

Teacher's Conceptions of Excellent Teaching in Middle School in the North of China

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Knowing how teachers in China understand excellence in teaching is an important precursor to developing teaching standards. This study explores the conceptions of excellent teaching held by 20 middle school teachers in the north of China. A phenomenographic approach with grounded theory was used to interpret teachers' descriptions of a time when they delivered excellent teaching. Four main themes were found: (1) caring for students, (2) guiding students' all-round development, (3) connecting school knowledge/work to other areas, and (4) planning and preparing structured lessons. In contrast to other Western and Chinese descriptions of excellent teaching, these teachers were much less transmission, examination, or professionally oriented and exhibited much more nurturing, facilitative, and apprenticeship characteristics.

Key words: teachers' cognition, teaching, conceptions

The nature of excellent teaching and teachers' understandings of the concept of excellent teaching are important factors in improving student outcomes. Recent Western definitions of excellent teaching have emphasised personal characteristics such as enthusiasm, preparation, organisation, ability to stimulate interest, love of the subject taught, presentation, relationships, assessment, innovation, curriculum design, and research into discipline specific teaching and pedagogical research (Elton, 1998; Hildebrand, 1973; Sherman, Armistead, Fowler, Barksdale, & Reif, 1987). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) codified characteristics of highly-accomplished teaching (1989) into five main areas: (1) commitment to students, (2) extensive knowledge about the subjects and how

to teach these subjects, (3) responsibility for managing and monitoring student learning, (4) reflection on their practice and learning from their experiences, and (5) membership in learning communities. Evaluations of NBPTS certified teachers consistently indicated that such teachers do raise student outcomes (Bond, Smith, Baker, & Hattie, 2000).

Western Conceptions of Teaching and Good Teaching

These formal definitions and lists, however, need to be balanced against what teachers themselves consider to be good teaching. A substantial body of research around teachers' conceptions of teaching has been developed (e.g., Kember, 1997; Martin & Ramsden, 1992; Pratt, 1992; Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992; Trigwell & Prosser, 1997) and three major approaches were found (Kember, 1997). The 'teacher-centered' orientation involved imparting information and transmitting structured knowledge. The 'student-centered' orientation included facilitating understanding and encouraging conceptual change. This latter orientation is similar to the conception common in middle school teachers

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about being a social-personal guide or affective mentor (Beane & Brodhagen, 2001). The ‘student-teacher interaction’ conception acted as a bridging conception between the two contrasting orientations. Kember has argued that these conceptions are not hierarchical but rather “an ordered set of qualitatively differing conceptions” ranging along the axis of ‘teacher-centered’ to ‘student-centered’. Studies have shown that an individual teacher might hold multiple or even conflicting conceptions of teaching (e.g., Pratt, 1992; Gao & Watkins, 2002).

Pratt and associates (Pratt, 1992; Pratt, Arseneau, & Collins, 2001) found that teachers have five different perspectives on the nature of teaching: that is, transmission, development, apprenticeship, nurturing, and social reform. The majority of perspectives can be located on the teacher-student continuum mentioned above. The most teacher-oriented perspective, transmission, requires teachers to present subject knowledge accurately, and take students systematically through learning tasks that lead to mastery of the knowledge. Three of the other four perspectives are more student-oriented. From the developmental perspective, good teachers should understand their students in order to adapt their knowledge to the students’ experience and ways of understanding. In the apprenticeship perspective, good teachers should cultivate students to work more independently. From the nurturing perspective, good teachers can create a supportive climate that assists students in achieving learning goals. From the social reform perspective, social reform educators should awaken students to the values and ideologies that lie hidden in the texts and common practices in order to achieve societal improvement (Pratt, Arseneau, & Collins, 2001). The location of this fifth perspective on the teacher-student continuum is uncertain. Fenstermacher and Soltis (1998) invoked three conceptually incompatible but practically integrated metaphors to describe the nature of teaching—that is, executive, therapist, and liberationist, which map onto these five conceptions. The executive seems most like the transmission perspective, therapist relates to the nurturing, developmental, and apprenticeship perspectives, while the liberationist connects to the social reform perspective.

