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Chinese Facilitators' Transformative Learning in a Community-Based SEL Study

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INTRODUCTION

In 1994, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a non-profit organization, was established to promote evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) as an integral part of preschool through high school education in the United States[1]. With the publication of *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ* by Daniel Goleman (1995) and *Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for educators* by Maurice Elias and colleagues (1997)[2], SEL has emerged as a thematic and programmatic emphasis in American education in the past 20 years (Hoffman, 2009). A large proportion of evidence-based SEL research illustrates the positive effects of SEL programs on student behavior and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Farrington et al., 2012). Accordingly, interests in SEL from educators, schools, publishers, and policy-makers have rapidly grown across the United States as well as around the world (Humphrey, 2013; Durlak et al., 2015). While at the same time, a number of scholars have critiqued its practice and promotion in education (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008; Hoffman, 2009; McLaughlin, 2008; Noddings, 2006). They critically argue that the "emotional intelligence" theory contains a neo-liberal view and the discourse on emotional expression is closely linked to implicit ideologies of selfhood and self-expression. They claim that

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[1] Retrieved from https://casel.org/what-is-sel/. CASEL designs the SEL programs with an aim of promoting intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive competencies for children and adults. The five competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills and responsive decision-making.

[2] In 1997 SEL was first defined in the book *Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for educators* (Elias et al., 1997) as the process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively (Durlak et al., 2011).

the implementation of SEL is developed from a deficit model and its remediation of individual children and youth. In their view, the current SEL movement has failed to address and engage in cultivating caring relationships, understanding politics of power, and respecting cultural diversity. It seems the current SEL projects in rural China are mainly based on the deficit model and the implementation of SEL is strategically used as a problem-solving approach to regain the resources and solve the problems for education. But, it is well known that the true challenge for education in rural areas is structural (Yang et al., 2017a), leading to the biggest dilemma faced by Chinese educators today. As researchers, it is essential for us to reconsider the political and sociocultural factors that are involved in the implementation of SEL in China. SEL might not be a potentially damaging influence on children and youth, while it should not be promoted as a panacea for all that ails education (Humphrey, 2013). We need to gain a deeper analysis of the SEL trend and investigate how it can effectively mobilize the autonomy of individual educators to critically reflect on their work while shedding light on the structural and systemic issues related to education in China.

Since 2011, China has witnessed a trend of developing and implementing SEL frameworks and curricula into local school settings and teacher education programs—for example, a three-year project in rural areas of Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Chongqing and Xinjiang Provinces by UNICEF and the Chinese Ministry of Education (UNICEF, 2017). The top-down approach rationalizes the implementation of SEL in China, and findings from the evidence-based studies catalyze its process. However, in those studies, SEL is simply used as an instrumentalist tool of assessments and SEL abilities are viewed as a series of measurable and fixed numbers

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(Chen et al., 2017; Li, 2017; Yang, 2016; Yang et al., 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). Generalizations from the findings about schools and students in Chinese rural areas (Li, 2017; Yang et al., 2017b; Yang et al., 2017c; Ye, 2017) reinforce our stereotypes of certain groups of students. In addition, the SEL indicators from a Eurocentric lens are used as standard to measure Chinese children and adults (Ye, 2017) without addressing ethical concerns. The academic endeavor presented here applies communities of practice and critical feminist pedagogy into a community-based SEL study with a group of Chinese facilitators. Through a bottom-up approach, two questions are investigated: 1) How have facilitators constructed their knowledge about SEL in the Chinese context? 2) How have facilitators reflected on their individual experiences in the process?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, a combination of communities of practice by Lave (1996) and Wenger (1998) and critical feminist pedagogy (English & Irving, 2015; Luke & Gore, 1992) is used as the theoretical framework. According to Lave (1996, p. 150), "learning is an aspect of changing participation in changing 'communities of practice' everywhere." Learning is a social function, done with others as part of gaining expertise. Learning processes and membership in a community of practice are inseparable. Learners are members in the communities of practice, and have an identity within them. Teaching in the communities of practice involves guiding, mentoring, facilitating the process of learning. Teachers are experienced participants and do not teach only

