

Chapter 3

Family–School Partnership as an Indispensable Avenue for Moral Education Stressing Pandemic Prevention and Control: A Case Study From Beijing, China

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ABSTRACT

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, schools in the Chinese mainland delayed opening until June, 2020. By describing a case study in Beijing, the authors explore how control of the pandemic has been affected by moral education delivered through family–school partnerships when students are taking their classes online at home. Following China's reforms and opening up in the 1990s, *deyu*, an educational domain in China, has addressed broad subjects such as character education, citizenship education, and mental health education using various formal and informal educational vehicles. Through analyzing data from 17 secondary schools and 27 primary schools in Beijing, the authors found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, humanistic and life-centered themes dominated the content of *deyu*. Social norms such as obeying regulations on pandemic control, showing empathy for fellow citizens, and caring for family members and peers were found to be strengthened through online activities in which families were included. The authors suggest that family–school partnerships in which all participants share responsibility and act in a unified way somehow promote pandemic control. However, degree of family participation in the partnerships need further research.

KEYWORDS: moral education, *deyu* in the Chinese mainland, family–school partnership, education during the pandemic

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

In February 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began to pose challenges for school educators worldwide. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, schools in the Chinese mainland delayed opening for six months while classes were conducted online. Because students were studying at home, participation by parents in family–school partnerships was required for the online moral education (Pei et al., 2020; Wu, 2020; Zhu & Wang, 2020).

Deyu, the name of an educational domain in China, is usually translated into English simply as “moral education,” as it derives from two words: *de* meaning “morality” and *yu* meaning “education” (Li et al., 2004). Since China’s reforms and opening-up in the 1990s, the Ministry of Education has broadened the meaning of *deyu*, combining moral education and ideological education to incorporate themes such as citizenship education, character education, and mental health education (Li et al., 2004; Feng, 2018, pp. 174–178). The purpose of these inclusions was to cultivate the development of citizens suited for a socialist society with Chinese characteristics (Feng, 2018, pp. 174–178). In this study, we used a variety of formal and informal methods to examine the conduct of *deyu* in Beijing at the same time attempts were being made to control the Covid-19 pandemic.

When *deyu* was expanded in the 1990s, Chinese educators began discussing the importance of family participation in moral education, as described in the manual *Instructions on Strengthening Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools*, published by the State Education Commission (1990). In 2017, the Ministry of Education of the Chinese mainland, in its *Guide to Moral Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools*, proposed that in conducting *deyu*, schools should “try to have families and communities on board” and “strengthen guidance for family education” (Ministry of Education, 2017). The forms of family–school partnership mentioned in the existing Chinese literature can be divided into three categories: school–family communication, school guidance of family education, and parental participation (Gong, 2018; Wu, 2018). Since smartphones became prevalent in the Chinese mainland, online vehicles for family–school partnerships have become increasingly popular, and many classes have logged onto WeChat discussion groups and other online platforms to access more flexible forms of family–school communication

(Shen, 2020). These venues provide the partners with fundamental tools and skills particularly useful for controlling the pandemic.

Many scholars have discussed the significance and mechanisms of family–school partnerships in both theoretical and empirical terms. In the philosophy of education domain of caring ethics, Nel Noddings (1992) has proposed a new kind of interpersonal relationship that she calls the “caring relationship”; drawing upon philosophical reflections on feminism, she highlights the role of the family in moral education, noting that interpersonal communication in the provision of care provides ideal opportunities for moral behavior and moral learning in everyday life. Caring ethics has been widely cited in Chinese literature on family–school partnership as providing theory-based evidence for the importance of collaboration between schools and families in moral education.

