hold fish; we must accommodate parental diversity. As teachers, we must adopt the right mindset and compensate for parents' shortcomings through our own diligence, they may lack capacity or time. Yet, we must also improve quality through extra effort."* (Teacher Db)

Under such a logic, institutionalized involvement shifts away from rigid requirements and becomes a gentler behavioral guide. Teachers adjust to family circumstances through phone calls, brief updates, and proactive outreach. Cultural-cognitive elements are not merely embedded in written policy but are cultivated in everyday interactions that gradually construct a "community of emotion." As Scott (2014, p.71) states, culture is often viewed as a unified system that maintains consistency across different groups or contexts. In this environment, parents no longer perceive the school purely as an authoritative entity, but rather as a supporter and partner. As a parent from School C expressed:

*"We don't have no complaints, but there is mutual understanding. My son's teacher is quite young, so we're sympathetic to her inexperience. She has good intentions. When the class wins awards, she takes the kids on outings and buys gifts. Sometimes she replies to parents' messages late at night. So we don't raise minor issues much. Most parents in our class are actively involved, even busy ones try to support the teacher when possible."* (Mother Cb)

However, institutional "care" alone cannot fully counter structural disadvantages. In the educational field, low-involvement parents often lack the cultural capital (e.g., educational discourse, communication skills) and social capital (e.g., relational networks) recognized by schools. As a result, their habitus frequently misaligns with institutional expectations. Nevertheless, institutional arrangements that reduce technical barriers, demonstrate empathetic intent, and downplay punitive logics preserve a symbolic position for these parents within the field. While they may not attend frequently, they are not entirely excluded from educational collaboration.

More critically, when schools consistently foster an emotionally responsive cultural atmosphere, where "absence" is not stigmatized and "limited involvement" remains valid, institutions cease to function merely as tools of enforcement and instead become frameworks that accommodate diversity. This form of flexible institutionalization helps soften exclusionary dynamics within the field, while maintaining basic norms and standards. It effectively expands the boundaries of family involvement and provides a more resilient and humane foundation for family-school relations.

### 5.4. Institutionalization and the rise of parental rights awareness

Chinese immigrant parents generally perceive schools as the primary agents responsible for education, believing their role is merely to cooperate. Due to language barriers and cultural differences, even when they have concerns about curriculum arrangements or ESL class placements, they often feel "reluctant or unsure how to express" them (Constantino, Cui, and Faltis, 1995). In Ireland, working-class parents report feeling "nervous, fearful, and demeaned" in interactions with teachers, fearing that raising questions may be perceived as troublemaking, leading them to remain silent (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002). A similar situation is found in Norway: despite official policies granting parents equal rights, teachers assert their authority through an emphasis on "professionalism," expecting parents to adopt a "passive recipient" role, making it difficult to challenge teachers' decisions (Tveit, 2009).

This suggests that, across various cultural contexts, there exists a phenomenon of parental “submission” to teachers and schools. However, this phenomenon appears to be undergoing changes in contemporary China.

As parental involvement in education deepens, institutionalization increasingly shapes how parental rights are expressed and contested. Regulatory mechanisms, such as complaint hotlines and structured communication channels offer parents legitimate pathways to voice demands and seek redress. Interviews show that rising rights consciousness has prompted schools to refine institutional safeguards to reduce risk. As one principal explained:

*“We remind teachers not to keep children at school too long without parents picking them up... If a parent says their child will go home alone, the school sends a confirmation notice... Teachers have many duties; dismissal supervision alone requires sorting kids carefully. If safety issues occur, the school is responsible.” (Principal A, School A)*

Parents can also invoke these institutional channels to mobilize external forces, such as education bureaus effectively extending family field logic into the educational field. While this increases parental voice, excessive interventions risk turning institutional tools into instruments of pressure or confrontation. Regulatory channels meant for accountability may burden schools with escalating complaints, prompting cautious and inflexible administrative responses. Defensive institutional construction thus emerges as schools attempt to preserve order amid external scrutiny.

