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Resituating Funds of Identity Within Contemporary Interpretations of *Perezhivanie*

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**ABSTRACT**

There is still a tendency for researchers and teachers using a Funds of Identity approach for social justice purposes to exclude negative emotions and experiences from the classroom. This article addresses this issue by situating Funds of Identity within contemporary interpretations of *perezhivanie* to theorize what we call *existential funds of identity*, which we present as an enrichment of the Funds of Identity approach. The findings from a case study of Valerie, a 16-year-old Chinese high school student, suggest that both positive and negative emotions and experiences can be accommodated in the classroom through the use of new technology, which can also help to bridge the gap between home and school.

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**Introduction**

There is now general agreement that education for students who are minoritized needs to move beyond what Amanti (2005) called “a beads and feathers approach” (p. 131) to teaching. Traditionally, approaches that have attempted to draw upon minoritized students’ out-of-school lives have been founded upon a narrow, static, and normative approach to culture that neglects the way students internalize and individualize their cultures as contextually and temporally situated in nature (Amanti, 2005; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003).

To address this deficit mentality, a number of approaches to multicultural education have been developed in recent years that are responsive to the ways individuals, particularly minoritized students in the United States and the United Kingdom, understand culture as a subjective experience. Perhaps the two most widely known approaches at the moment are Funds of Knowledge and Funds of Identity. Although Funds of Knowledge and Funds of Identity were initially conceived in relation to Mexican American students and students of foreign origin in the Spanish European context, respectively, these two approaches have been taken up by researchers in a number of other contexts, including Australia (Zipin, 2009), New Zealand (Hogg, 2016), the United Kingdom (Andrews & Yee, 2006; Thomson & Hall, 2008), and the People’s Republic of China (Poole, 2017a, 2017b). This article mainly focuses on Funds of Identity. However, despite these advances, Funds of Identity emphasizes positive experiences, rather than acknowledging the full range and value of all human emotion and experience. The same tendency has also been identified in the field of positive psychology, which has been heavily criticized for its exclusive focus on positive emotions (Miller, 2008).

However, adopting an either/or position in relation to positive and negative emotions and experience is problematic, as they are inextricably linked in the form of lived experience, which we argue should be the unit of analysis for identity work. The concept of *perezhivanie* as developed by Vygotsky...
(1928, 1994), Vasilyuk (1984), and its contemporary reinterpretations (Blunden, 2014, 2016; Clarà, 2016b; González Rey, 2011, 2016), is a potent reminder that both positive and negative experiences have a key role to play in creating links between the classroom and home and in fostering the development of new identities. Although the literature on Funds of Identity has drawn heavily upon a Vygotskian tradition in its conceptualization of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a) and perezhivanie (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014b), to date it has tended to focus on students’ more positive experiences and how these experiences can be mobilized for identity and pedagogy work. This article attempts to extend Funds of Identity as an approach that affirms positive identities in order to counter deficit thinking by presenting the notion of existential funds of identity, which is theorized in relation to contemporary interpretations of perezhivanie. Existential funds of identity are defined as positive and negative experiences that students develop and appropriate in order to define themselves and to help them grow as human beings. Existential funds of identity are presented as an additional category of funds of identity that are designed to complement the typology consisting of geographical, social, cultural, institutional, and practical funds of identity as developed by Esteban-Guitart (2012, 2014).

This article also demonstrates how identity texts can be used to collapse the boundaries between positive and negative experiences by presenting a case study of Valerie (a pseudonym), a Chinese student in Shanghai, China, which explored how she constructed her identity in the form of a word cloud (an image composed of words used in a particular text or subject), an avatar (a graphical representation of a user or a user’s alter ego or character), and a written reflection.

**Literature review**

**Funds of knowledge**

Funds of Knowledge utilizes collaborative ethnographic research methods between teachers and researchers to investigate students’ households, which are taken to be repositories of knowledge and skills (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Rather than lacking the skills needed to flourish in the mainstream classroom, minoritized students come to school with a host of skills and bodies of knowledge that are conceptualized as funds of knowledge or “historically accumulated and culturally developed bod[ies] of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133). Rather than being fixed, these bodies of knowledge are temporally and contextually situated and are therefore likely to change depending on time and place. Teachers “tap” or draw upon students’ household funds of knowledge in order to valorize their out-of-school lives in the mainstream classroom.