In educational sociology, research based on social capital theory has found that when parents engage with their child’s school and create social networks used as information channels, collective social capital was enhanced and a normative environment was created for students in which social norms, such as learning norms and caring norms, were strengthened (Coleman, 1998; Brown, 1998). Systems-ecological theory emphasizes the function of family–school partnerships and explicates the reciprocal influences of family and school systems on children’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Epstein (2010) developed a framework to interpret the mechanism of family–school partnerships and their effects on students. The framework is based on the premise that only when (a) school, community, and family have overlapping spheres of influence with students at the center of the partnership, and (b) high-quality interactions among school, community, and family consistently provide support and care for students, do students receive common messages and develop a positive attitude towards school, learning, and participation in family and community activities (Epstein, 2010).

An increasing number of empirical studies have been reported on the consequences of family–school partnerships. For instance, meta-analyses suggest that family–school cooperation has had a positive impact on student’s academic achievement (Choi et al., 2015; Li & Lerner, 2011; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), mental health (Li & Lerner, 2011; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014), and emotional and

social development (Thijs & Eilbracht, 2012). Results from quantitative research based in the Chinese mainland provide evidence that parent–teacher partnerships are related to students' academic performance, career planning, personal development, and social development (Deng et al., 2018). Some case studies of online family–school partnerships suggest that online information exchanges between teachers and parents are related primarily to students' academic performance, while lacking humanitarian concern for students' mental health and emotional experiences (Liang, 2019; Shen, 2020). Above all, there is still inadequate research focused on the role of family–school partnerships in moral education in the Chinese mainland. This has been especially true during the pandemic.

On the other hand, there has been much discussion in the Chinese educational literature on the responsibility of schools to provide moral education during the pandemic. The common conclusion is that schools need to pay more attention to the mental health, life experience, interpersonal communication, and emotional well-being of students at home, where the participation of parents and the cooperation of families in providing moral education are indispensable (Pei et al., 2020; Wu, 2020). Reflections by Chinese scholars during the pandemic of COVID-19 on the subject matter of moral education have brought to light certain themes and domains that may need more attention in the Chinese mainland, such as environmental literacy, a humanitarian spirit, honesty, international understanding, philanthropy, professionalism, and collective memory (Gao, 2020). Furthermore, the separation of students' learning space from teachers' teaching space while classes are being conducted online has provided valuable opportunities for the practice of life-centered education during the pandemic (Cui, 2020).

Based on this research, we decided to use a case study in Beijing to analyze how the content and structure of moral education in family–school partnerships have interacted with pandemic control efforts in Beijing, which have required students to study online at home.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Given that there are still limited data on moral education in the Chinese mainland and we wanted to answer exploratory questions in a real-life context (Babbie, 2014),

we chose the case study as the most appropriate research method. The case we chose involved moral education using family–school partnerships in Beijing schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. For convenience and feasibility, we selected 17 secondary schools and 27 elementary schools from all the districts and counties in the Beijing area as our sample.

DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

Because of government policies aimed at controlling and preventing the spread of COVID-19, it was difficult for the researchers to enter the schools and conduct face-to-face interviews with teachers during the first half of 2020; thus, we chose text analysis as a makeshift method to collect and analyze the data. The information we collected on the conduct of moral education included notices, meeting agendas, event plans, reports, meeting minutes, and work journals created by the teachers during the pandemic, as well as selected texts related to our research question. Each school was an independent unit of analysis, such that a recurring coded item for a given school was counted only once.

Due to the wide usage of term *deyu* in the schools of the Chinese mainland, we referred to the Guide to Moral Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools (Ministry of Education, 2017) to design coding criteria expressed in localized terminology. This method gave us more valid descriptions of moral education practices in specific localities in the Chinese mainland. We adopted two levels of codes for the data analysis. For level one, we used codes from the *Guide*, but we modified their wording to better fit the content of the text segments we were coding, and we allowed ourselves the option of generating new codes; for level 2, we consolidated the level-one codes into five categories: mental health education, traditional virtue education, citizenship education, respect for life, and ecological education.