specific content. Critical feminist pedagogy stresses resistance to power in learning situations, stretching beyond personal development and inclusion, and moving toward social transformation (English et al., 2013, p. 104). As feminist educators, Luke and Gore (1992, p. 1) claim that they attempt to create pedagogical situations to empower students and demystify canonical knowledge. They further clarify how relations of domination subordinate subjects by various categories. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000 [1970]; Giroux, 2003 & 2018) emphasizes education as the practice of freedom and the need to develop a

The revolution Freire proposed for education is to refocus on dialogue.

discourse of emancipation and social transformation. Knowledge emerges from critical and dialogical encounters. Feminist theories of education (Jackson, 1997; Morley, 1998; Shrewsbury, 1987; Weiler, 1991; Weiner, 1994) challenge the category of knowledge and its ownership, and question the disconnection between the personal experience in everyday life and knowledge, truth, authority of teachers, and questions of difference.

Following these theories, a dialogical space is created in this study. Through dialogue, we reflect on our knowledge about SEL, particularly the frameworks and curricula that are implemented in China. We also attempt to problematize the knowledge related to SEL in education. This approach often leads us into a conceptual dilemma. However, it is the dilemma that ultimately empowers us to engage in the transformative learning process.

Creation of Dialogical Space

Freire (2000 [1970]) used the term "banking" as a concept of "indoctrination" in education. In his view, education that indoctrinates reinforces power differentials whereby teachers are the owner and transmitter of knowledge who instill education in students. The revolution Freire proposed for education is to refocus on dialogue (p. 86). Therefore, in this study, as an organizer, I adopted a dialogue-based approach and developed a dialogical relationship with three facilitators. None of us had ownership of SEL knowledge. Instead, our understanding of SEL gradually developed through constant discussion and reflection. As Freire mentioned, three facilitators and I taught each other about the concept of SEL as it is mediated by the world. Our positions emerged as "teacher-student with students-teachers" (p. 80).

Construction of Knowledge about SEL

Feminist theorists are cautious about knowledge, especially for the grand narratives of "truth" and "liberation". Jackson (1997) believes that the most important contribution of feminist theories is

...knowledge is not fixed, exact or teacher-owned, but rather partial, inclusive, incomplete, and produced by the participants in the process of interaction in the classroom.

to question the basic category of knowledge, such as who determines our understanding of "knowledge" and the relationship between knowledge and power.   Feminist   pedagogy questions the attributes of knowledge itself, and claims that knowledge is not fixed, exact, or teacher-owned, but rather partial, inclusive, incomplete, and produced by the participants in the process of interaction in the classroom

(Morley, 1998). Morley (1998) argues that the emphasis on social relations differentiates feminist pedagogy from the traditional hierarchical teacher-student relationship, and includes at both teachers and learners and the knowledge that is created through their relationships. Shrewsbury (1987) identifies the powers discussed in feminist pedagogy as energy, ability, and potential, but not dominance. In this study, we constructed our knowledge about SEL through learning, teaching and conducting research.

Transformation of Individual Experiences

Individual experiences are particularly emphasized in feminist pedagogy. Morley (1998) states that the goal of feminist pedagogy is to test and share women's experiences, democratize organizational arrangements, and provide mutual group support based on respect for women's individual experiences and their confrontation with internalized oppression of women. It is process-oriented, and full of ambition, change, awareness, and healing (p. 16). In this vein, this study specifically encouraged three facilitators to share their lived experiences as educators, women and mothers. Through their narratives, we perceived the social and cultural context of education, which in turn shaped individual perceptions. In our dialogues, I tried to avoid interrupting their sharing of experiences, but rather encouraged them to think deeply about the complexity of educational issues related to their own experiences.