**Funds of identity**

Whereas funds of knowledge are taken to be the resources, skills, and bodies of knowledge of adults, funds of identity are constructed and appropriated by individuals in the construction of their own identities (Esteban-Guitart, 2012). In practice, individuals accumulate not just household funds of knowledge, but also life experiences that help them to define themselves (Jovés, Siqués, & Esteban-Guitart, 2015). These life experiences may or may not be in continuity with the funds of knowledge available in the family home, as children also create their own funds of knowledge (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a). The concept of Funds of Identity, therefore, is based on the premise that “people have and accumulate not only their household’s funds of knowledge, but also life experiences that ultimately help to them to define themselves” (Subero, Vujasinović, & Esteban-Guitart, 2017, p. 5). These internalized experiences are mobilized by students to mediate human identity and can be embodied and distributed in people, objects, and artifacts (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a). In addition, students’ experiences can also be mobilized by teachers for pedagogical purposes by drawing on the learning experiences, practices, and lifestyles of learners both in and out of school to create continuities between learners and school, and family and social contexts that make up their lives (Esteban-Guitart, 2016).
Although Funds of Knowledge and Funds of Identity share many similarities as discussed earlier, the latter could be understood as a development of the former (Poole, 2017a). As initially presented by Moll et al. (1992), the Funds of Knowledge approach was primarily participatory in nature, with learning understood as a product of participation in cultural activities among people (Subero et al., 2017), with some advances that also drew upon learning as knowledge creation (e.g., see Schwartz, 2015). However, there is now a general consensus that education in the 21st century must strive to be more prospective in nature by requiring that people create and develop new knowledge and understandings collaboratively (Castells, 1996). Funds of Knowledge, with its focus on students’ repertoires of cultural and intellectual resources located within the household, did not adequately address the role of identity in the learning process and its role in facilitating prospective education. Therefore, learning should focus not only on mediated processes of knowledge creation, but also on mediated processes of identity development, which the Funds of Identity approach attempts to do (Subero et al., 2017). This article draws upon the Funds of Identity tradition as defined earlier by showing how new technology (in the form of the avatar) can be used for prospective purposes. However, it also extends the conceptualization of Funds of Identity by showing how it can also be used as a way to draw on both positive and negative experiences to make pedagogical connections between home and school, which we articulate through the notion of existential funds of identity.

Previously in the Funds of Identity literature, identity has been understood in sociocultural terms as something that resides simultaneously within and without, that is, “identity is in things as well as people” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a, p. 37). Identity is thus an empirical concept that is inextricably linked to an individual’s phenomenological, subjective experience of it through perezhivaniya (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014b). As such, identity has been understood as a construct, rather than a thing. Although we subscribe to a phenomenological approach to identity—to do otherwise would effectively negate the Funds of Identity approach—we nevertheless underscore the temporal and contextual nature of identity, and the notion that although individuals may possess a core or essential identity, they also possess a number of subidentities, or I-positions (Hermans, 1996), which not only change over time, but also are mobilized or adapted according to context.

Having explored the literature on Funds of Identity, its relationship to Funds of Knowledge and how identity is conceptualized in this study, we next present an overview of how Vygotsky presented the concept of perezhivanie and its contemporary interpretations to develop a conceptual approach that is capable of facilitating both positive and negative emotions and experiences.

**Vygotsky’s presentation of perezhivanie**

Vygotsky’s presentation of perezhivanie had different meanings at the first and last moments of his works and remained open and incomplete at the time of his premature death in 1934 (González Rey, 2016). As initially presented by Vygotsky, perezhivanie was an umbrella term for all psychological processes and experiences; however, Vygotsky later presented perezhivanie as a theoretical concept specifically related to the process of development, the role of the environment, and the laws of development (Veresov & Fleer, 2016). From this developmental perspective, the environment and self exist in a dialectical relationship; even if the environment remains stable over time (e.g., the child remains in the same school or is taught by the same teacher), the fact that the child changes in the process of development leads to a transformation in the way the child relates to, and interprets, her or his social environment. As Vygotsky (1994) explained,

> It is not any of the factors in themselves (if taken without reference to the child) which determines how they will influence the future course of his development, but the same factors refracted through the prism of the child’s perezhivanie. (pp. 339–340)