Table 1

Two Levels of Codes

Level-two Codes	Level-one Codes
1. Mental health education	interpersonal communication & emotional education; adaptation to learning and living under the pandemic
2. Traditional virtue education	caring for family members; love of home and nation; leading a well-paced life; maintaining self-discipline
3. Citizenship education	Obeying regulations for pandemic prevention as a social responsibility of citizens; maintaining pride in one's national identity; showing empathy for fellow citizens
4. Respect for life	respecting the life of oneself and others
5. Ecological education	reflecting on the relationship between human beings and nature

To assure the validity of our study, we employed multiple investigators to collect and interpret the data; to assure the reliability of the study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with four teachers and six parents to compare their understanding of family-school partnership with findings from the literature text as data in this study for triangulation. We chose head teachers as the interviewees, because in the Chinese mainland head teachers are primarily responsible for moral education in elementary schools and serve as a bridge for school–family partnerships in moral education. Parents' participation in the interviews was voluntary.

RESULTS

Information and Knowledge Spread Through Social Networks Among parents and Teachers

During the pandemic, the local government of Beijing required primary and secondary schools to fulfill their social responsibility in pandemic prevention and control; with the cooperation, support, and oversight of parents, the schools guided students in how to stay healthy mentally and physically at home. For example, parents needed to be aware of whether any students in their child's school had any

symptoms related to COVID-19; both teachers and parents needed to encourage students to do physical exercises at home.

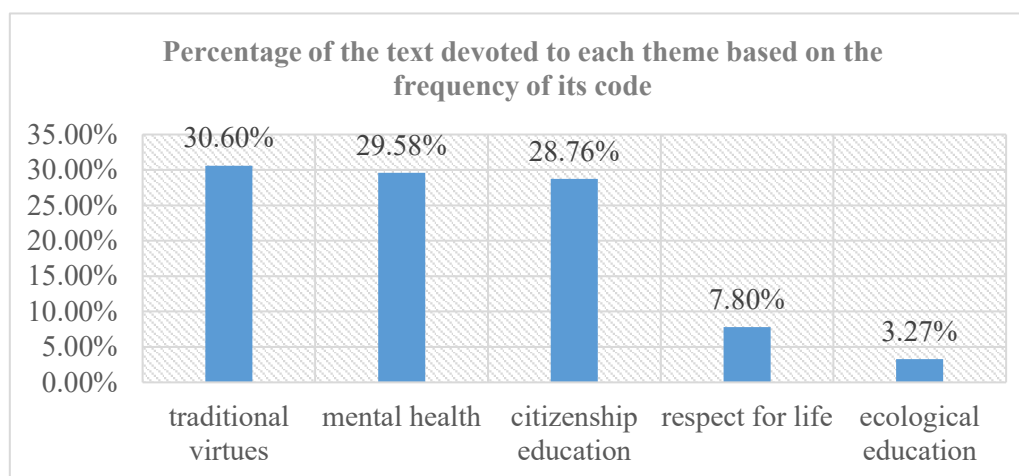
Furthermore, the sample schools have needed to concern themselves with what families were doing to educate themselves and their children during the pandemic. Some of the schools have offered parents various forms of professional support for this educational function through vehicles such as online meetings and lectures, brief letters, and handbooks, which imparted psychological and educational knowledge and reminded them to pay attention to how they were communicating with their children at home. In all the sample schools, teachers, especially head teachers, have been available for consultations with parents if they have any questions about family education or what to do if their children are encountering difficulties with home schooling.

Strengthening Social Norms Through Collaborative Activities

As an aid to the at-home learning required by the delays of in-person classes, the internet has not only allowed live broadcasting of lessons online, but also enabled teachers, parents, and students to communicate instantly with one another and undertake joint activities, even though they were physically separated; moreover, certain social norms relevant to coping with the pandemic have been strengthened through such communications and activities. Through text collection and analysis, researchers have found that these online moral education activities touch on multiple themes related to students' daily lives and home study during the pandemic.

