

## An Ethnographic Case Study of Secondary School's Moral Education in a Mainland City of the Greater Bay Area

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### ABSTRACT

Chinese moral education is a much broader concept and is heavily criticized for being overly politicized and indoctrinated. The Greater Bay Area (GBA) initiative upholds the people-centered development philosophy in education. This study aims to investigate the school-level implementation in Shenzhen, one of the GBA cities, and teachers' perspectives to determine the facilitating and inhibiting factors across different layers in the student-centered ecological systems of students' moral development. A two-year-long ethnographic case study was conducted in the case school based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The study participants consisted of 18 teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine the participants' perceptions. The study findings revealed that the facilitating factors include clear guidelines on the national level, cooperative teachers, and ambitious principals with a consciousness of visions and responsibilities for moral education. Meanwhile, Shenzhen has the potential to be the pioneer of moral education reformation. However, the rigid content in the textbooks and the stuffy school culture hinder the success of moral education at the school level. The lack of communication and mutual understanding contributes to the splintered and emotionally exhaustive experience of moral education teachers. More efficient and measurable strategies should be used to uphold a tight alliance across different layers. Future research should examine alternative moral education models, decision-making processes, Chinese school management style, and the specific appliance of the ecological systems theory in the unique Chinese educational context.

### KEYWORDS

Ecological systems theory; Greater Bay Area; China; moral education

## INTRODUCTION

Wang Yangming, a famous educational philosopher in early Ming Dynasty stated that “the ultimate goal of school education is to cultivate students’ morality (You et al., 2018). Moral education (Deyu) is compulsory in Chinese primary and secondary schools because it deals with interpersonal values, social norms, and ideological and political education. Deyu consists of character education, ideological and political education, legal knowledge education, physical education, and career development education. At university level, Deyu is closer to political science, whose main courses include Marxism, Mao Zedong’s thoughts, Deng Xiaoping’s theory, and world politics and economics (Li et al., 2004).

Historically, Chinese moral education has focused more on the connection between moral beliefs and moral behavior rather than the speculative logic of moral beliefs, which has triggered several ups and downs in moral education practice since the founding of New China in 1949 (Sun, 2022). From 1949 to 1976, moral education followed in the footsteps of the Soviet Union (Hou, 2019) and criticized Dewey's theory of moral education to break the shackle of federalism on the moral education of old China (Du et al., 2019).

After the Cultural Revolution, from 1978 to 1988, the content of moral education was less politicized and less ideological (Tan & Chen, 2018). Still, several core values remain the same, such as love for the people, love for socialism, love for the country, and the Communist Party (CPC) and the Chinese culture (Lei, 2021). From 1990 to 2012, Chinese moral education started to find its own path and voice in theory and practices, such as human-centered and modernized moral education (Du et al., 2019), interdisciplinary moral education (Tan & Chen, 2018), and scientific moral education (Hou, 2019). From 2012 to the present, Chinese moral education has entered a flourishing and diversified development stage featuring the renaissance of traditional Chinese culture (Du et al., 2019) and “the preserving of social stability, state's power and social hierarchies (Lei, 2021, p.237).” For instance, in 2017, the State Council released Opinions on Implementing the Project to Pass Down and Develop Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture to integrate traditional Chinese culture into all stages of moral education in the current K12 curriculum. It is considered a “new trend in the reform of Chinese moral education (Tang & Wang, 2021, p. 735).” In February 2019, the *Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area* was released, marking the milestone in the Greater Bay Area (GBA) development. It adopts the philosophy of people-centered development in education and proactively expands cooperation in social security, culture, education, tourism, and urban planning (State Council, 2019). The GBA initiative is labeled as a “triple I helix strategy of integration, innovation, and internationalization” (Xie et al., 2021, p. 211).

Shenzhen was the first special economic zone to benefit the reform and opening -up policy in the 1980s. It borders the New Territories of Hong Kong and connects the central government and HKSAR with the Beijing-Kowloon Express train. As the pilot demonstration area of socialism with Chinese characteristics, Shenzhen is leading the pilot reforms in the education system by maintaining higher quality and larger scale elementary and middle school education

and modernizing the vocational education system. Moral education is also given greater autonomy in the Nanshan district in Shenzhen, with a policy of “one school, one design.” This study provides a valuable and unique opportunity to explore the moral education strategies in the self-claimed “future school” in the Nanshan district in Shenzhen. It could offer some practical implications for education policymakers as it focuses on educational equality, students’ physical and emotional well-being, teachers’ professional development, family education, and school governance.

### **Statement of the problem**

Moral education is a much broader concept than academic education in China. For centuries, it has been considered one of the most effective statecrafts in China. The CPC regards it as one of the determinants of the success of Chinese socialism. Currently, Chinese moral education is still heavily criticized for many issues, such as neglecting the contextual factors, emphasizing the school-based values education model only, and being overly politicized, detached from real life, exam-oriented, rote memorization, and the harshest criticism is on indoctrination (Feng & Newton, 2012; Gao et al., 2021a, 2021b; Lee, 2021; Li et al., 2004; Tang & Wang, 2021; Wan & Wu, 2004; Yang, 2021). This study investigates the school-level implementation and teachers' perspectives of moral education to determine the facilitating and inhibiting factors across different layers in the ecological systems of students' morality advancement.