Perezhivanie is a prism through which social experience is refracted, thereby creating lived experience. The seemingly objective social world—the environment as an “indivisible state”—is understood or represented by individuals subjectively. Therefore, perezhivanie is always an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics, which are represented in an individual’s perezhivanie (Vygotsky, 1994).
Contemporary interpretations of perezhivanie

Clarà (2016a) identified four main contemporary interpretations of perezhivanie: experiencing-as-contemplation, experiencing-as-struggle, fantasy-based experiencing-as-struggle, and m-perezhivanie. The reason for this variation is because Vygotsky’s ideas remained largely only intuited and superficially developed in his short but productive lifetime (González Rey, 2016). As the focus of this study is on developing a new category of funds of identity that is able to facilitate both positive and negative experiences, the primarily focus is on experiencing-as-struggle. However, experiencing-as-contemplation is also a significant approach as it refers to the passive subjective contemplation of the world and, according to Vasilyuk (1984), is the traditional meaning of perezhivanie in the field of psychology, reflecting Vygotsky’s initial presentation of the term as a general psychological definition (Clarà, 2016a) and reflecting the approach adopted by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014b).

Scholars working from an experiencing-as-struggle perspective emphasize the active nature of the individual in working through critical moments to reestablish psychological equilibrium. However, it may be more accurate to understand perezhivanie not as an abstract concept that is presented in the form of an uncountable noun, but rather as a countable noun (Blunden, 2014). Rather than viewing emotional experience or lived experience as encompassing an individual’s whole integrated living human tapestry, Blunden (2014) located the concept of perezhivanie within a Dewean tradition of experience in which experience as a noncountable noun is understood as comprising countable experiences, that is, self-contained episodes “each with its own plot, its own inception and movement toward its close, each having its own particular rhythmic movement” (Dewey, 1939, p. 555). Accordingly, Blunden distinguished three main units or phases in his account of perezhivanie, which, according to our data, occur in the following order: critical episode, reflection, catharsis and integration. That said, it has to be stressed that this movement may not be linear or occur in the order that we here present. We define the three phases of a perezhivanie as follows:

- Critical episode: a traumatic experience or a life-changing episode in one’s life that leads to a blockage in psychological development.
- Reflection: the process of becoming conscious of, reflecting on, and talking about the critical episode with a significant other, such as a teacher or a parent.
- Catharsis and integration: the processing or working over of a critical episode in order to assimilate it into the personality.

A perezhivanie thus involves an individual working through a traumatic experience to bring about catharsis and the integration of the experience into the individual’s personality (Blunden, 2016; Clarà, 2016b; Poole, 2017a). Moreover, catharsis is a significant moment in the process of identity development because the working through of a critical moment results in the creation of a new role (Blunden, 2014), which also requires external affirmation or acceptance from others, such as family members, peers, or teachers in order to become fully integrated into the personality. Thus, development can occur only once an individual has worked through a perezhivanie and the inchoate identity has become “integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences” (Dewey, 1934, p. 35). An approach based on an experiencing-as-struggle interpretation of perezhivanie may allow teachers and researchers to unify both positive and negative experiences by showing how individuals work through negative experiences to grow as individuals, which may also lead to positive learning outcomes such as improved academic performance (Rogers, 1995).

Similarly, González Rey’s work on perezhivanie may assist teachers and researchers in moving beyond the impasse of an either/or position in regard to positive and negative experiences. Although positive and negative experiences are often taken to be objective realities by teachers, these reified realities within which human processes occur are in fact understood subjectively (González Rey, 2016). Experience is thus refracted through the prism of a perezhivanie leading to subjectivized or
internalized reality, which we label *lived experience*. This has implications for the way teachers understand and select the kinds of experiences that they valorize within pedagogical settings for identity work. What may appear to be objectively given to a teacher (such as a negative emotion or a traumatic experience) may in fact hold different identity resonances for the child or adolescent who may relate to these experiences differently. Therefore, it is essential to develop approaches, such as Funds of Identity, that are grounded in an individual’s lived experience. Moreover, González Rey (2016) also theorized that polarizing experience into positive and negative experiences is incongruent with the way individuals actually experience and make sense of reality: “The human subjective processes are never moved by one final cause and do not represent stable contents; they flow in time, integrate, and unfold into different forms during the same experience” (p. 311).