Figure 1

Frequencies of Codes for Different Themes in the Collected Text



As shown Figure 1, the most frequently coded theme in the text was traditional virtues education; the schools have used family–school partnerships to conduct various collaborative activities aimed at teaching traditional virtues. Codes for mental health education also appear very frequently in the text; during the pandemic, the sample schools have attached great importance to mental health education delivered through family–school partnerships. Codes for citizenship education appeared third most frequently; in response to the need for pandemic control, the sample schools in Beijing have provided citizenship education through online lectures, seminars, and meetings attended by both students and parents. Regarding the themes of respect for life and ecological education, teachers have guided students to reflect on the relationship between human beings and nature as conditioned by the worldwide prevalence of COVID-19, and they have taught the students that human beings should respect the lives of others as well as their own life. Our findings on mental health education, traditional virtue education, and citizenship education are discussed in more details in the following sections.

Mental Health Education

The aim of mental health education through family–school partnerships during the pandemic is to guide students in adapting to the pandemic’s impact on their daily lives. For example, at-home learning has caused students to experience loneliness and

a sense of uncertainty about the future, leading in some cases to unhealthy moods such as anxiety and irritability. Head teachers in some of the sample schools have encouraged students to communicate with peers and teachers online at a set time each week. Moreover, the schools have encouraged teachers and students to offer emotional and spiritual support to students whose parents were volunteers or medical care workers during the pandemic, as the parents may not have had enough time to spend with their children and take care of them.

Traditional Virtue Education

According to traditional Chinese virtues, well self-cultured Chinese persons are expected to manifest a strong sense of responsibility for one's family and the society, to understand the unity of family and nation, and to lead a well-paced and balanced life informed by traditional Chinese culture (Ministry of Education, 2017). During the pandemic, teachers from the sample schools, with the support of the parents, have designed and conducted collaborative online activities. Scheduled for special days, these activities provide students with opportunities to care for family members as well as to empathize with their fellow citizens who are suffering from the pandemic. For example, during traditional festivals, schools designed online celebratory activities for students and their families, such as learning how to prepare traditional dishes from their parents at home and expressing good wishes to their parents and best friends. During the Qing Ming Festival, the Chinese tradition is for people to memorize the names of their family's ancestors; since the festival has continued to be held during the pandemic, the schools have designed activities for it in which students communicate with their peers online and memorize the names of health care workers who died from the pandemic.

There also have been collaborative online activities aimed at nurturing the students' spirituality by teaching them about traditional Chinese culture. Some of the sample schools have also invited parents to participate in online classes on the traditions inherited from the culture, such as classical Chinese poetry, Chinese calligraphy, tea culture, and traditional handicrafts.

Finally, the head teachers have encouraged students to live a well-planned life and develop self-discipline with the help of their parents at home. Two primary

schools in the sample have encouraged students to develop and share with classmates their own plans for learning and living at home, and the parents have supervised the execution of these plans as time allows.

Citizenship Education

Both the teachers and parents in the sample schools have pointed out to students that it is their social responsibility as citizens to obey the regulations on pandemic prevention, such as wearing a mask and maintaining social distance when outside the home.

Furthermore, teachers have encouraged parents who are health care workers or have volunteered in the community during the pandemic to share stories with students about how they assisted their fellow citizens who suffered from the pandemic, the purpose being to help students empathize with the sufferers. Some parents who happened to be health care workers volunteered to assist in the battle against the pandemic in Hubei province, the area most severely affected by the pandemic during the first half of 2020. After the parents completed this volunteer work, the head teachers invited them to share their experiences with the students. This story sharing was intended not only to help students appreciate their fellow citizens' commitment to pandemic prevention, but also to instill admiration of the perseverance and sense of responsibility they demonstrated through this high-risk, high-intensity work.