Generally, research into conceptions of good teaching has reported that pre-service and in-service teachers have multiple understandings, most of which can be located on the teacher-student continuum. For example, Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, and Minor (2001) reported pre-service teachers having teacher-centred (i.e., classroom and behaviour management, teaching methodology, and knowledge of subject) and

nurturing (i.e., student-centeredness) perspectives. Vallance (2003) reported the characteristics of excellent secondary teachers as being teacher-centered (i.e., having the classroom under control) and nurturing (i.e., commitment to the whole person and a personal commitment to their students). Kane, Sandretto, and Heath (2004) found that tertiary science teachers believed excellence involved transmission (i.e., subject knowledge and skills), nurturing (i.e., international relationships), and cognitive development (i.e., research/teaching nexus).

The Chinese Educational Context and Chinese Conceptions of Good Teachers

Research with Chinese teachers around their notions of excellent teaching would be valuable given that their teaching environments and the degree of freedom they have in making teaching decisions differ greatly from those of Western teachers (Gao & Watkins, 2002). For example, classrooms in China are typically characterized by large class sizes, expository methods, and drilling for externally-mandated, high-stakes or consequence examinations (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). As for teacher training, it varies across the whole country. In general, teacher training in Liaoning province comprises two parts: pre-service training and in-service training. Pre-service training is conducted in four-year teacher training institutions, such as universities and colleges, and three-year teacher training. In-service training is conducted by education institutes (e.g., Liaoning Normal University, Liaoning University) and in-service teacher training schools (e.g., Liaoning Province Teachers Training School) for secondary and primary school teachers (The Educational Department of Liaoning Province, 2002). International cooperation projects are increasingly frequent. For example, since 1998, some excellent teachers at secondary schools in Liaoning province have been sent to England to experience the British education first hand.

The traditional Chinese view of teachers is that they should be completely devoted (in Chinese the phrase is *Hui Ren Bu Juan*) (Watkins & Zhang, 2006). Han Yu, one of the most celebrated educators in the Tang Dynasty said, “A teacher is the one who shows you the way of being human, teaches you knowledge and enlightens you while you are confused” (Liu, 1973). Among the old sayings to describe traditional teaching is the Chinese phrase “*Yin cai shi jiao*”, which means teachers should ‘teach students in accordance with their aptitude’.

The conceptions of teaching and good teachers held by modern Chinese teachers, in contrast, have not been investigated extensively. Watkins and Zhang (2006) reviewed several related studies (e.g., Gao & Watkins, 2001; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998; Watkins & Sachs, 2004) which were conducted in Hong Kong or Mainland China at the senior secondary school or higher level of the school system. They concluded that Chinese views of a good teacher focused primarily on transmission and nurturing perspectives. They defined a good teacher as one who has deep knowledge in general and in a particular subject; focuses on knowledge delivery; helps students to do well in examinations; cares about students' personal problems and has close relationships with students; and is a good moral guide and promotes positive attitudes to society. This list exhibits four of Pratt's five teaching perspectives—that is, teacher-centered transmission and student-oriented nurturing, mentoring, and apprenticeship perspectives.

Most studies about teachers' conceptions of teaching have been conducted in Western contexts, so it is valuable to explore Chinese teachers' teaching conceptions. Because previous Chinese studies were conducted in the south of China at the senior secondary school or higher level, they may not generalize well to teachers in the north of China or to those teaching at lower levels of the school system. It may be that the great physical distance between the south and north of China and the differences between compulsory attendance at middle schools and optional attendance at secondary schools will result in different conceptions of excellent teaching. The aim of this study is to investigate the conceptions of excellent teaching held by Chinese middle school teachers in Liaoning province. It is expected that understanding how teachers themselves understand excellence will inform efforts to evaluate teachers' work and address teachers' professional development.

Method

This study elicited Chinese middle school teachers' personal descriptions of excellent teaching. Responses were analyzed using phenomenographic techniques and grounded-theory approaches.