NARRATIVE INQUIRY AS METHODOLOGY

The current top-down approach of SEL implementation in China pays little attention to individual educators, and their experiences are largely untold in evidence-based studies. In this study, narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013) is specifically used to portray and make sense of each facilitator's individual experiences. For narrative inquiry, a Dewey-inspired view of experience undergirds its epistemological and ontological assumptions. According to Clandinin (2013), narrative inquiry is viewed as an approach to studying human lives, which is conceived as a

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way of honoring lived experience as source of knowledge and understanding. Narrative inquiry respects ordinary life experiences, through which social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional aspects in a broader context are also explored (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In addition, narrative inquiry emphasizes three fundamental dimensions: relational, continuous, and social, which also distinguishes narrative inquiry from other forms of narrative research. In her book, Clandinin (2013) reclaims the meaning of engaging in narrative inquiry and living lives as a narrative inquirer. She indicates that narrative inquiry is both the phenomenon under study and the methodology for its study.

PROCEDURE

Participants

This one-year community-based SEL study explored the role taken by facilitators and participant narratives in China through the lens of adult education. This study was part of a larger research project pertaining to teacher education and leadership programs in K-12 schools in China. The paper focused on three female facilitators, Ruoshui, Tianna and Anxin with ages ranging from 40 to 46 at our initial meeting. They were Positive Discipline (PD)[3] certified facilitators and worked together as a team for four years to provide SEL-related workshops and consultation services to local schools and communities.

Study Group

In May 2018, I organized a study group with three facilitators and two graduate students who joined the group later. The bottom-up approach that I used was based on our mutual interests in adult education and the topic of SEL implementation in China. The study group met once a week for three hours at my university office except during holidays and school breaks. A dialogical space was developed through the study group for inquiry and critiques. Readings on SEL both in English and Chinese were assigned to and critiqued by the group. Their reflective writings were also collected. U.S.-based SEL activities were translated and analyzed. Experiential activities, such as role-play and improvisation for Chinese teachers and parents were developed in the process. Each facilitator designed and conducted one research project on SEL throughout the one-year study. Prior to organizing the study group, I shared with three facilitators my stories of conducting SEL research in the United States. Then, I explained the research project based on our study group to them and provided them with a consent form. I indicated that their decisions to participate were completely voluntary. Throughout the study, we had 16 sessions of formal discussions and a number of informal conversations.

Interviews and Observations

I conducted in-depth interviews with each facilitator respectively prior to the study, in the process of study, and at the end of study. Each interview lasted about one to two hours. I also conducted observational participation in their SEL classes; these included workshops for teachers and parents, and formal and informal classes for students. Some classes were co-designed and co-taught. For those classes, I was not an "expert", but rather a team member with them in order to deeply understand the context and their concerns in the process of practice. Reflections from them as well as my observations were documented in the process. All interviews and critical dialogues in the study group were digitally recorded and transcribed. In the final writing stage, we exchanged our reports and provided comments and feedback to each other. I sent my first draft in Chinese to each of them. After reading, we took time to clarify the points and errors together. Once I completed

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[3] Positive Discipline refers to a program developed by Dr. Jane Nelsen, an American educator. It is based on the work of Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs and designed to teach young people to become responsible, respectful and resourceful members of their communities. Retrieved from: https://www.positivediscipline.com/about-positive-discipline

the draft of this paper in English, I shared it with them again and corrected it based on their suggestions. This process of creation, negotiation and collaboration resulted in a profound sense of shared ownership.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Participant #1: Ruoshui

Ruoshui and I went to the same graduate program in China and have remained good friends since then. One day in 2015 she asked me if I could share my opinion about U.S.-based SEL programs. At that time, she had just received her parent-educator certificate from Positive Discipline and heard the term SEL from that training for the first time. Two years later, I returned to work at a Chinese university. I invited her to participate in this study.