Blunden and González Rey’s interpretations of *perezhivanie* are a significant step in advancing the conversation about the kinds of experiences that teachers could or should draw on for social justice work. Both of their interpretations problematize the notion of the positive/negative dichotomy by showing how individuals subjectivize what is often taken to be objective reality by using negative experiences as the starting point for identity development. González Rey also offers a way to move beyond the positive/negative dichotomy by suggesting that a *perezhivanie*, as an indivisible unity of positive and negative experiences, could form the unit of analysis for identity work.

**Developing an experiencing-as-struggle approach to funds of identity**

In keeping with the need to find a balance between positive and negative emotions and experiences, the notion of existential funds of identity (Poole, 2017b) has been developed as an additional category to complement the five identified by Esteban-Guitart (2012, 2014). In its initial articulation (Poole, 2017b), existential funds of identity were sketched as issues related to low self-esteem, identity issues, and peer pressure. However, it was only loosely defined and remained unconceptualized. Therefore, a more robust definition of this category is needed, one that is conceptually based on experiencing-as-struggle and methodologically based on the use of avatars in providing a virtual space in which positive and negative experiences can coexist.

Existential funds of identity are thus defined as positive and negative experiences that students develop and appropriate to define themselves and use to help them grow as human beings. These experiences can be problematic circumstances, such as being suspended from school, exam pressure, or falling out with a friend, as well as more personal issues to do with identity and belonging. Existential funds of identity are existential precisely because they deal with issues of being and self-defining: On one hand, individuals are free to define themselves as they wish, yet on the other hand, the open-ended nature of self-defining often leads to doubt and confusion. We consider the notion of existential funds of identity to be fundamentally optimistic in its orientation toward the transformation of critical moments through catharsis and integration with the personality. In addition, our approach is also expansive enough to accommodate more problematic issues that can be mobilized for identity construction. We draw upon Blunden’s proposed phases for experiencing-as-struggle and González Rey’s notion of subjectivity as ways to connect positive and negative experiences through lived experience, which can also be facilitated through the use of avatars as a commensurate method for uniting positive and negative experiences.

Taking an experiencing-as-struggle interpretation of *perezhivanie* as a starting point, we view identity development as an essentially positive process. Therefore, problematic life experiences such as issues related to sexuality, gender, and exam stress, which are typically excluded from the classroom, could be drawn on by teachers to valorize the whole spectrum of adolescent learners experiences and in so doing transform negative experiences into positive ones. González Rey’s work on subjectivity validates such an approach by emphasizing lived experience as the fluid interpenetration of time, space, and reality. *Perezhivanie* as experiencing-as-struggle thus allows for the dialogic conceptualization of past, present, and future identities. Moreover, avatars are particularly effective in channeling *proleptic identities*—inchoate future selves that are starting to emerge, but
have yet to become integrated into the personality (Cole, 1996)—and, as the findings of this study show, allow for the construction of a more positive and idealized self that students can then be encouraged to develop in real life and that teachers can draw on to combat their own entrenched deficit discourses. This also answers González Rey’s (2016) call to develop concepts used in the study of subjectivity that “must be capable of integrating a subject’s lived experiences from the past with the imaginative ideas of the future” (p. 311).

However, overemphasizing negative emotions or experiences could also be counterproductive. Although they may allow teachers to create connections between the home and school, focusing on negative experiences exclusively may inadvertently lead to the reinforcement of deficit discourses, thereby undermining the very purpose of the Funds of Identity approach. That said, an experiencing-as-contemplation approach to identity, on which a Funds of Identity approach is based, tends to foreground the positive aspects of students’ lives too much, which excludes the negative emotions and experiences that adolescent learners in particular are actually experiencing. Although it is true that most teachers are not psychiatrists, allowing some darkness into the curriculum may further strengthen links between home and classroom, which can allow teachers to come to know their students as complex, creative, and competent individuals with pasts and futures, rather than merely as students in a classroom condemned to exist in a perpetual present as a reified character type. Hence the development of existential funds of identity as an additional category that could be used alongside the other five developed by Esteban-Guitart (2012, 2014) as a way to facilitate the whole spectrum of human emotion and experience.