Sample

A convenience sample of about 50 teachers, who were colleagues of the author, in six Middle Schools in Liaoning

province was approached. These teachers had different backgrounds (e.g., gender, educational background, working experience, and teaching subjects). Questionnaires were sent by email, and printed responses were posted back by 22 of the invitees, giving a response rate of about 44%. Of those returned, 20 were considered valid for analysis (the other two were not completed).

Instrument and Procedure

The research instrument employed in this study was an anonymous qualitative questionnaire which asked teachers to recount a personal anecdote or narrative (Calderhead, 1996) of a moment or time when they delivered excellent teaching, however they understood excellence. The words 'excellent teaching' which can be translated as "*jie chu de jiao xue*" or "*you xiu de jiao xue*" in Chinese were used in the questionnaire. This is in contrast to other research (e.g., Pratt, 1992; Watkins & Zhang, 2006) which has used 'good teaching' or 'effective teaching' which can be translated as "*hao de jiao xue*" and "*you xiao de jiao xue*" in Chinese respectively.

The responses were translated by the author, and accuracy of the Chinese to English translation was determined by comparing the author's translation with that of an independent official translator. Functional equivalence was used as the basis for comparing translations rather than literal equivalence (Decker, 2004). Ten randomly selected scripts produced 154 English sentences. Of these, 151 (98%) had equivalent meanings in the two translations and only one sentence differed substantially. In the case of this one disagreement, the author's translation took precedence. Substantially, the English versions reported in this paper are accurate representations of the teachers' thinking in Chinese.

Analysis

The data obtained was analysed in light of the research into teachers' conceptions of teaching and frameworks for describing teaching. Informed by the research into teachers' conceptions of teaching (e.g. Kember's (1997) the teacher-student continuum; Pratt, Arseneau, and Collins' (2001) five teaching perspectives; Fenstermacher and Soltis' (1998) three teaching metaphors), the data was analysed using phenomenographic techniques and grounded-theory approaches to create a rich profile of the multiple conceptions of excellent teaching held by these teachers.

The phenomenographic approach aims to reveal the

qualitatively different ways in which people experience and conceptualize the world around them (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997). Such an approach has been demonstrated to be valuable in studying qualitative variations in people's thinking about their experiences of various phenomena (e.g., teaching and learning). The current study used this approach to identify the various conceptions teachers had of excellent teaching. Grounded theory is a research strategy whose purpose is to generate theory from qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This procedure is suitable for analysing the data in the current study. The analysis involved three steps. Initially each phrase or notion concerning qualities of excellent teaching was identified and labeled. Responses were coded for the person and the line within the transcript (e.g., T1, 2-1 refers to Teacher no. 1, Page no. 2, and Line no.1). Using a constant-comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the units which appeared similar in content were assigned to a common category. A stable set of categories was established, such that each category represented a distinct theme. Second, the frequency of each conceptual category across all teachers was found. Finally, the categories were aggregated into major themes related to the conceptions of teaching and standards of excellence in teaching.

Results

Four major characteristics of excellent teaching were identified in the narratives supplied by these 20 middle school teachers in China. They are presented in descending order of frequency: (1) caring for students (80.0%, 16 of 20 teachers mentioned this conception), (2) guiding students' all-round development (70.0%), (3) connecting school knowledge/work to others (45.0%), and (4) planning and preparing structured lessons (45.0%).

Caring for students

Sixteen teachers described excellence in terms of caring for students. This category included several aspects, such as creating a warm encouraging classroom climate (75%), having positive relationships with students (45%), and encouraging and praising students (40%).

Most teachers tended to create a positive classroom environment using a variety of teaching and assessment techniques:

Display the video episode showing the Sydney Opera House and Australian National Zoo. The purpose is to stimulate students' interest in exploring Australia...