Normative tensions also surface when parental expectations of “reasonable education” and “good parenting” diverge from school norms. Through institutional channels, parents may assert their own normative logics, challenging school authority. These conflicts reflect mismatched habitus between actors in different fields. As a vice principal from School A recalled:

*“Alan’s case was illustrative: a mother angrily posted a long complaint on Weibo, tagging city and district education bureaus... Visits by teachers were rebuffed... The mother was emotionally charged and refused dialogue.”*

At the cultural-cognitive level, transparency and open meetings aim to foster mutual trust, yet shared understanding is not guaranteed. Even individuals in the same context may have completely different perceptions and understandings of what is, what should be done, and how it should be done (Scott, 2014, p. 71). Parents interpret school decisions through the lens of their own experiences, educational background, and social class position. When interpretive frameworks clash, even minor issues can escalate. A teacher from School A observed:

*“Parents sometimes perceive bias over small issues... Once they suspect ill intent, they become hyper-vigilant... A parent once caused an uproar because her child got mosquito bites while others did not, she demanded an explanation.” (Teacher Ac)*

Parents seek to embed their own logics and capitalize on institutional platforms, while schools caught between state and family pressures, respond by constructing defensive norms and procedures. In this multi-actor dynamic, institutions themselves become objects of struggle, with meaning, function, and authority negotiated through ongoing interactions. Understanding parental rights today thus requires not only examining institutional design, but analyzing how institutions are mobilized, resisted, and reshaped within the broader power dynamics of the educational field.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

### 6.1. The core tensions and theoretical contributions

This study reveals that the institutionalization of family-school collaboration in urban China is a complex process fraught with

profound tensions. On one hand, driven by sustained national policy directives, this process provides a standardized framework that integrates a broad spectrum of families into the school system, creating an unprecedented baseline for involvement for lower-middle-class urban families. On the other hand, this same top-down institutional structure introduces two new forms of tension. The first is a form of implicit cultural exclusion: it embeds behavioral standards aligned with middle-class cultural styles, creating a symbolic boundary between “core parents” and “ordinary parents” and thus reproducing new inequalities. This observation aligns with the previous researches (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; Tveit, 2009), who similarly highlight how institutional norms and communication practices can privilege certain parental groups while marginalizing others. The second, more dynamic tension is the unintended cultivation of parental rights-consciousness. Probably fueled by the immense economic and emotional investment demanded by “education fever,” parents increasingly view themselves as key stakeholders or even “consumers” of education. Institutionalization provides parents with legitimate channels for action, such as complaint hotlines and formal meetings, enabling them to move beyond being passive recipients of institutional directives. They are learning to utilize these “rules and resources” to voice demands, challenge school authority, and seek external intervention.

In this context, parents employed within China’s national system (tizhinei, 体制内) are particularly privileged in family-school interactions due to their social status and familiarity with institutional processes. These tizhinei parents possess stable jobs, strong bureaucratic knowledge, and a higher level of cultural and social capital, which positions them as “core parents” in parental involvement. Teachers tend to view these parents as reliable partners, and they often proactively seek their input or relay information to them. The advantage of tizhinei parents is rooted not just in financial capital but also in their ability to navigate institutional channels effectively, as these parents are already familiar with the language and culture of bureaucracy. In the Western context, a similar phenomenon is that middle-class parents are more adept at using educational discourse, actively demanding personalized teaching support, and leveraging higher symbolic capital (such as professional status) to challenge teacher authority, while working-class parents tend to be more passive (Lareau, Weininger (2003).

The study’s theoretical contribution is to fuse Scott’s (2014) institutionalism with Bourdieu’s (1990) field theory. Rather than treating regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements as static backdrops, it shows how they jointly constitute the “rules of the game” in the family-school field and how parents and schools, wielding unequal capital, negotiate, valorise, or devalue that capital within this evolving arena. We have validated Scott’s argument that in most institutional forms, it is not just one element, but rather a combination of two or even three elements that plays a role (Scott, 2014, p. 73) and argue that the success or failure of collaboration depends not merely on the existence of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements, but more critically on how these elements combine to shape a particular “cultural field.” It is within this field that the different forms of parental capital are assigned value, recognized, or devalued.