Ruoshui was generally acknowledged as a good student in primary school, following rules, obeying teachers, and performing well on exams. She never doubted her own excellence until she was accepted by a top high school. Because of the fiercely competitive environment and pressure from her peers, she lost confidence. She began to question the social expectations for being outstanding academic achievement and questioned why it was hard to accept herself as an ordinary person. She realized that she tried very hard to prove herself to the world so that others could recognize her as a "good" student. What motivated her were expectations from the society, but not from her inner self. She began developing a sense of self-awareness and a critical thinking. After three years, she was accepted by her dream university. She majored in sociology and later received her MA in education. After graduation, she took a teaching job at a Korean preparatory high school in Beijing. The cultural environment of the exam-oriented prep school had little space for her to do "real" teaching, but she still made efforts to create a dialogical space with her students and inspired them to develop better self-awareness and critical ways of thinking about society.

After she had her second child, she left her teaching job in order to take care of her children. Her husband works at a family-owned farm in Sichuan[4] and visits them occasionally. Since 2015, she has worked as facilitator and wanted to be a positive influence on teachers. She enjoyed working as facilitator, but still had concerns. She noted that the principals who invited her to provide workshops viewed her as a model to demonstrate new teaching skills to teachers. However, she believed that more nuanced techniques in pedagogy were not being communicated. As she went through the process of the study, she shared more of her insights into and critiques of SEL.

> Last year when I thought about SEL from the activities offered by Positive Discipline, my way of thinking was limited. But this year, I feel SEL is everywhere in daily life. (Interview, March 12, 2019)

Compared to her views at the beginning of the study, we can see changes in her perspective. She noted that SEL should not be limited by the five competencies developed by CASEL[5]. Instead,

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[4] Sichuan is a province in Southwest China. It takes about nine hours from Sichuan to Beijing by high-speed trains.
[5] According to CASEL, SEL consists of five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Received from: https://casel.org/what-is-sel/

teachers should feel free to share their own life stories and reflections in order to have a positive impact on students. The starting point can be teachers' personal experiences rather than the concepts directly from SEL. Through our conversation, we both agreed to add one session about the role of teachers to the workshops in order to aid teachers in making an emotional connection with their students. She realized the significance of addressing this topic from her experience of being pregnant and teaching at the Korean school. She said:

> Almost every time when I entered the classroom, I had to ask my students to give me a chair or help me wipe the blackboard. I was pretty weak. But, I also saw them working very hard and performing very well. They didn't know that I became pregnant until I told them later. They cared for me and grew up quickly during that time. (Interview, March 12, 2019)

She described the power of vulnerability in our interview. Her vulnerability gained her trust from the students, which also challenged the mythical image of teacher as an omnipotent God. In order to become more involved in her work on SEL, she focused her research topic on Chinese literacy teaching and SEL. She interviewed Chinese literacy teachers at elementary schools to examine their pedagogy and perceptions of SEL. In her final report, she wrote:

> In these schools, there is not yet a program named "Social and Emotional Learning", but it doesn't mean their teachers had no SEL mentality or that type of guidance for students. The issue is, what is our "SEL" with Chinese values? How can schools provide continuous learning opportunities and venues for teachers?

In her teaching, she continued to question unfair social issues and continued to stay true to her critical views. As a mother, she was concerned about the Chinese

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education system. She said,   once her son told her that he disliked writing essays because his Chinese literacy teacher didn't allow him to express his true feelings. She listened to him and shared her view on the current evaluation standard set by the education system.

> If we can have such an honest conversation with our children, it will have a positive impact. It's not necessary to tell them to go this or that way. If we teach SEL to students, it will be too superficial because they already know. But, if we can offer activities to teachers to let them reflect on themselves and social issues, which means they are willing to face the dilemma, that will be different. (Interview, March 12, 2019)

She claimed that holistic education could not be achieved if we did not critically examine the current culture of education at home and in schools. None of us could easily escape the cultural environment that is shaped by the system. However, as individuals, "we can still long for a free soul."   As she said, what she advocated was not to simply implement a SEL curriculum or programs for students, but to change the culture by rejecting unacceptable requirements. Otherwise, it would be impossible to free our souls and honestly face dilemmas.