Have the students prepare a role play being a tourist guide for these sites. Put the students into six groups, and have each student perform and then the group recommends a tourist guide to present their collected tourist information. (T18, 18-2)

I leave the platform and come to each group to listen to students' conversations, I find their good points, and give a demonstration promptly. (T3, 3-18)

Some teachers put students at the centre of the teaching-learning process:

Students are the key during the teaching process. Teachers should stimulate fully students' enthusiasm, enjoyment, and involvement. (T13, 14-1)

Teachers paid significant attention to the differences which existed between students, (e.g., students' personality, learning style, etc.) and tried to meet their different needs using different teaching approaches in the class. The centrality of the individual learner can be seen in this teacher's description:

I attach more importance to students' true feelings since each student has a different background,, experiences, and cognitive levels. You can find the innovative ideas from students if you give them opportunities to think and speak. (T2, 3-3)

The importance of each individual student's thoughts and learning was clear:

It is true that teachers should not only prepare for the class fully (e.g. study texts, create new teaching methods), but they will attach more importance to what students think and listen to their voices inside and outside of classroom. (T10, 10-21)

Excellent teaching meant catering for individuals, not just the class.

Positive relationships between students and the teacher were advocated by nine teachers as an important aspect of excellent teaching. As one said:

*The teacher should listen to students' words from the heart (in Chinese the phrase is *Xin li hua*), and become the students' good friend and teacher (in Chinese the phrase is *Liang shi yi you*). (T7, 7-11)*

Teachers associated being a model for life as part of their caring for students, as in this example from a class on

polymerclay:

The boy says, "Ms Zhu, perhaps you think the colour is too ugly, but I like this colour and I name this band as 'Heiren Band', I hope you also like it. Because I admire you and want to be an arts teacher in the future, just like you." (T3, 3-26)

Eight teachers were likely to encourage or motivate their students, especially to express their independent opinions. One teacher explained:

A teacher should guide students to say what they think even though their ideas may be not good. During this process, the teacher can discover what students think and how they think. (T5, 5-28)

Teachers also associated unearned praise intended to encourage students with excellence:

He started to work after I reminded him softly. When I came to this group the second time... I took the polymerclay from his hand and kneaded a funny head, and then returned it to his hand with a smile. Both of us didn't say anything, but I could see this boy was surprised by my skill...I said, "Good job! You give me a big surprise!" Just common praise, but I found this boy showed his great interest and did very well in arts in later classes. (T3, 3-21)

The excellent teacher regards students as the key of the teaching process, cares about their problems, encourages them, and helps them mature in a supportive environment. This approach to excellence is like being a parent of the students. The excellent teacher cares for the students as young people who need encouraging and shaping, just as a parent might seek to mould a child.

Guiding students' all-round development

Excellent teaching facilitates and focuses on students' full development, not just intellectual or cognitive abilities. Almost all teachers focused on knowledge delivery in order to help students achieve learning tasks to contribute to their academic development. However, students' full abilities also needed promotion. Both intellectual divergence and personal courage to differ were valued by two different teachers:

Practice can not only achieve the language task, but also cultivate students' divergent thinking and innovative ability. (T1, 1-12)

Even though it is still an open question so far, Li's braveness and critical thinking should be encouraged.

(T16, 15-12)

Teachers were not only facilitators, but also guides of the students. In other words, excellent teachers not only promote students' academic and ability development, but also teach their students how to learn. As a teacher said:

During this process, the teacher can find what students think and how they think. The teacher should teach students an approach to learn instead of telling them the answer. In other words, the teacher should teach students how to catch fish instead of giving them fish. (T6, 5-29)

In addition, learning in China was a means to becoming a better person. Two teachers expressed this thusly:

I take this opportunity to educate students to use water economically and protect water sources. (T19, 19-14)

At this moment, I am aware that it is a good chance to educate students to hold a positive philosophy of life. (T8, 7-14)

Excellent teachers in this approach act more like mentors who guide the young adult's social, personal, and even spiritual development. Perhaps then, this is akin to a guru who helps the learner to develop both in knowledge and in spirit through the example of their teaching and their way of life. Fine examples of such excellence would be Gautama Buddha (India) and Confucius (China) who taught followers through their words and their exemplary lives.