**Methodology**

A single-case study design was utilized, as it is particularly well suited to capturing the subjective, qualitative aspect of lived experience and can help to describe real people in real situations (Yin, 2013), such as individuals in organizations or institutions. Locating individual actors within the context of their organizations or operating contexts allows for the generation of thick description and a certain degree of holism, which allows researchers to capture the complexity of a single case (Yin, 2013).

**Study procedure**

To illustrate our approach, we draw upon data from a previous article (Poole, 2017b). The data were collected as part of the Avatar Project—a 2-week project that involved students creating three identity texts. Rather than making use of interviews, which are often the main method for qualitative data collection, this study instead used the students’ work as a strategy for data collection. More specifically, it drew upon the participants’ funds of identity by employing a multimodal approach to data collection, which included two visual methods for eliciting identity positions—an avatar and a word cloud—as well as a written reflection. For the word clouds, students were asked to make a list of adjectives and nouns that best described them and then arrange them graphically using a range of apps found through Google or Baidu (China’s main search engine). The avatars were also constructed using apps, such as Second Life or DoppelMe, and in the case of Valerie, Adobe Photoshop. Students were not given any direct instructions on how to go about creating their avatars and were simply told to experiment with different apps and software until they felt they had found one that was capable of facilitating their identity as they perceived it or how they wanted it to be perceived by others. The reflection was designed as a reflective commentary to support the word cloud and avatars, and functioned as an interpretative guide to ensure that our understandings of the visual data were congruent with the students’ own intended meanings. The reflection was based on the following questions:

- Why did you choose the software to create your avatar?
- Why did you create the avatar the way you did?
- What does your avatar reveal about you?
- Are you happy with your avatar? Why/why not?
The written reflection was essential in ensuring that our interpretation of the visual data, which is inherently ambiguous, was grounded in Valerie’s lived experience. As avatars and word clouds are open-ended in nature due to their digital form, they are more congruent with Vygotsky’s (1998) notion of the historicity of experience and therefore can better reflect the process of identity development over time.

**Research context**

The research context is a Type-C nontraditional international school in Shanghai, China (pseudonym WEST), which offers international curricula (such as the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme [IBDP]) to Chinese national students from Grades 9–12. Type-C schools have emerged in part due to the effects of globalization, which has led to a growing international focus in some national school systems (Hayden, 2006). For the affluent middle-class parents of these countries, an international education is considered to be both superior to that available in their own national system and a means to securing a competitive edge for their children (Hayden, 2006). In the Chinese context, these types of schools often offer a localized version of international education at primary and middle school, such as social, cultural, and practical courses guided by an international philosophy, with the full international curriculum being reserved for the final 3 to 4 years of high school.

The majority of WEST’s students have come to the school having completed the compulsory 9-year national education system, which terminates in Grade 9 with the Zhong Kao, an externally assessed high-stakes examination that decides eligibility into high school. WEST’s current 1st-year high school students are faced with the challenge, both academically and psychologically, of transitioning from a Chinese national curriculum system to an international curriculum, made even harder as they are second-language learners of English. From our observations, many of our students still use the approaches to learning, thinking, and behaving that they acquired through the national curriculum system, such as memorization of facts, an emphasis on a transmission style of teaching, and the centrality of test scores. In contrast, the IBDP focuses more on independent research, critical thinking, and putting what has been learned into practice. Researching into Chinese students’ funds of identity in an international context might enable teachers not only to make pedagogical links between home and school, but also to make connections between national and international curricula.

**Research participants**

This study focused on one student, Valerie, to show in detail how experiencing-as-struggle can be used to analyse her existential funds of identity. Both of the authors were also Valerie’s English teachers during the time of data collection, which afforded us many opportunities to get to know her as a person. Valerie’s data were chosen because they illustrated and supported an experiencing-as-struggle approach to Funds of Identity. Future research, however, needs to explore how such an approach works with students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, as this study focused on a student from a relatively privileged background. For example, Valerie’s parents are both well educated and globally mobile. Although Valerie is not minoritized in the same socioeconomic way as Mexican American students or students in the Spanish European context in the Funds of Knowledge/Funds of Identity literature, the Western-centric nature of the IBDP calls for a more expansive notion of minoritized in which students from affluent backgrounds are also excluded by and through language and cultural bias.