### **Research questions**

From an ecological perspective, how is moral education being carried out and perceived by teachers in a “future” middle school in Shenzhen in GBA? More specifically:

- How can these ecological factors be accurately measured, recorded, and interpreted?
- What are the facilitating factors affecting teachers' perceptions of moral education in middle schools?
- What are the inhabiting factors in teachers' perceptions affecting moral education in middle schools?
- What should be done to ensure a promising future for moral education in this area?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Moral Education**

According to Socrates and Plato, the knowledge of the good is at the highest state of human development (Stewart & Blocker, 2012). Aristotle proclaims two themes in his conceptions of character and character education: “conformity with reason” and “habituation” (Nucci & Narváez, 2008, p. 18).

Kant proposes a new conception: personal autonomy, in which one obeys the moral law as one governs oneself in pursuing one's vision of the good (Formosa, 2013). Kant considers rationality essential and worthy, while our physical nature and passion are lower and unworthy. Acting in goodwill is morally good only when it comes from the person himself. Kant's categorical imperative requires one to respect the humanity in others and to abide the rule of

conduct that is unconditional or absolute for all agents (Johnson & Cureton, 2021). Buddhists believe the ultimate goal of achieving nirvana, the emptying of the self, by practicing the Eightfold Path, the right viewpoint, value, speech, actions, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and proper meditation (Heim, 2020). Modern educators consider morality a form of self-realization, and moral education is the human development to “betterness” (Nucci & Narváez, 2008, p.11).

Piaget and Kohlberg later developed moral cognitivism based on the Knowledge of the Good: to know it is to choose it. There are several logically connected stages to cross to the final fusion of moral wisdom and moral virtue (Kohlberg, 1984). The stage model provides an excellent way to examine and understand students’ moral stages and structures. However, it is necessary to explain the formation process and provide adequate guidance to schools and parents in raising their children at that stage. Haidt (2001) proposes the social intuitionist model as an alternative approach. He considers that intuitions or feelings are in firm control, and reasoning is merely used in post hoc rationalization. Moral intuition makes moral judgment automatically and effortlessly, such as “you feel a quick flash of revulsion at the thought of incest” (Haidt, 2001, p. 814). Simply put, moral intuition is a “gut feeling in mind” (Haidt, 2001, p. 825).

While some scholars such as Gigerenzer (2007) strongly advocate making decisions based on “gut feelings,” as proposed by Haidt, other scholars like Stanovich (2009) argue that bias, discrimination, polarization, and reckless behaviors in the current society are the result of a lacking reflective and rational moral reasoning. Another scholar, Evans (2010), believes that the truth lies in the middle. More analytical people will do better in specific fields, and more intuitive people will excel in other fields. James Arthur (2002) adds that moral education should not be the tantamount to behavior control, discipline, or indoctrination. Children should be allowed to voluntarily participate in behavioral change activities and form certain kinds of characters consciously. Berkowitz and Bier (2007) identify that moral education needs to be integrated into the academic curriculum, implemented by professionals, and taught through direct peer interactions and family and community involvement.

Pratt et al. (2003) conduct a longitudinal study to show the power of community involvement. Active community involvement produces endorsement of a moral self-ideal, a person of six qualities, trustworthy, just, caring, fair, good citizen, and integrity.

Focusing on Confucian thinking, emphasizing “Ren” (benevolence) and “Li” (behavior etiquette), the traditional Chinese moral education aims at being a tool of governance of the society and nation in the highly divided ancient China (Lei, 2021, p.233). The Ministry of Education (MOE) of China issued the Guide in 2017 to identify the fundamental task of “developing people by cultivating character virtues” and the Code in 2015 to “comprehensively refining students’ behavioral standards as a way of facilitating moral education”(Huo et al., 2022, p. 12).

Shi (2016) proposes that the modernization of Chinese moral education needs traditional moral education as the foundation and a historical transformation to a mature system as the

priority of modern schools. Only in this way can a secure and ethical moral education system be established and modernization of Chinese moral education preserved. This ethical moral education system should be a democratic community where all participants can grow morally (Du et al., 2019) and a sustainable research site where theories and practices elevate each other (Tan & Chen, 2018). It is also an enjoyable learning place where test scores are not the sole assessment standard (Fang & Chen, 2016) and moral education is a virtue-based guarantee system where the results and the process are guaranteed to be ethical (Ye, 2019).