In most of the sample schools, the head teachers have led students and parents in discussions of current affairs or local news about the pandemic. These meetings or activities educate the students about the efficiency of pandemic control in the Chinese mainland, and they reinforce students' national identity by showing how the nation's strength has been mustered to effectively control the pandemic.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

How Moral Education During the Pandemic Required Life-Centered and Humanistic Content

At the same time China was reforming and opening-up to the outside world

through its development of a market economy, its education policies, including those for moral education, were also evolving. *Deyu* has gradually phased out the political platitudes and replaced them with more humanistic content (Du, 2007; Jiang, 2019). Inspired by Marxism's emphasis on knowledge from praxis and Dewey's theory of education, the Chinese scholar J. Lu (Lu & Wang, 2002) proposed the theory of "life-centered moral education," which suggests that moral education should be focused on students' real-life experiences as well as their immediate mental and physical conditions, and educators should guide students in pursuing a good, benevolent life. The wide prevalence and extensive discussions of Lu's theory in the 1990s led to a revision of *dēyu* in the Chinese mainland (Feng, 2018).

Our study's findings demonstrate that changes in the methods of instruction and quality of life during the pandemic have encouraged schools in Beijing to emphasize the life-centered and humanistic aspects of moral education. For example, the sample schools have stressed mental health education and the teaching of traditional virtues and have done so by incorporating various interesting collaborative activities in the courses; even citizenship education, which characterizes citizenship as a patriotic duty, has included stories about interactions between health care workers and patients during the pandemic to invoke students' empathy for their fellow citizens.

Family–School Partnerships Characterized by Shared Responsibility and Unity of Action Could Facilitate Pandemic Prevention and Control in Beijing

In this study, we found that families and schools, working together as partners, have shared social responsibility for pandemic control and reached consensus on a range of value standards for pandemic control and prevention. Through regular communication and collaborative activities, parents and head teachers have tried to construct a normative environment in which students coordinate their behavior with other students. Guided by their parents and teachers, these activities are designed to help students internalize social norms consistent with pandemic control.

Meanwhile, through the interviews we found that many parents who participated in the study appreciated the collaborative activities held by the schools that touch upon "sense of responsibility," "love," and "caring." For example, one parent

remarked, “I think the idea proposed by the homeroom teacher to ‘learn to cook a dish from parents’ is great; it helps the children learn to value the rewards of work and understand their responsibility toward the family” (S1P1). Parents can also identify with certain abstract educational concepts emphasized by the schools. One parent stated, “I very much agree with the humanist education promoted by the schools and am willing to work hard with the school” (S4P4).

Degree of Family Participation in the Partnerships Needs Further Research

While the pandemic has shifted the major learning space from school to home, as acknowledged by two of the teacher interviewees (S2T2, S4T4), the need for moral education during the pandemic prompted schools in Beijing to be more respectful of the critical role that families play in moral education. Thus, they have placed more emphasis on encouraging families to be creative in how they cooperate with others in morally educating students.

According to the texts we collected and analyzed for our study, the most common protocol followed by the family–school partnerships was as follows: First, the school administrators and teachers propose and decide which protocol(s) to implement; second, the families, in collaboration with the schools, implement the chosen protocols. In the interviews, parents equated “parents complementing schools” with “families cooperating with schools,” and the teachers equated “parents’ willingness to complement us” with “head teachers and parents maintaining a common goal for moral education through cooperation.”

Based on their study of the functioning of family–school partnerships in the USA, Epstein et al. (2010) proposed that schools should take into consideration a variety of factors in parental involvement, including the diversity of family backgrounds, whether parents can obtain accurate information about the schools, and how many members of the family could participate in the partnerships. Nevertheless, in the Chinese research, there is still limited data on the degree of participation of families in family–school partnerships. More research is needed to clarify this issue in the Chinese mainland.

As the city of Beijing is one of the largest metropolises in the Chinese mainland and its cultural and political center, it has abundant educational resources and capacities for innovation. The findings and implications of our research, based as it was on the experiences of primary and secondary schools in Beijing, do not necessarily represent the situations in other districts in China. The various issues concerning moral education and family–school partnerships in these other districts are fertile ground for additional researchers to explore.

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