Connecting school knowledge/work to others

There were nine teachers who conceived of excellence as linking and applying classroom or school knowledge to real-world settings, students' prior knowledge, and to other disciplines. For example, in terms of real-world settings, a teacher taught and practiced interest calculation by having the students verify the amount given by a bank on their own personal savings:

I encourage each student to open a savings account by depositing their pocket money into the bank. At the end of the month, they should calculate the interest and ask the bank to check whether they were right or not. (T9, 8-11)

Some teachers also connected school knowledge or work to other knowledge or work. A teacher reported that he linked

Mathematics to the Geography class:

...The main point is water distribution...I found there was always something wrong when students calculated the percentage and did a unit shift, so I decided to reviewed the related mathematics knowledge firstly and then calculated the water percentage for distribution.. (T19, 19-1)

The writing method of this paragraph is the same as Du Fu (famous poet of Tang dynasty)'s "Welcome Rain One Spring Night". The teacher praises this student and asks students to recite the poem together. (T2, 2-19)

These teachers designed the classroom as a part of the real world. Using a variety of teaching approaches, they induced students to absorb and learn how to apply school knowledge or work to their daily lives. Teachers also claimed that excellent teaching involved linking school knowledge or work to prior knowledge or work and other disciplines. Teachers holding this conception conceived of excellent teaching as like unto a master who trains apprentice learners.

Plan and prepare structured lessons

Conceptions of excellent teaching also involved planning and preparing well for a class. Nine teachers supported this conception of excellent teaching which is reminiscent of the executive or professional teacher who is in charge of the class. Teachers' comments about planning and preparing structured lessons included:

At the beginning of the class, I ask students to talk about what they knew from the bank yesterday... Next, I introduce the definitions... Finally, I encourage each student to open a savings account by depositing their pocket money into the bank. (T9, 9-3)

The topic is "what do you want to be?" In order to stimulate students' interest, I use Cheng Long's (famous kung fu actor) photo to elicit the new sentence structure: what does he want to be? Next, I display some famous people's childhood photos, for example, Yao Ming (basketball player), Li Yuchun (Singer), Chen Luyu (reporter), etc. Students are interested in these people and some of them are their fans. Students show their interest and discuss the people heatedly. And then I ask, "What do you want to be?" Students throw away their shyness and discuss their ideas naturally... (T1, 1-11)

Both of these teachers talked about how they prepared for the class. The process of actual teaching revealed that excellent teachers plan the classes very carefully.

In this section, four major characteristics of excellent teaching derived from 20 middle school teachers' descriptions of excellent teaching events have been described.

Discussion

Comparing this study in China with previous studies in China and western countries reveals interesting similarities and differences. Table 1 summarises these differences and similarities.

The most frequent conception was the nurturing or parent perspective. Excellent teaching involved caring for students through creating a warm encouraging classroom climate. This result is consistent with the NBPTS (1989) standard that accomplished teachers should know how to create instructional settings to capture and sustain the interest of their students and be committed to students. The traditional Chinese Confucian saying, 'teach students in accordance with their aptitude' (in Chinese the phrase is "*Yin cai shi jiao*"), also describes this characteristic. In addition, these teachers stressed positive relationships both inside and outside of classroom between teachers and students. This result is consistent with those of other studies which reported that Chinese teachers attached importance to student-teacher interaction and to the teacher acting as a friend and parent (Gao & Watkins, 2001). Similarly, one of influential Chinese educational sayings, 'the teacher is a good teacher and friend' (in Chinese the phrase is "*Liang shi yi you*"), is used commonly to describe the Chinese teacher-student relationship.