Sun (2022) argues that the epistemological issues of Chinese moral education urgently need to be improved. It is under three major effects, the traditional deficiency of moral education epistemology, the disadvantage of being a developing country, and "the aphasia under cultural colonization (Sun, 2022, p.86)." She urges Chinese moral education scholars to put students' morality advancement into a broader ecosystem to combat the epistemological crisis in China's moral education research.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory**

Yang (2021) advocates Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory to shed light on analyzing and reforming Chinese moral education. Experiential research is needed to examine whether the typical Chinese culture and characters would make this proposal difficult to implement. Hart implies that an ecological system offers plasticity in children's moral formation (Hart & Carlo, 2005). Hart constructs five factors that affect children's moral identity formation: (1) enduring dispositional characteristics; (2) enduring social and cultural characteristics; (3) moral judgment and attitudes; (4) commitment to ideals; (5) opportunities for moral action (Matsuba et al., 2011, p. 188). Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological approach comprehends and defines "environment" as a rich, multidimensional construct that consists of five layers (Bronfenbrenner, 2005):

- Micro- (immediate settings, such as parents, peers, and teachers).
- Meso- (the link between two or more microsystems, such as the interrelations between the family and school).
- Exo- (settings that do directly affect the individual but affect the microsystem, such as mass media).
- Macro- (broader organizational, social, cultural, and political contexts).
- Chrono- (consistency or change throughout life, such as the historical contexts).



**Figure 1.** Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model. (Image By Ian Joslin is licensed under CC BY 4.0.)

Second, it is suggested that individual biological resources and environmental factors are essential for individual development. Meanwhile, the most important is the engine that drives the story—the interactive proximal processes, the relationship between the context and individual characteristics, and the complex relationships between the various level systems. Briefly speaking, it is critical to understand the development of the individual in the PPCT model, namely process, person, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a theoretical lens, Chinese scholars have made numerous findings in moral education and family education research.

Luo (2022) finds that public space is beneficial for realizing children's proximal learning process through active interactions among children, parents, other community members, and social norms and etiquette. Li and Cheong (2022) suggest that a combination of efforts at all levels of the ecological model could maintain students' physical health by integrating home-based fitness behavior, mass media promotion, and school guidance during the pandemic.

Luo et al. (2020) propose that it is necessary to establish a long-term home-school association mechanism as middle school students' academic stress is significantly correlated with students' perceptions of the teacher-student relationship and parents' emotional warmth. Other scholars suggest promoting a positive school climate in China is necessary to support students suffering from peer victimization (Sullivan et al., 2021). It shows that Bronfenbrenner's

ecological systems theory is highly effective in examining individual factors and their relationships in the PPCT model across the systems. This study also adopts a much more comprehensive and inclusive definition of moral education in Chinese middle schools.

### **Transformational leadership theory in school**

The purpose of this part is to understand the thoughts and actions of the principal.

James MacGregor Burns (2012) believes that leadership is a process of morality as moral leaders share motives, goals, and values with their followers and listen to their economic, spiritual, physical, safety, or psychological needs. Transformational leadership enables followers to make a conscious choice among other competing alternatives than traditional transactional leadership.

Transformational leaders can dramatically change people's lives, expectations, and values, considerably improving the organization and, more importantly, changing the organizational culture. Transactional leaders only value the "give and take" relationship, and they are comfortable with no plans to change or improve the organizational culture. Transformational leaders are not only moral exemplars but also can create changes through positive examples, motivational speeches, and the leaders' personality traits.

Transformational leadership in schools focuses on second-order changes and the support of changes rather than direct control and constant supervision (Yulianti et al., 2021). Scholars believe that transformational school leaders can "travel across contexts" (Yu et al., 2002, p. 383), "positively affect the school climate and students' modernity development" (Wang, 2019, p. 339), "make the teacher feel substantial job satisfaction" (Kouni et al., 2018, p. 158), and "significantly influence teachers' work motivation" (Lee & Kuo, 2019, p. 109).

It is also beneficial in encouraging school-based parental involvement if the principal is welcoming and supportive to parents because transformational school leadership values authentic relationship building, promoting communication, and empowering individual families (Yulianti et al., 2021).

Lastly, Berkovich (2016, p. 617) warns us that to understand the unique arena of educational administration, we need to "exchange theoretical beauty for empirical support," and we need to "meaningfully fit transformational school leadership theory to other theories in the field of educational administration."

## **METHOD**

### **Ethnographic Case Study**

Experiential research is informational and can provide profound thoughts and explanatory theories, a possible methodological breaking point in Chinese indigenous moral education research (Ye, 2019; Sun, 2022). The ethnographic case study (ECS) is defined as "prolonged observation over time in a natural setting within a bounded system" (Angers & Machtmes, 2005, p. 777). ECS is similar to Creswell's delineation of Ethnography and Case study. Ethnography studies a social group or an entire social or cultural system through prolonged observation and participation to obtain a holistic portrait of a group or system.

At the same time, a case study investigates a bounded system to provide an in-depth analysis of an issue through multiple sources, including documents, interviews, observations, and surveys (Creswell & Poth, 2016). By conducting an ethnographic case study and talking with and listening to the local people, researchers could obtain first-hand information and knowledge about the local culture; therefore, it is considered the best way by many scholars (Keller, 2018; Keller & Bard, 2017; Morelli et al., 2018).