### 6.2. The decisive role of the cultural field: insights from the cases

This study finds that the cultural-cognitive element plays a decisive and integrating role in shaping the character of the field. This school-dominated cultural field is, in itself, a powerful structure that profoundly mediates parental involvement. When a school’s cultural-cognitive elements construct a trusting and validating enabling structure, it expands the space for parental agency, transforming involvement from an obligation into an identification. Conversely, when this structure is rigid, exclusionary, or culturally weak, it becomes a constraining structure, compressing parental agency into narrow channels of either passive compliance or active resistance.

The construction of this determinative “cultural field” is not

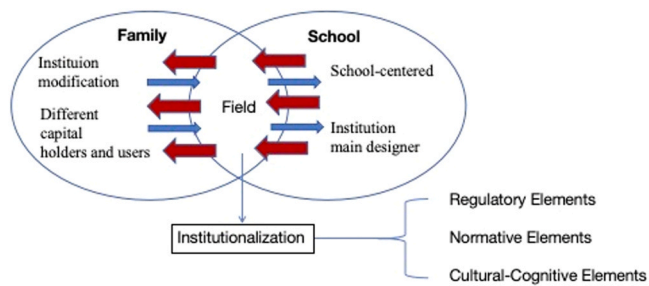


Fig. 1. Theoretical Framework Graphic.

accidental; it is a dynamic process shaped heavily by the interplay of principal leadership, school culture, and parental capital. This interaction directly determines the different combinations and efficacy of Scott's (2014) three institutional elements. This phenomenon reveals a new feature of contemporary family-school collaboration in China and challenges previous research. The study by Xie and Postiglione (2016) attributed inequality in rural areas to "institutional loopholes." Our research, however, finds that in urban contexts where institutionalization is relatively advanced, even when formal "loopholes" are filled, inequality is still reproduced in a more subtle form. The root cause is no longer the absence of institutions but the exclusive culture embedded within the institutions themselves. The coexistence of widespread opportunities for participation and an exclusive cultural core constitutes the central paradox of family-school collaboration today. Besides, the root cause is no longer institutional shortcomings, but the exclusive culture formed under competitive pressure. Therefore, future policies must directly address and alleviate this social anxiety, rather than merely establishing rules.

### 6.3. Practical and policy implications

Our findings strongly suggest that future reforms must move beyond merely proliferating regulative tools, as such "one-size-fits-all" policies are destined for limited success if they ignore the underlying driver: pervasive educational anxiety. For policymakers, the focus should shift from enforcement to empowerment. Instead of simply issuing top-down mandates, policy should be designed to build schools' capacity to become architects of their own inclusive cultures, acting as potential counterweights to the hyper-competitive pressures of the wider society. This involves providing school leaders, particularly principals, with the autonomy, resources, and professional development needed to cultivate institutional environments that are emotionally resonant and culturally inclusive. The goal of policy should be to incentivize the creation of trusting, collaborative communities, rather than just ensuring procedural compliance.

For educational practitioners, this study highlights their critical role as "main designers" of the institutional field. Principals and teachers must recognize that an institution's effectiveness hinges on its cultural-cognitive foundation. This requires consciously moving beyond a logic of management and control toward one of partnership and co-construction.

In addition, it is crucial that policies specifically address the challenges faced by schools in economically disadvantaged or declining regions. For example, policymakers should prioritize funding for schools in these regions, allocating resources not only for physical infrastructure but also for professional development and teacher training that focuses on effective family-school collaboration.

### 6.4. Limitations and future research directions

This study is, of course, not without its limitations. First, lacking long-term ethnographic fieldwork, our understanding of internal school dynamics was derived primarily from in-depth interviews and

supplementary materials. Second, this study is limited by its small sample size of four schools, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The schools were chosen from regions with varying economic development, but the results may not apply nationwide. Future research should include a larger, more diverse sample. Third, this study's necessary focus on institutional structure highlights the need for future research on its counterpart: parental agency. A dual perspective examining the interplay between structure and agency is a valuable next step.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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### Author Statement

We declare that this manuscript is original, has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere. We confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. We further confirm that the order of authors listed in the manuscript has been approved by all of us. We understand that the Corresponding Author is the sole contact for the Editorial process. She is responsible for communicating with the other authors about progress, submissions of revisions and final approval of proofs.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Sharnita Midgett:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Resources, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Sharon M. Ravitch:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Xiaohang Luo:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Yuting Wang:** Writing – original draft, Software, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ruoshui Zhao:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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