In contrast to the majority of students who attend WEST, Valerie’s middle school history is quite complex. She spent 3 years in a key middle school in Shanghai, which she describes as “happy study style” as its focus was less examination oriented than typical middle schools. Valerie accompanied her mother to Canada for 1 year. During that period, she studied in a Canadian public school. In a casual conversation, Valerie mentioned to one of us that she did not like to study there, as she always felt like an outsider, which is why she decided to come back to China to continue her high school education.
Findings

Figures 1 and 2 are examples of Valerie’s word cloud and avatar.

The following section presents Valerie’s existential funds of identity as analysed from the perspective of experiencing-as-struggle. The headings reflect the structure of a perezhivanie as defined by Blunden (2014) and include a critical episode, reflection, and catharsis and integration.

Critical episode: “I am a sleeping cat”

The image of the cat runs like a leitmotif throughout Valerie’s work. It appears in her word cloud as a house cat and in her avatar as a leopard. The cat also appears in the form of doodles on Valerie’s schoolwork and is a screensaver on her laptop. The cat itself, as described by Valerie, embodies both positive and negative characteristics: It is clever and sophisticated, but also lazy and passive. Overall, Valerie underscores the negative traits of the housecat in order to convey how she currently views herself, identifying with its laziness and passivity. This can clearly be seen in her avatar (see Figure 2) in which the house cat is curled up into a tight ball underneath colourful pillows. This is further corroborated by her written reflection:

Sleeping cats bend like a ball, putting their heads into their legs and tails, squeeze tightly like it makes them feel safe this way. They like to sleep on the sofa, where there are cushions and blankets, softly surrounding them. I like hiding too. So I put a cat on the sofa under those cushions, sleeping. I am saying that I always hide from stuff like cats covering their heads and ostriches burying into sands. And I like sleeping on the sofa, indeed. Cushions and blanket are all my favourites.

The theme of tiredness recurs throughout Valerie’s work in words such as passive, lazy, and exhausting. This is personified in the cat sleeping under the pillows. We have also observed that Valerie can be quite lethargic and tired during class time.

Second, it can be seen that Valerie prefers to hide from complicated or difficult situations, rather than tackling them head-on. This is also reinforced by the reference to the ostrich burying its head in the sand. An immediate question arises: What has prompted Valerie to want to curl up into a ball and to seek protection? The exhausting life that Valerie is referring to is perhaps the result of “going
too deep inside and too often,” that is, analysing everything in such detail that it inhibits action. As she explains, “The counsellor of my Canada high school said that I have made so many restrictions on myself that I am basically living in a box or something and I shall say that I definitely need some air.” This restriction, or inhibition through hyper-self-analysis, which is represented in the metaphor of a box and the sleeping cat curled tightly in a protective ball, represents the crisis at the heart of this critical episode.

Third, from our perspective as teachers, the theme of freedom and restriction is also reflected in Valerie’s class behaviour. When assigned a task with a specific purpose and topic that is below her perceived capabilities, Valerie will become very listless and tired, just like the sleeping cat under the pillows. In contrast, when given tasks with more freedom, such as independent reading and speaking, Valerie will finish them very efficiently and energetically, bringing to mind the leopard with wings. Although Valerie has all the characteristics of being a “good” student valued by Chinese society, such as following what teachers say, achieving high scores on examinations, being attentive, and making notes during classes, maintaining these “good behaviours” also restricts her and prevents her from being the leopard with magical wings. Why does Valerie choose to be obedient, even though her lethargy is an indication that she is not happy to conform? One reason may be partly due to the collectivist nature of Chinese society, which is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and contemporary Chinese Socialist ideology. Instead of allowing her more individualist side to emerge, Valerie prefers to be the good student in the eyes of teachers, parents, and classmates, which is why she does not like to be called xue ba (master of study) by her classmates. However, English—as illustrated by her selection of reading and listening materials—becomes a vehicle for her to resist conformity and to reveal her more unique identity as embodied in her identity work.

Reflection: “Now I have decided to let go a bit”

It can be seen that Valerie has made some progress in working through the critical episode just described, as she then explains,

Sometime later I suddenly find this way of dealing with life exhausting and kind of disturbing. It distracts me from making normal daily decisions since I am always too eager to give all my feelings, responds and even
intuitions a scientific explanation, and always telling myself too often about all these “shoulds” so that I can 
keep myself on the track of so-called “good behaviors” which I learned from books.