The first principle is “the nonobvious.” The researcher enters a new environment and observes the people’s daily lives from an insider's viewpoint. The researcher also analyzes the collected data from an outsider's viewpoint to make sense of the environment (Murchison, 2010). The researcher in this study enters the school as a *Morality and Law Basis* teacher as an insider to investigate how moral education is carried out in this school. Meanwhile, the researcher needs to examine the whole process from an outsider's perspective.

The second principle is “thick description.” A thick description reports facts and showcases the context of the ethnographer’s experience to make sense of the purposes and intonations of those new strange encounters. The primary purpose of detailed descriptions is to allow other researchers and readers to “assess the quality of the findings and check for logically and empirically supported claims” (Cheung & Tai, 2021, p. 4).

Eighteen teachers with moral education responsibilities were invited to participate in the semi-structured interview: 11 teachers from different subjects, *Geography, Chinese, English, History, Math, Physics*, and of course, *Morality and Law Basis*, two psychology teachers working as student consultants, two middle leaders in the school, and the headmaster of the school.

The study lasted two years, a prolonged engagement to ensure the researcher understood the school under investigation. Repeated observations and thick descriptions were also employed to improve the validity of the qualitative research.



**Table 1.** *Detailed Information for Each Participant*

Name	Age	Gender	Subject	Experience	Positions
Participant 1 Alton	40	Male	Mathematics	15 years	Middle leader
Participant 2 Brian	35	Male	Geography	11 years	Headteacher
Participant 3 Casey	23	Female	Morality and Law Basis	1 year	Headteacher
Participant 4 Debbie	22	Female	Morality and Law Basis	1.5 years	Vice headteacher
Participant 5 Eva	32	Female	Morality and Law Basis	10 years	Middle leader
Participant 6 Frankie	26	Male	Mathematics	2.5 years	Headteacher
Participant 7 Gabby	26	Female	Chinese	4 years	Headteacher
Participant 8 Hana	25	Female	Chinese	3 years	Headteacher
Participant 9 Irene	23	Female	Physics	1 year	Headteacher
Participant 10 Jager	28	Male	P.E.	5 years	Subject teacher
Participant 11 Kamila	29	Female	Psychology	3 years	Consultant
Participant 12 Leon	28	Male	English	2 years	Subject teacher
Participant 13 Mandy	28	Female	Chinese	6 years	Vice headteacher
Participant 14 Nicky	48	Female	Physics	25 years	Middle leader
Participant 15 Olivia	30	Female	History	8 years	Headteacher
Participant 16 Percy	30	Male	Morality and Law Basis	8 years	Headteacher
Participant 17 Quinn	28	Male	Psychology	3 years	Consultant
Participant 18 Raven	49	Female	Chinese	24 years	Headmaster

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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 159) advise researchers to downsize and interpret the empirical data with "creative insight and careful attention to the research purpose." Thus, the researcher used only documents closely related to the research question.

### Chronosystem

Teachers have a general understanding of the objectives from years and years of learning throughout their student life. Some notions, such as being patriotic and working for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, have been engraved into teachers' minds (Excerpt 1).

#### *Excerpt 1*

*I know that we need to have faith in the path, theory, system, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics. I have repeatedly learned this when I was an undergraduate and graduate student. (Nicky, Interview 14)*

Teachers were repeatedly taught the content and importance of socialism in China when they were students. However, in the current globalization age, Chinese teachers have also developed a strong consciousness of rights and boosted the courage to appeal to their interests (Chen, 2018, p. 171). Some teachers disagree with the government's predetermined moral education goals.

#### *Excerpt 2*

*Everyone has goals for the students to achieve. Less is more. Just let them be themselves." (Quinn, Interview 17, 2021.7.20)*

They think that moral education should not have too many purposes, it should focus more on the nature of children, be more individualized, and more on their physical and psychological well-being (Excerpt 2). For the new generation, the language of the textbook may be a little "old school." It creates cognitive confusion (Excerpt 3) and prevents students from getting higher test scores in exams (Excerpt 4).

#### *Excerpt 3*

*Boys and Girls in Grade 7 Morality and Law Basis textbook aims to help the students eliminate the stereotypes, but on the other hand, it repeatedly emphasizes what boys should be and what girls should be. (Percy, Interview 16, 2021.7.18)*

#### *Excerpt 4*

*In the final test, the correct answer is "observing disciplines and obeying the law," but the students are giving answers like "Do not be a gangster," "Don't rob me, and I won't rob you." (Field notes, 2020.1.8)*

This study findings also revealed that demonstration classes are quite different from daily classes in terms of material selection, teaching arrangement, class activity design, and, most importantly, the profundity of the class (Excerpt 5). Teachers are encouraged to work collectively to orchestrate the best version for the public demonstration that explains not what moral education teachers do daily but only what they can do.