What is more, encouraging and praising students was identified as one of the characteristics of excellent teaching. This may stand in contrast to the traditional Chinese notion that students listen and do not publicly express their own opinions (e.g., *Silence is golden* or *Still waters run deep*). To a large extent, Chinese traditional culture restrains students from expressing their ideas freely. Perhaps these Chinese teachers were trying to stimulate and promote students' motivation so that they could throw away their shyness, have more confidence to show their true selves, and say what they think fully and freely within a relaxed environment. It is expected that these teachers would agree with the notion that excellent teaching requires 'doing when learning' (in Chinese the phrase is "*zuo zhong xue*") and 'learning when enjoying'

Table 1
Comparison of Conceptions of Excellent Teaching

| Chinese Views | | | Western Views | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Chen | Traditional Chinese | Watkins & Zhang | NBPTS | Pratt, Arseneau, & Collins | Fenstermacher & Soltis | |
| Excellent | Good | Good | Highly Accomplished | Good/Effective | Effective | |
| Creating a warm encouraging classroom climate | Teaching students in accordance with their aptitude | -- | Creating instructional settings to capture and sustain the interest of their students | Nurturing | Therapist | |
| Caring for students (parent) | Having positive relationships with students | Completely devoting to students | Developing close relations with students. Teachers care about students' personal problems | Committing to students and their learning | Nurturing | Therapist |
| Encouraging and praising students; | -- | -- | Be responsible for managing and monitoring student learning | Nurturing | Therapist | |
| Guiding on students' all-round development (Guru) | Showing the way to be human, teaching knowledge and enlightens | Be students' good moral guides; promoting positive attitudes to society and cultivate good citizenship | Developing students' cognitive capacity and fostering their character, civic responsibility | Developmental | Therapist | |
| Connecting school knowledge/ work to others (master) | -- | -- | Teaching how knowledge in their subject is organized, linked to other disciplines and applied to real-world settings | Apprenticeship | Therapist | |
| Planning and preparing structured lessons (boss) | Completely devoting to job | Having deep knowledge in general and deep subject knowledge in particular; focusing on knowledge delivery; Teaching students to do well in public examinations | Knowing the subjects and how to teach; Thinking systematically | Transmission | Executive | |
| -- | -- | -- | Be members of learning communities | -- | -- | |
| -- | -- | -- | -- | Social Reform | Liberationist | |

(in Chinese the phrase is “*yu xue yu le*”). This finding is consistent with the NBPTS standard which points out that accomplished teachers should understand how students develop and learn and treat students equitably, while recognizing individual differences. This approach to excellent teaching richly resonates with the middle school teacher role of being an affective mentor (Beane & Brodhagen, 2001). It is also consistent with the nurturing perspective (Pratt, Arsenau, & Collins, 2001) and the therapist/facilitator metaphor of teaching (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 1998).

Second, guiding students’ all-round development was identified as a characteristic of excellence. Excellent Chinese teachers promote both students’ academic development and promote moral development. From the traditional Chinese view, good teachers should not only perform well in teaching and learning, but also in other aspects of their lives (Gao & Watkins, 2001). This aspect of excellence in teaching involves cultivating good persons (in Chinese the phrase is “*Wei Ren Shi Biao*”). Indeed, many influential Chinese sayings express this dimension of excellent teaching, for example, ‘Teach by personal example as well as verbal instruction’ (in Chinese the phrase is “*Yan Chuan Shen Jiao*”) and ‘Teaching as well as cultivating good persons’ (in Chinese the phrase is “*Jiao Shu Yu Ren*”). A similar conception, teachers promote positive attitudes to society and cultivate good citizenship, has appeared in Watkins and Zhang’s study (2006). It is also congruent with the NBPTS (1989) standard that accomplished teachers develop students’ cognitive capacity and their respect for learning. Equally important, accomplished teachers foster students’ self-esteem, motivation, character, awareness of civic responsibility, and their respect for individual, cultural, religious and racial differences. Clearly, this emphasis is also consistent with both the cognitive and personal development perspectives outlined by Pratt, Arsenau and Collins (2001), and Fenstermacher and Soltis’s metaphor of teacher as therapist (1998).

Third, the conception that excellent teaching connects classroom learning to real-world settings and other disciplines was a key standard in the NBPTS (1989), which claimed that accomplished teachers should have a rich understanding of the subject(s) they teach and appreciate how knowledge in their subject area is created, organized, linked to other disciplines, and applied to real-world settings. Additionally, connecting classroom learning to prior knowledge was stressed in the current study, an aspect on which the NBPTS was silent but possibly implicit. This is understood to be explicit evidence for the apprenticeship perspective of teaching outlined by Pratt, Arsenau, and Collins (2001).