Participant #2: Tianna

> For a long time I thought of myself as naïve and arrogant. How can I communicate with others through my own experience? I was scared. But actually, you inspired me because I got to understand that there is nothing wrong with this way. What I need to do is not to indoctrinate, but to share my experiences. (Interview, January 29, 2019)

Tianna majored in physical education and enrolled in an MBA after working at a state-owned company for many years. She was not interested in the program, so she finished all the coursework and left. In 2003, her son was born. After a few years of feeling stressed about how to become a "good" mother, she began to take credential classes and became a certified PD facilitator and psychological consultant. In one interview, she addressed her concerns on the former and present practices. What challenged her most was in what way they could reach out to those who need true support. In one study group in particular, she shared her mixed feelings after a class observation. She said, the students were asked by the home teacher to write a letter from the perspectives of their parents. But, one student didn't do so. He explained his story in a card and shared this with the class: "I know my mom must have a lot to say to me, but she doesn't know how to write a single character." Tianna said in tears:

> I am sure many schools have children like him. The students are well camouflaged. We pay a lot of attention to them, but we couldn't see who they really are. They are all the same. They are all dressed the same, and say the same stuff. You know you should understand their points of view. It's just too hard. What you do might hurt them. (Study Group, May 21, 2018)

Tianna addressed an essential question we all needed to rethink. "How can we truly teach without hurting students?" She claimed that it would be easy to talk about respecting and valuing differences and diversity, but it would be harder to act and not take everything for granted. She shared another story of class meeting in a middle school. On that day, she tried a SEL activity called "group jump", which was translated and redesigned in our study group. The objective was to develop students' SEL skills, in particular their social awareness. To her surprise, a class of 40 students jumped and landed at the same time. She noted, "we tried twice and there was only one sound!" Later, she asked two teachers to try the same activity, but they failed. Through discussing her case, we all agreed to shift our lens from fixing students' problems to providing support to teachers.

During the study, I went with Tianna to her parenting workshops for six sessions at one kindergarten. Before and after each session, we discussed her pedagogy and practices in the workshop. In her view, a "good" educator should create an equal and horizontal relationship with participants. So, in her class, she tried hard to avoid becoming an authoritarian educator. In one of her reflective writings, she described her role in teaching:

> I am a light to lighten the road ahead and the road beneath our feet. Sometimes I will guide them in a direction, and sometimes I will give them warmth. I believe in

"doing nothing but everything is done (*Wuwei* in Chinese)[6]". I believe that opening up myself will have an influence on others. (Writing, May 28, 2018)

However, she realized that she faced a dilemma due to her differing roles in the public and private spheres. At the very beginning of this study, Tianna planned to conduct research on the school principals. But, her son failed his high school entrance exam. The frustration hit both her son's and her self-confidence. She began to doubt her self-perception and its relation to social expectations as well as her way of being a "good" mother. After her son went to a new school, he was ranked as the top in the first exam and elected as president of the class. Both she and her son regained some self-confidence. Tianna began to register him in college-prep programs and paid about 1000 RMB (around 140 USD) per session for his private tutoring. From her son's experience of "failure", Tianna learned to accept the social selection system based on meritocracy. She said, "we had to choose a 'good' school, which is defined by our society. It might not be a school that meets my expectation for ideal education or even be a good fit for my child." In our dialogical space, she was allowed to reflect on the exam-oriented system, the "vertical" teacher-student relations, and the pedagogy of indoctrination. However, her private role as a mother led her to rationalize everything related to the educational system because her son still benefited from the system, even though it is highly demanding. Her positionality was intertwined between public and private spheres.

Tianna changed her research topic yet one more time. Eventually she chose to focus on interpreting the social and emotional expressions through her own consultation work at school. In her final report, she stated how our study inspired her to reconsider her work with students. She wrote: what students' need is to be heard, seen and understood. They need inspiration and encouragement. The only thing I need to do is respect, care and trust.