*Excerpt 5*

*In daily class, we have to do all the dirty work. However, you only need to be glamorous in a demonstration class, like in an acting class. It is an illusion or the ideal version you cannot sustain all the time. (Leon, Interview 12, 2021.7.11)*

Moral education demonstration classes in Shenzhen welcome interactive class activities, innovative design, traditional cultural wisdom, student-centered and inquiry-based instruction, and show teachers' vulnerability. The evaluators encourage teachers to view the students' moral development from the social intuitionists' points of view (Haidt, 2001) instead of the rationalists' views (Kohlberg, 1984). Teachers get credit for creating a real-life situation and provoking students' emotions to form a natural "gut feeling in mind" (Haidt, 2001, p. 825).

Notice that performing well in demonstration classes only means what the teachers are capable of, not necessarily what they do in daily classes.

After Hong Kong and Macau's return and further opening to the global world, China continues to promote patriotic education, education for democracy, and individual well-being (Lee & Ho, 2005). With a straightforward arrangement on the national level, 18 *Morality and Law Basis* textbooks were designed and written by a group of moral education experts in China. The set has a clear, logical progression, official language and expressions, and a solid but rigid foundation of morality teaching. As a result of top-down national and social requirements, the children's personal moral development and moral learning mechanisms need to be adequately considered in the content of moral education textbooks (Gao et al., 2021a, 2021b). This is shown in the standardized language used in textbooks and examinations, particularly in *Morality and Law Basis* subjects.

**Microsystem—Teachers**

In this study, the headteachers take up more than half of the responsibility in moral education, ranging from 50% to 80%, in teachers' perceptions (Excerpt 5).

*Excerpt 5*

*The headteachers take up at least 70%, the school's activities take up 20%, and the rest of the teachers share the last 10%. (Eva, Interview 5, 2021.7.9)*

Headteachers' job includes teaching their subjects, managing the students, communicating with parents and school leaders, team building with subject teachers, and taking temporary work assigned by the school (Excerpt 6).

*Excerpt 6*

*The headteachers are under tremendous pressure doing regular and temporary tasks, even like tracking down the students when they run away from their families. (Mandy, Interview 13, 2021.7.11)*

According to teachers' perceptions, school leaders tend to protect students more than the teachers. Teachers feel powerless when their rights are violated, and they do not have a suitable platform to defend themselves (Excerpt 7).

*Excerpt 7*

*Firstly, I feel powerless about how to discipline the misconduct. Secondly, I feel helpless in protecting my rights. (Hana, Interview 8, 2021.7.11)*

School leaders should create a harmonious school culture with a high level of innovation, affiliation, and justice (Wang, 2019). In practice, teachers are powerless in disciplining students and are at high risk of being reported to education authorities, who often prioritize parents' and students' complaints. Thirdly, when they are incredibly protective and defensive of their kids' moral misconduct, they feel powerless when dealing with doting parents (Excerpt 8). When a student made a cruel joke about his/her classmates, he/she argued he/she was only making an art piece, and his/her father further screened his/her fault and gave unprincipled protection.

*Excerpt 8*

*One student in my class wrote numerous small-sized names of other students to constitute a huge word, "F\*\*K." His father said the boy was only practicing calligraphy. (Gabby, Interview 7, 2021.7.10)*

Next, due to the lack of a precise future arrangement in the students' moral education system, teachers can only hope that their moral education endeavors are good enough to see the students through the next chapter of their life (Excerpt 9).

*Excerpt 9*

*You need to find out what is in the next chapter of their lives. I know my appreciation-oriented moral education strategy will work in the end. All I need to do is wait patiently. (Brian, Interview 2, 2021.7.9)*

Lastly, there are huge differences between permanent and temporary staff, such as income differences, training opportunities, housing subsidies, and promotion opportunities (Excerpt 10). Permanent teachers show different attitudes in communicating with teachers with different statuses. They adopt a long-term-oriented attitude toward other permanent teachers.

*Excerpt 10*

*We can easily be replaced by others, like the newly recruited permanent teachers and other more obedient temporary teachers. (Kamila, Interview 11, 2021.7.11)*

Temporary teachers are at much higher risk of losing their job. Thus, to get the school leaders' notice, they need to foster an active image in carrying out the leader's moral education strategies. Alternatively, their disagreement with school leaders' moral education ideology may result in losing their contract (Excerpt 11).

*Excerpt 11*

*I was fired simply because I have a different teaching philosophy from the school. (Jager, Interview 10, 2021.7.11)*

Moral education begins with the teacher's exhibition of virtues and models (Noddings, 2010); however, this study shows that teachers, particularly headteachers, have to deal with tremendous unsubscribed responsibilities while feeling vulnerable and unprotected in dealing

with school leaders and parents. Temporary teachers are in an even worse position, with less income and higher risk of layoffs.

### **Microsystem—The School**

The school's moral education activities are ambitious and inclusive. For instance, the SPECIAL life education in the first week includes safety education, patriotic education, engineering, artificial intelligence, etiquette, and creativity. Additionally, more than 40 other moral education activities are spreading throughout the semester. Teachers think the school pays too much attention to being photogenic, so there will be glamorous reports of moral education activities (Excerpts 12).