It is possible to see the transformation of Valerie’s perezhivanie over time in the way she presents her 
identity journey in the form of a narrative, indicated by the use of the past tense and discourse 
markers such as “sometime later.” This temporal aspect adds essential information about the 
transformation of a perezhivanie—it is not the crisis or struggle that has changed, but the way 
Valerie understands it and relates to it as a result of experiencing over time. The narrative shift from “living in a box” to an awareness that a change has to be made shows that Valerie is growing as an 
individual and taking steps to work through her current perezhivanie as experiencing-as-struggle. As 
she says herself, “I decided to let go a bit, to experience and accept myself more before modifying 
anything.” It can be seen that the expert helper in this instance is Valerie herself, albeit one who is 
empowered through narrative; that is, by putting her thoughts into words, she is able to gain some 
distance and mastery over her critical episode and therefore make more sense of it.

Catharsis and integration: “I am still trying to find who I am and who I should become”

Despite having made some progress, Valerie is still searching to find “who I am and who I should 
become.” The word choice here sets up an interesting dichotomy. On the one hand, Valerie is 
searching to find who she is, which is revealed by the verb find, implying that the identity for which 
she is searching already exists; it is just waiting to be discovered. On the other hand, the use of the 
modal verb should is a callback to an earlier statement in which Valerie explained that she is “always 
telling myself too often about all these ‘shoulds’ so that I can keep myself on the track of so-called ‘good behaviors.’” The modal should also implies external regulation: There is a social version of 
Valerie that she feels compelled to live up to, but one that forces her to conform to what she refers to 
as “good behaviours.” Thus, we discern a tension between Valerie’s perceived journey of self-
discovery, which will lead to catharsis and the integration of the critical episode into her personality, 
and the restrictions placed upon her by duty and social obligations, which block her attempts to 
move through this critical episode. Teachers, then, have a key role to play, not so much as an expert, 
but as facilitators and legitimizers of existential funds of identity. The tension just highlighted is also 
reflected in the way Valerie describes the cat and the leopard, with the sleeping cat being described as 
some evil-cat and the leopard as a “superhero-leopard.” As she says,

The leopard standing on the cushions is half-transparent, saying it is only an image in my cat’s sleep. I want to 
be a furious leopard with magical wings and super power to cope with all those things, but I am still only an 
escaper. I have those dreams of being capable, capable from the inside. But they are always dreams, and I am 
still the one sleeping with cushions on me.

According to Blunden’s interpretation of perezhivanie, a new identity emerges as a result of some 
kind of crisis. From the presentation of Valerie’s case study, it can be seen that the sleeping cat 
represents Valerie as she currently sees herself—somewhat stifled and trapped by the need to think 
about how she acts, which leads to inhibition. The leopard appears to represent a new, emerging 
identity, a move toward catharsis, although at this stage the identity is still inchoate and idealistic in 
nature, hence the fact that it appears translucent. In contrast to the sleeping cat, Valerie aspires be a 
“furious leopard with magical wings and superpower.” Although the adjectival phrase “furious 
leopard” could be interpreted as an awkward collocation, it could also be interpreted as a form of 
anthropomorphism. Similarly, “ferocious leopard” may sound more idiomatic from the perspective 
of a native speaker, but “furious” is far more figurative, as it mixes both human and animal 
characteristics. This need to transcend, however, is problematized by a kind of weight that only 
Valerie can feel:

Those cushions on the cat are colourful, regarding to all those daily stuff fall on me. Those things appear to be 
colourful, pleasant and easy, but not to me. They are burdens that push me into escaping sleep. I am scared and tired.
The pillows, although appearing bright and colourful to the outsider, nevertheless take on the form of an existential weight when interpreted through the prism of her *perezhivanie*. A follow-up talk with Valerie also yielded some additional data that shed light on the process of working through a *perezhivanie*. When asked whether she would change the avatar to reflect her current experience, Valerie informed one of us that she would put the leopard in space in order to show how lost she currently felt. This reflects a point raised earlier, that movement through a *perezhivanie* may not necessarily be linear, but may in fact be recursive, with critical episodes being revisited many times before they are finally worked over and integrated into the personality. In Valerie’s case study, it is possible to see the movement toward integration—that is, the working through of a *perezhivanie*—which suggests that avatars can facilitate the working through of critical episodes by allowing users to simultaneously present current identities (the sleeping cat) and future, inchoate identities (the leopard).