Participant #3: Anxin

> Education should be focused on the wholeness of people, so an educational architecture should have a life. It is neither a dead building, nor a box of reinforced concrete. I want to understand an educational space from the view of life. (Study Group, May 29, 2018)

In the morning after the first interview with Anxin, I received the following message via Wechat[7]. From that brief message, I was allowed to learn her life stories and retell her lived experiences. She had a difficult life transitioning from a professional architecture designer to a full-time mother.

> After I delivered my baby, I had a depression for a long time. All of sudden, my identity and role changed. I felt very anxious and all sorts of uncertainties came to me at once. I didn't know how to be a mother when I faced this little tender being. I hope to help those who might have had a similar experience to me. After my daughter went to kindergarten, I got more free time. I began to rethink how I could combine education with architecture. At this moment, I met you. Thank you again

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[6] It is a concept from *Dao De Jing: The Classic of the Virtue of the Tao*.
[7] Wechat is a China-based social network application.

for making me re-explore my own identity and role, and develop more possibilities for my future. (Wechat Message, May 18, 2018)

Anxin majored in architecture in China. In 2005, she received her MA in Landscape Architecture from the United States and returned to Beijing. After a few years of working at an architectural firm, she partnered with her colleague and established their own architectural firm. The price for earning a decent income was long working hours and managing more than ten employees. In 2012, she got pregnant and found herself an excuse to take a temporary leave. Starting then, she began to question the meaning of life and work. She completely knew it would be impossible to maintain her intense working schedule if she continued to own the firm while being a mother. After having a serious discussion with her husband, also an architectural designer, she decided to leave her work and dedicate herself to the family.

> Our society requires men to make money and support the family. It's an unavoidable fact. After the discussion, we found my husband would do better than me in all aspects, so I decided to stay at home. (Interview, May 7, 2018)

Gender ideologies are clearly reflected in their process of negotiation and her final step of decision-making. At the very beginning of staying at home, she had to deal with her countless struggles of not being recognized,

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low self-esteem and no sense of security. Because she valued the taken-for-granted gender norms and took all responsibilities of childrearing, she became unhappy and stressed. In addition, the unhealthy competition from the educational system reinforced her anxiety of being a responsible mother. She said:

> There is a huge gap between good and bad schools. Parents are so anxious to send their children to the top ten schools. That's the reality. Whenever they talk with me about the issue, I become worried and anxious. Is the environment getting worse when it's time for my daughter to go to school? (Interview, May 7, 2018)

The more questions she raised, the clearer she was determined to do something education-related and meaningful. In 2015, she received her PD certificate and began to work as facilitator. Throughout her SEL project, she combined SEL and architecture design. For her, it was not only a process of forging a new multi-identity by being facilitator, designer and mother, but rather an inspiring attempt to re-interpret the social norms for mothers and women, and most importantly, for herself as an independent human being.

Anxin first heard about SEL from a class on PD, which confused her. Due to its translation, she thought the term "social" was an adjective to describe the term "emotion". She had to use the Chinese concept of human relations to interpret SEL. In her view, Chinese culture emphasized one's self-reflection, rather than social relations with others. This was seen in the expression "everyday I examine myself for three counts", which was recorded in *The Analects of Confucius*

(*Lunyu* in Chinese). She gained a new and deeper understanding of the social dimension in education through this SEL study.