#### *Excerpt 12*

*The glamorous presentation of moral education activities should not be the main focus of moral education, for it is like putting the cart in front of the horse. (Jager, Interview 10, 2021.7.11)*

The main reason is due to the deviated top-level design that is not based on the actual needs of the students. An effective moral education activity should have a bottom-up decision-making process (Excerpt 13). Just as Meindl et al. (2018) claimed, prepacked moral education at school has a weak effect and limited effectiveness. In this study, their ineffectiveness in reaching students' hearts left impression of bureaucratism and formalism in teachers and students.

#### *Excerpt 13*

*If you take a closer look at many activities in our school, the students benefit very little because the school's top-level design is targeted at another angle. I'm not here to make the principal more and more famous. (Brian, Interview 2, 2021.7.9)*

Teachers think some moral education activities only serve as a stepping stone for the principal, especially when the school's moral education principle, "to love the students," is too elusive and impractical (Excerpt 14). The moral education training in this school is also highly theoretical and not practical, which is not enough to help teachers deal with the daily masses in moral education.

#### *Excerpt 14*

*I need to know more practical methods. (Frankie, Interview 6, 2021.7.9)*

The school is considered "the second most important space after home" in the Microsystem (Campos-Gil et al., 2020, p. 3). Having a highly motivated principal and a clear goal of "loving the students" is beneficial to the school's moral education. Without practical guidance and a bottom-up decision-making process, teachers ended up with the impression of formalism and bureaucratism.

### **Mesosystem--- School Culture**

Mesosystem deals with the connection between two or more microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The following section discusses the interrelationships between school leaders and teachers. Teachers think that mid-level leaders are the communication bridge between teachers and the principal, whose words dramatically affect whether the principal has a negative or

positive impression of them (Excerpt 15). However, in transformational leadership theory, the role of the principal is “building collaborative structures” (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015, p. 19).

*Excerpt 15*

*The middle leaders only report negative information about me to the headmaster. He did not know the whole picture because he lived in a virtual reality constructed by the middle leaders. (Jager, Interview 10, 2021.7.11)*

When teachers are misrepresented or misunderstood by mid-level leaders, it will not “make the teacher feel substantial job satisfaction” (Kouni et al., 2018, p. 158). If mid-level leaders bury potential dangers caused by students’ moral misconduct without noticing the principal, students may lose a valuable chance for their moral growth and development (Excerpt 16).

*Excerpt 16*

*I reported one online bullying incident to the middle leaders, but it was buried in the middle layer. (Mandy, Interview 13, 2021.7.11)*

The principal seeks to make a difference through motivational speech and setting a vision and belief system for the school; however, without adequate support from the mid-level leaders, immediate communication with the teachers, and positive examples from the principal, the transformational process is struggling to make substantial progress. Additionally, teachers think the school should not be anyone's vanity fair, and the school's reputation is formulated not by self-glorification but compliments from parents and society (Excerpt 17).

*Excerpt 17*

*Currently, the school is blowing its own trumpet on social media and every possible channel to make the principal a pop star, which should not be the top concern of moral education. (Jager, Interview 10, 2021.7.11)*

Speciosity in moral education only cultivates students' attention toward formalism, hypocrisy, and superficiality. It is the complete opposite of morality cultivation. As a result, the principal should "positively affect the school climate and students' modernity development" (Wang, 2019, p. 339). After experiencing unharmonious school culture, teachers do not show strong job satisfaction. People are at the heart of any organization, particularly a school, and it shows that an organization can only thrive by changing people, nurturing and challenging them, helping them grow and improving, and creating a culture where they all learn (Hoerr, 2005, p. 7).

### **Exosystem---The COVID-19 Pandemic as an educational opportunity**

Some teachers emphasized that the pandemic has the potential to positively affect moral development of children, as it brings longer quality time, independent learning opportunities, and a chance to observe society and the government (Excerpt 18). If it is used wisely by parents, it could be highly motivating for the moral development of children. Meanwhile, students can get inspirational information online that is conducive to their moral development.

*Excerpt 18*

*Firstly, they got a precious opportunity to spend a very long quarantine time with their family members. Secondly, online classes offer them more opportunities to practice their ability in autonomous learning. Thirdly, seeing how society copes with this pandemic helps them reflect on the Chinese socialist structure. (Alton, Interview 1, 2021.7.8)*

Others think the pandemic compresses students' social circles (Excerpt 19), exposes the children to the dark sides of the Internet (Excerpt 20), and jeopardizes the children's attention span and their abilities to think independently and critically.

*Excerpt 19*

*For some introverted students, it is like an igniter fuse. It is convenient for them to wall themselves up and retreat from social life. (Frankie, Interview 6, 2021.7.9)*

*Excerpt 20*

*Some developed an addiction to cell phones when students returned from quarantine at home. (Irene, Interview 9, 2021.7.11)*

The Exosystem does not directly affect the individual but affects the Microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Yang, 2021). During the two years research journey, China and the whole world have been under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the teachers' perceptions, it can be an educational opportunity if used wisely and strategically by parents and schools.