**Discussion**

So far in the literature, students’ funds of identity have been mobilized as a lens through which to absorb new information and identities (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a; Subero et al., 2017) and to transform educational practices that typically marginalize out-of-school knowledge so that educators become more sensitive to the lived experience of learners (Jovés et al., 2015). However, this study adds to the literature by offering an additional identity modality in the form of existential funds of identity that may allow teachers and students to use both negative and positive experiences as the starting point for identity work.

The main strength of using an experiencing-as-struggle lens through which to analyse students’ funds of identity is that it could allow teachers to understand their students more completely, and therefore come to understand them as complex individuals who may perceive the world very differently from the way they do. This has implications for social justice teaching, as minoritized students’ out-of-school identities may not actually be inherently dark or problematic to the learners themselves, but are taken to be so by teachers working with a traitlike construction of culture. More critically, out-of-school identities are often constructed as problematic to legitimize their exclusion from the classroom (Zipin, 2009), thereby valorizing multiculturalism in so far as it conforms to, or legitimizes and sustains, a discourse of optimism.

This played out in WEST in a number of ways. First, assemblies were mobilized as a way to reinforce positive behaviour and to caution against unwanted behaviour. Moreover, students and teachers were made to line up facing the Chinese flag as a sign of obedience and conformity. Second, teachers were encouraged to focus on more inspiring and positive topics to encourage students to be “better” citizens. Valerie’s identity texts are an example of the kind of authentic identity work that could flourish if teachers are given more autonomy to design and implement curriculum and students given the time, space, and encouragement to explore their out-of-school experiences alongside more traditional academic subjects.

Methodologically, avatars allow for the interpenetration of past, present, and future, which also facilitates the simultaneous contemplation of both positive and negative experiences. Students are thus able to present and simultaneously construct who they have been, who they are now, and who they want to be as real and imagined individuals. Although Valerie did not work over her *perezhivanie*, she was nevertheless able to mobilize both positive and negative emotions and experiences to present her current identity (that of the house cat) and to construct a future identity (the leopard). Therefore, some negative experiences in conjunction with positive experiences could be used productively as a way to construct more positive future selves, which individuals could then strive to actualize in their daily lives. Teachers should also be attentive to these future selves and seek ways to draw upon them, such as through avatars and in the development of curriculum and units of work.
Conclusion

Although an experiencing-as-struggle approach to Funds of Identity could help to bridge the gap between school and home, its potential use has to be counterbalanced against the ethical imperative to bring about social justice for the minoritized. Therefore, the approach offered here should be used in conjunction with that developed by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a, 2014b). More specifically, the notion of existential funds of identity is conceptualized as an enrichment of the Funds of Identity approach, rather than a negation of it, an additional category that could complement the five identified by Esteban-Guitart (2012, 2014). Whereas geographical, social, cultural, institutional, and practical funds of identity valorize the positive side of experience by revealing what is significant for an individual (Jovés et al., 2015), existential funds of identity could potentially allow for the documentation of more complex experiences that specifically relate to identity formation, rather than extrapolating identity as it is embodied in objects, concepts, and symbols that are significant to the individual. However, more dialogue is required to explore the nature of existential funds of identity. For example, is it an enrichment of the five existing categories of funds of identity suggested by Esteban-Guitart (2012) or an additional category? Existential funds of identity, as it is operationalized here, is designed to be an additional category, as it is predicated upon the idea that experiencing-as-struggle and experiencing-as-contemplation are theoretically compatible from a dialectical perspective. Therefore, on a conceptual level at least, experiencing-as-struggle and experiencing-as-contemplation are commensurate because the contradictions between the two are resolved through the act of integration. However, it could equally be argued that the contribution of existential funds of identity applies to the already existing five categories, functioning as a lens through which to bring to the fore identity-related issues (such as bullying or doubt) that exist within these categories. Therefore, existential funds of identity is offered not as a complete theory, but as a first step in what is hoped will be the start of a fruitful and productive dialogue that continues to explore ways in which the whole range of human experience and emotion might be drawn upon to bring about more socially just teaching for minoritized learners in the mainstream classroom.

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