Lastly, the conception of planning and preparing structured lessons has been identified in this study. This finding is consistent with the NBPTS standards that accomplished teachers understand the subject(s) deeply and know how to teach. Accomplished teachers should also have command of a range of instructional techniques, know when each is appropriate, and implement them as needed in a purposeful learning environment. Excellent Chinese teachers tended to use varieties of teaching strategies in order to meet students’ capacities and needs. Similarly, Watkins and Zhang found that good Chinese teachers should have deep knowledge in general and deep subject knowledge in particular, focus on knowledge delivery, and teach students to do well in public examinations. In the traditional Chinese view, this kind of teacher may be regarded as ‘completely devoted to the job’. This result is also consistent with the transmission perspective of teaching advanced by Pratt, Arsenau, and Collins (2001), and Fenstermacher and Soltis’s metaphor of teacher as executive (1998).

The current study shows that Chinese middle school teachers have conceptions of excellent teaching that have strong similarities to those outlined by Western professional standards of excellence and by research into conceptions of teachers in China and the west have of good teaching. However, interesting differences were noted. Unlike the NBPTS, these Chinese teachers did not emphasize their own professional development, how to assess students, and working collaboratively with other colleagues, school boards, and parents. On the other hand, it would seem that the American notion of highly accomplished teaching stops teacher-student relationships at the classroom door. Moreover, the NBPTS did not mention the importance of teachers paying attention to students’ moral development. It may be that these Chinese middle school teachers have expectations that they are responsible for moral as well as academic development. It is also possible that Chinese teachers have little awareness of professional development and assessment because these are not well-developed school-based activities in China. Compared with Pratt, Arsenau and Collins’ (2001), and Fenstermacher and Soltis’s (1998) research, Chinese middle school teachers did not mention social reform perspectives or the liberationist metaphor.

Compared with Watkins and Zhang’s summary, these Chinese teachers did not emphasize the more teacher-centered or transmission-oriented notions of teachers’ deep knowledge in general and their particular subject which they should teach explicitly. However, when reading between the lines, it seems that teachers believed that excellent teachers should have rich

subject-matter knowledge which was actively connected to other valuable content. In addition, it is somewhat surprising that the expected transmission-oriented emphasis on preparing students for examinations was not mentioned by these teachers. It may be that this notion is associated with ordinary teaching as opposed to excellent teaching or it may be that in the lower years of middle school examinations are not important.

These differences may be caused by several reasons. The current study was conducted in northern China, while the earlier studies were conducted in southern China (i.e., Hong Kong and Guangdong). The large physical distances and different policies between the north and south of China, especially in terms of ideology and culture, may contribute to differing conceptions of excellence. Second, the current study focused on middle school teachers, while earlier studies focused on older students (i.e., university and secondary schools). The importance of high-stakes qualifications assessments in those sectors may contribute to a less student-centered notion of excellence. Third, the current study focused on the conceptions of teachers, while other studies have included students. Fourth, the current study was very small-scale involving only 20 teachers, while other studies have reported results based on over 100 participants. Fifth, the current study has focused on 'excellent' teaching, whereas other studies have focused on 'good' teaching—thus, it may be that they are not interchangeable notions.

It can be seen that aspects of Chinese middle school teachers' conceptions of excellent teaching reflect in part Western standards for highly accomplished teaching and research on teachers' conceptions of good teaching from both Western and Chinese sources. However, this study has identified a strong effect of traditional Chinese and Confucian conceptions and noted the pointed absence of examinations or assessment systems in the thinking of the middle school teachers. Several important hypotheses have been identified that need to be investigated, but the current study has clearly shown that Chinese middle school teachers invoked conceptions of student-centered, nurturing, academic-cognitive development, and personal development in their understanding of excellent teaching.

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