### **Macrosystem---Social and Cultural Influence**

Teachers think that schools only select the cultural essence and filter out the negative effect of society, so they still have great importance in connecting students with the outside world. Also, the current model of moral education lacks flexibility, relies heavily on the school, and achieves fixed goals set solely by the government (Excerpt 21).

*Excerpt 21*

*Right now, in moral education, the government and the MOE are setting goals. We have to take the parents' and the children themselves' goals into consideration. (Olivia, Interview 15, 2021.7.12)*

The current law system is not detailed enough to care for teenagers' emotions when no severe physical damage is involved (Excerpt 22). When students have serious psychological issues, the school is not eligible to recruit more professional psychological consultants or receive the help they need from the government to handle the students' problems.

*Excerpt 22*

*When students' hearts get hurt, there is no law protecting their rights. (Quinn, Interview 17, 2021.7.20)*

When social organizations seek to cooperate with the school, their promotional materials are neither appropriate nor effective for solving the most urgent and current problems, such as online scams or juvenile delinquency (Excerpt 23).

*Excerpt 23*

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*Courts want to come to our school and run promotions; however, their material needs to be updated. No specific courses target the latest online scams, drug abuse prevention, and social media addictions. (Raven, Interview 18, 2021.7.20)*

The school culture is under the influence of traditional Chinese culture. Teachers are expected to act like saints. Meanwhile, little protection is offered to them when parents file a complaint with the education bureau (Excerpt 24).

*Excerpt 24*

*The requirement for parents to report teachers is pretty much nonexistent. However, moral expectations have been so high throughout Chinese history that teachers are required to be saints. (Casey, Interview 3, 2021.7.9)*

According to teachers' perceptions, the characteristics of Shenzhen considerably affect the implementation of moral education in this city (Excerpt 25). Shenzhen's income differences and living conditions pose problems in the moral education of schools. Shenzhen needs to provide decent accommodation to residents at all levels of society.

*Excerpt 25*

*When I got the call, a boy was physically fighting with his father because they had different bedtime. The mother said there were no other rooms because five of their family members had to sleep in one room on two bunk beds. (Irene, Interview 9, 2021.7.11)*

The living conditions in Shenzhen could be more satisfactory. Lacking personal space creates physical and emotional conflict between parents and their children. Unacceptable living conditions bring out the wrong side of each person, making it even more difficult to implement family moral education.

Additionally, Shenzhen's social atmosphere needs to be more supportive and tolerant of moral education results in school. The city has limited high school student quotas, which create a fierce competition for parents and students. Considering the educational differences and inequalities in GBA, it is impossible for children to surmount the class differences in this area (Excerpt 26).

*Excerpt 26*

*One student in my class is from a wealthy family in Hong Kong. Unlike other students, he has many more options for high schools and universities in GBA. (Debbie, Interview 4, 2021.7.9)*

However, Shenzhen has excellent potential to be the breakthrough point in China's model of moral education. Shenzhen launched an ambitious and comprehensive evaluation system for moral education. It combines some cutting-edge moral education concepts both at home and abroad. Despite its failure to allocate the resources efficiently and fairly, it is a heroic attempt to provide an alternative to accessing moral education results and processes (Excerpt 27). This is because the foundation needs to be more solid. More departments are needed to recruit volunteers, so volunteer positions should not become a scarce resource.



*Excerpt 27*

*The only way to alter the evaluation method of moral education needs to be tested one school by one school, one district by one district, one city by one city, and eventually the whole country, possibly beginning in Shenzhen. (Alton, Interview 1, 2021.7.8)*

Shenzhen has a mature grid management system that has already shown city's capacity to respond quickly and contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, people living in this city genuinely love this migrant city. They are confident and passionate about the future of the city and their lives in the city (Excerpt 28).

*Excerpt 28*

*Shenzhen is a weird place. The rich and the poor enjoy this city and live together harmoniously, sometimes working as volunteers during the pandemic. (Gabby, Interview 7, 2021.7.10)*

In a word, Shenzhen has the potential to be the breakthrough point of Chinese moral education in terms of the technology, economy and culture.

### CONCLUSION AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The research findings revealed that facilitating factors in different ecological systems include: 1) a strong foundation and guidelines at the national level; 2) teachers' constant renewal of their teaching methods and teaching philosophy; 3) an ambitious principal with clear visions for moral education; 4) Shenzhen's potential as a pioneer of moral education reformation.

The lack of communication and mutual understanding contributes to moral education teachers' emotionally exhaustive experience. Factors hindering the success of moral education at different levels are: 1) rigid content in the textbooks; 2) burdensome responsibilities of teachers; 3) teachers' vulnerability and powerlessness in dealing with parents and protecting their rights; 4) extravagant moral education activities without supervision and evaluation; 5) stuffy school culture; 6) lack of mutual understanding among teachers, the school, and parents on belief in moral education; 7) lack of tight alliance across different layers; 8) the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **Proposal 1: Find a more comprehensive model for Chinese moral education**

The current research shows that moral education in schools has its limitation.

First, it cannot undertake and complete the task of moral development of students without cooperation of family and support from social institutions. It echoes Huo and Xie (2021) that psychological professionals are in desperate need of supporting students facing challenging times in schools.