Prior to this study, she had developed a stereotypical way of viewing knowledge as methods and skills, which also affected her understanding of teachers' roles and the teacher-student relationship. She used to think knowledge was separate from her own sensations or experiences. Once in our study group, we talked about the image of a teacher as a saint on a stage. She believed a teacher should have an "omnipotent" view—just like God. But a few months later when I interviewed her again, she shared with me how her views had changed. Her current pedagogy differed from her former workshops for teachers. At that time, she taught psychological knowledge, but later she used a dialogue-based approach to share her own life experiences. She had been working in a kindergarten as a facilitator for more than three years. During our study, she visited there twice a month and taught a class on astronomy. She noted:

> I was actually teaching them how to view our lives. Once we talked about *Dileifu* (name of a diagram) from *the Book of Changes (Yijing* in Chinese)*, I told them it might predict the time of darkness. I also shared my own struggles with them. After class, I got a message from one teacher. She was touched by my teaching and shared her hardships with me. It was a transformative moment for both of us. (Interview, January 31, 2019)

During her work in the kindergarten, she conducted interviews with teachers and the principal. Through her research, she found that children could easily develop a connection with nature to solve their own emotional issues. It was not necessary for them to seek help or solutions from their teachers. Rather, teachers should pay more attention to evaluating and developing a safe, joyful, and educational space for children. Through this study, Anxin became more fascinated by educational space design in nature. In April of 2019, she was invited to participate in a project of school design. Within one month, she finished developing a conceptual framework of design for the school and sent it to me as her final report. She was guided by her own way of infusing education with architecture design and finished the project at an unexpectedly fast pace.

DISCUSSION

Rethinking SEL in China from Transformative Learning

This community-based SEL study creates a space for Chinese adult education facilitators to engage in a transformative learning process (Mezirow et al., 2009; Mezirow, 1994). Through revisiting their interpretation of the meanings of their experiences, they developed a critical and reflective perspective on SEL frameworks and its implementation in China. This research article attempts to problemize the universal SEL-based education for both parents and K-12 teachers in the Chinese social and cultural context. Currently, educational researchers and practitioners in China are still at the initial stage of translating and implementing SEL into the Chinese context. Some researchers suggest a localization of the SEL competencies in local settings by adding two more dimensions, namely collective awareness and collective management (Zeng et al., 2014). From this study, we find it is urgent to reconsider the term of localization when we

address the issue of SEL in China. Localization of SEL should not be merely focused on translation from English to Chinese or implementation of curriculum into the Chinese context. Rather, we need to revisit the social and cultural context, where the SEL related concepts are situated. Chinese sociologist Fei (2018 [1943]) indicated that the Chinese concept of *Li* (rites in Chinese) could be understood as social skills in an American context (p. 113). His insights remind us of significance for re-conceptualizing the terms of "social" and "emotional" in contemporary China. We must reconsider the current way of combining the Eurocentric SEL frameworks with local perceptions in China in order to offer a culturally relevant instrument. This study suggests we develop an alternative framework based on interpreting social and emotional meanings in the local context to offer more insights and critiques to the SEL global movement. The two approaches are fundamentally different in terms of epistemology and methodology.

In addition, the deficit model of SEL has become the starting point for Chinese scholars to identify educational issues in and out of schools, and allowed them to posit that SEL implementation would solve educational problems and effectively improve students' academic performance. This study suggests that we should shift our emphasis from identifying problems to recognizing resources in individuals, schools and communities. With our efforts, children and youth will become more engaged with learning and feel listened and responded to so that they can do well even in a competitive exam-oriented Chinese environment.

As mentioned earlier, SEL cannot become a panacea for all educational problems. We should be cautious about social realities for education. At the school level, we find many of the Chinese principals have an awareness of the price they pay under the current exam-oriented system, but schools by themselves can hardly solve those problems. Those principals have intentions of seeking an alternative approach outside of the system to get them through these dilemmas. Some studies suggest SEL programs address the problems of "emptiness" in China's moral education, improve teachers' emotional literacy and class management skills, reduce teacher pressure, and develop better teacher-student relationships (Shi et al., 2013). Some studies illustrate that effective teaching methods combining SEL with academic subjects will improve both the evaluation system for teachers and SEL itself (Yang et al., 2016). However, there are tensions between the SEL frameworks and individual situation affected by the China's educational systems. Topics of teacher authority and teacher-student relationships are reiterated in discussions and interviews throughout the study. It is difficult to ignore the cultural influence of Confucianism on those issues, which is closely related to SEL and its interpretation in China. Further investigation is needed to analyze the profession of teaching and the image of teachers in the Confucian context of China. SEL should not be limited to a decontextualized approach of teaching. We need to reinvestigate the purpose of education and clarify in what way we can make efforts to achieve its goal.