Second, the dramatic social transformation is too powerful to be blocked at the school gate. The current school system cannot "resolve the ethical problem of social development" (Qi & Tang, 2004, p.478).

Third, it heavily depends on the principal's personal aspiration and moral education beliefs, which triggers teachers' emotional and physical burden, job dissatisfaction, and a high turnover rate in this case.

The new wave of traditional virtue-centered and school-based value indoctrination is doomed to fail in the escalating moral disorders in Chinese society. It is time to think about the limitations of schools and to start thinking an alternative model that could include or exclude schools as the primary location for moral education.

### **Proposal 2: Implement a bottom-up decision-making process**

This study results show that Chinese Mainland moral education is under close monitoring of the Party by implementing a top-down standardized continuum in the education system, from the MOE, Shenzhen bureau of education, and the school level to teachers. In fact, emphasizing a few specific virtues, such as self-control, gratitude, and humility could increase the effectiveness and efficiency of moral education in a school (Meindl et al., 2018). Scholars also draw attention to that values obtained in school have less important than values conveyed by friends and mass media nowadays (Maharani, 2020).

Early at the beginning of this century, Li et al. (2004) raised concerns that examination pressure, bandwagon effect, sexual behavior, mental illness, and suicides are the primary pressure sources for teenagers. Yu and Wang (2020) warn us that social media and cellphone addictions might bring more depression and pressure rather than happiness to teenagers. This study shows that family support and involvement could amplify or undermine the effectiveness of the school's moral education. However, families and schools have no strong bond or joint force. At the same time, the power of moral education in school is also limited without an ethical environment created by family, school, and friends (Yang, 2021). Thus, the students are forced to cultivate a "double personality" at school and home (Qi & Tang, 2004, p.475).

Chinese moral education has a history of top-down reforms rather than a bottom-up approach (Huo & Xie, 2021). The social problem in the community is frequently the result of a lack of understanding among everyone (Maharani, 2020). Suppose the government and the school leaders still refuse to consider students', parents', and teachers' appeals and start making bottom-up fashion decisions. In this case, people will become more distant from the current model of moral education.

### **Proposal 3: Treat Chinese teachers with socialist mindsets**

There are two contradictions in the current Chinese middle school management. To be an effective transformational leader, the principal must relinquish authority and elicit potential motivation of teachers (Lee & Kuo, 2019). Also, top-down administrative promotion of the government imposes an over-standardization on moral education, which is not conducive to flexibility and autonomy of schools (Tang & Wang, 2021). The traditional top-down Oriental Confucianism model is still the "main mode in the primary and secondary school environment" (Wang, 2019, p. 339).

Furthermore, there is a conflict between the need for legalization in society and the moral requirements for teachers in Chinese traditional culture. Socialism has dominated Chinese social, political, cultural, economic, and educational terms (Li et al., 2004). Society needs to set up more detailed laws to ensure the rights and interests of teachers, in a sense, to give teachers the right to be indifferent so that the burden of moral education is taken off the teachers so they can focus on their subject teaching.

Li (2022) notes that China has been experiencing a major transformation in economy, technology, information, and innovation. However, some of the outdated traditional moral values put a curb on people's minds. Chinese people must be aware of the potential for an even more polarized ideological war between the far-reaching impactful traditional Chinese cultural relics, classical Marxism, Chinese characteristics, socialist theories, and westernized management methods.

In a word, Chinese schools and society should treat Chinese moral education teachers with a socialist mindset. Currently, schools enjoy the convenience of managing employees by the modern westernized capitalist management models. The conflict between the modern management model and ancient sentiments can only gradually swallow the teachers' enthusiasm to become caring teachers. Using the participants' words, you cannot expect teachers to eat "capitalist grass" and produce "socialist milk."

**Proposal 4: Use Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory with narrow focuses**

Yang (2021) examined the Chinese school-based moral education system using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. He stressed that contextual factors other than school need to be stressed to establish a moral ecology system for students to flourish morally. While this study results show that there are laws established and implemented by the government on the surface in China, and simultaneously, the underground "sub-rules" work so efficiently that they imprint themselves in Chinese society and people's minds. The current research shows that the Chinese school moral education system still falls into what Kohlberg (1984) had criticized: training of behaviors and inculcation of values, neglecting the contextual factors, that can shape a person's character more profoundly than one's moral decay.

The social nature of the problem is still not going through the thick school walls smoothly with the lens of this theory. Or, more likely, the contextual factors are so subtly intertwined that this theory cannot detect them. The complex social, historical, cultural, political, economic, and educational contextual factors are too intricate to be encapsulated in a single ecological theory with five clear-cut levels.

From the research, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory could be applied to better examine moral education implementation in China with a much narrow focus, such as a specific virtue of the students. When going into the research field with a focused lens, researchers can better understand how this particular virtue, namely gratitude, integrity, creativity, self-discipline, compassion, determination, patriotism, forgiveness, charity, diligence, patience, humility, courage et al., is affected and cultivated at different levels.

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