It is also essential to have an awareness of complex realities at the household level. Even today, gendered traditional ideologies still powerfully shape motherhood practices in China (Fei, 1998). Motherhood and children's education are closely linked. As educational agents, mothers are anxious and pushed by the market-oriented educational system to find out a more scientific approach of mothering to maintain their role of being "good" mothers (Yang, 2018). At the same time, studies claim parenting education will have a predictive impact on student's emotional regulation and family-school-community partnerships through SEL (Yang et al., 2017). The

studies made those mothers realize the SEL frameworks could provide them with an actionable and instrumentalist tool. Narratives of three facilitators in this study confirmed the social expectation as well as counter the social narrative through their own reflections. Motherhood is well argued as a social formation, which is affected by social, cultural, historical, political, and institutional factors (Arendell, 2000; Collins, 1994; Hays, 1998). We need to consider if it is appropriate to claim a universal SEL-based parenting education since gender-related issues cannot be avoided when we discuss this topic.

Empowering Facilitators through Narratives

The collaborative and dialogical space that was created by this community-based SEL study allowed three female facilitators to bring in their experiences and reflections. This approach respected their ordinary life experiences and believed that their individual narratives would enable us to explore social, cultural, familial, and institutional aspects in a broader context. As individuals, they benefited from the exam-oriented educational system and had successful professional trajectories. After they assumed the role of mother, they could not avoid being judged by gender ideologies, which were powerfully determined by the patriarchal society of China. They internalized the so-called "double standard of gender roles" in private and public spaces for Chinese women (Dai, 1999; Ton, 2008). They made efforts to become "good" mothers by learning scientific approaches and earning credentials. As facilitators, they advocated for efforts to break through the current circumstances and gave teachers and parents specific tools that could be used in classrooms and homes. Through the study group, they reflected on their situated context, which shaped and was shaped by their experiences of being women, mothers and facilitators. This study re-captured their controversial voices and dilemmas of positionality, and illustrated the possibility of transformative learning through the bottom-up approach.

> *Education should never happen in an idealistic place, but in our ordinary and complex daily lives.*

Additionally, this study aided three facilitators in rethinking their positionality in both public and private spheres, and raised more critical questions. Their reflections assisted them in discovering issues facing teachers and parents as well. Therefore, in our study group, we developed the pedagogy for adult learners who would attend their workshops. It mainly focused on creating a transformative learning community for participants to explore, reflect and critique rather than simply implementing SEL-based activities. The pedagogy was designed to give participants permission to trust their resources and use them as legitimate problem-solving tools at work. Education should never happen in an idealistic place, but in our ordinary and complex daily lives. Through those specific moments, we learned how to become educators with a critical but open-minded perspective.

LIMITATIONS

Although the three facilitators worked with the teachers in private and public schools, they were not teachers working at those schools. They were all highly educated and lived in the metropolitan city of Beijing. The fact that their middle- and upper-middle-class background had shaped their perceptions of education should not be ignored. Their roles allowed us to have more flexible schedules to organize our study group, and to have discussions, conversations and interviews, which was a major determinant for the successful completion of this study. However, we still need to consider the limitations of using narrative inquiry as a methodology. It is a process of re-interpretation and a result of negotiation. No doubt, the question of validation and generalization represents its own dilemmas. As mothers, they certainly experienced more hardships than were revealed during the study. As women, we deeply understand that there will be more uncertainties than we can expect in the present and future. As educators, we must unite to let our voices be heard. This solidarity will empower us to embrace uncertainties and question social realities that we have experienced from a critical, feminist, and most importantly, a humanist perspective.

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