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Teaching in HIGHER education: Students' perceptions of effective teaching and good teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Chinese students' perceptions of effective teaching and good teachers. The qualitative data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 72 associate degree students in Hong Kong. Adopting a thematic analysis, three main themes are found: teaching approaches and content, teacher-student relationship, and teacher's personal characteristics and roles. The results show that the students perceive effective teaching as teaching in an interesting, clear, and adaptive way. In addition to teaching expertise, the learners also value teachers' appreciation, care, and friendly relations with students. Enthusiasm and a sense of humor are perceived as significant personal traits of good teachers. Contrary to the traditional Chinese educational philosophy and Confucian-Heritage cultural values, the students place little importance on teachers as a role model. The findings also suggest that students' perceptions of learning and learning styles may shape their conceptions of excellent teaching and exemplary teachers. This research not only sheds valuable new light on interrelationship between teacher's personal characteristics, teaching methods, and teacher-student relationship, but also yields practical implications for school administrators, teachers, and teacher trainers.

Keywords: good teaching, good teachers, students' perceptions, higher education

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1 INTRODUCTION

The quest for teaching excellence has currently gained increasing attention. Teaching effectiveness and quality of teachers are important factors affecting students' development (Yin et al., 2016). Hence, it is important to know the key attributes of quality teaching and good teachers. Though conceptions of a teacher are related to conceptions of teaching, they are not the same because the role of a teacher may be far beyond performing teaching solely. Indeed, it appears that the attributes of teaching excellence and best teachers always overlap. In general, terms such as "good", "ideal", "effective", "exemplary", "outstanding", "professional", "excellent", "best", "great", "superior", "successful", and "quality" teaching and/or teachers are applied interchangeably in reference to facilitate student learning (Alhija, 2017). In spite of a growing number of studies on good teaching and ideal professors, it is difficult to achieve a single agreed definition (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010). Students' perspectives are considered to be one of the most vital ones because they are the key stakeholders in the teaching and learning process (Hande, Kamath, & Souza, 2014). Student ideals of teaching might affect the quality of classroom interaction, their learning, attendance, and even career choice.

Because of increasing accountability, the quality of teaching of self-finance educational institutes has become under scrutiny in Hong Kong. Owing to the education reform and the government's advocates, there has been robust development in the sub-degree education sector. Although post-secondary education is an important sector, hitherto, it has surprisingly received little attention from educators and researchers (Chan, 2013). Given the rising public concern about the quality of teaching of Associate Degree (AD) and Higher Diploma (HD) programmes and the significant role of students, it is crucial to examine conceptions of effective teaching and good teachers through sub-degree students' lens.

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2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies on learners' conceptions of quality teaching and good teachers have mainly examined the perceptions of students in tertiary environments and western contexts (e.g. Basow, 2000; Woods, Badzinski, Fritz, & Yeates, 2012). Prior literature on Chinese learners hitherto is not extensive. Chinese students' views about a good teacher were examined in the large-scale survey conducted by Szalay, Strohl, Fu, and Lao (1994), which revealed that the participants viewed their teachers in an idealized role endowed with a great deal of authority, esteem, and respect. It also found that Chinese students not only considered their teachers as transmitters of knowledge, but also as "an idealized role model, a resource for solving all types of human problems, and a model for lifestyle as well" (p. 245). Cortazzi and Jin (1996) investigated 135 Chinese university students in Tianjin about their perceptions of good teachers by asking them to write essays on this topic and five major traits were found: "deep knowledge" (67%), "patient" (25%), "humorous" (23.7%), "good moral example" (21.5%), and "friendliness" (21.5%). Focusing on a single discipline, Xiao and Dyson (1999) examined Chinese students' perceptions of accounting teaching and found similar results. The most important characteristics included knowledgeable, the adoption of effective teaching approaches, being responsible and conscientious, making teaching interesting, an ability to encourage and facilitate independent thinking, and an ability to provide moral and behavioural guidance. Previous Chinese studies have generally showed that role model (*Wei Ren Shi Biao*) and conduct guidance are key attributes of a good teacher. It is suggested that the traditional Chinese educational philosophy and beliefs still have a certain impact on Chinese teachers and students.

Besides these, there are some cross-cultural studies, Jin and Cortazzi's (1998) research revealed significantly different emphases between Chinese and British students on the conceptual items as indicators of a good teacher. Good British teachers

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were held to "arouse students' interest", "explain clearly", "use effective teaching methods", and "organize a variety of classroom activities". In contrast, good Chinese teachers were generally believed to "have deep knowledge", "have an answer to students' questions", and "to be good moral examples". Such results embraced the conceptions of "knowledge delivery" and "conduct guidance" identified by Gao and Watkins (2001). Lai (2000) examined the perceptions of a good teacher held by secondary school students and found that Hong Kong students did not consider teaching methods as important as the Mainland Chinese and British students did. They were rather passive and dependent and preferred their teachers to explain everything clearly so that they could acquire knowledge in the fastest way. They did not care whether the teacher could help them to learn independently. The disparities among the respondents in the above research indicate that an understanding gap might appear in an educational setting where students are from different contexts and bring with them different conceptions and beliefs about excellent teaching and outstanding teachers.

3 RESEARCH AIMS

The research pertaining to effective teaching and good teachers is bountiful, yet often conflictual in findings of characteristics of successful teaching and competences of exemplary teachers. Results of previous studies suggest that conceptions are context-dependent, cultural-bound and dynamic, and will inevitably change to some degree as societies change and time goes by. This gives the importance of studying conceptions of best teachers and good teaching in different institutional environments and cultural contexts.

In previous literature, most participants were advanced students in universities and, for the most part, were studying in Western contexts. Concerns about the teaching quality of self-financed post-secondary education in Hong Kong have been

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increasingly raised; however, little is known about students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness and few of these arguments have been based on empirical investigation. In addition, most of prior studies on students' conceptions of good teaching and teachers are based on quantitative ratings; however, have not fully examined the traits and qualities students value. Qualitative studies addressing students' conceptions of ideal teachers and good teaching are generally rare but necessary (Könings, Brand-Gruwel, & Elen, 2012; Raufelder et al., 2016; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013).

Thus, the major aim of the present research is to explore how students perceive effective teaching and exemplary teachers by using a qualitative research design. Analyzing data by thematic analysis may promise greater objectivity than questionnaire –based survey (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The current study foregrounds the viewpoints of Chinese associate-degree (AD) adolescent students in Hong Kong, thereby offering significant insights into their needs and expectations from their teachers and yielding practical implications for various stakeholders.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1. Participants

A subsample of 72 associate-degree adolescent students were selected from the sample pool for a larger project which exploring quality of teaching of the self-financed sub-degree education in Hong Kong. The data were collected from four educational institutes and the participants were recruited through email invitations. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their responses would remain confidential. The participants were full-time students studying Associate Degree programmes from three disciplines. 23 (31.9%) students were from the stream of Science and Technology, 21 (29.2%) from Arts and Humanities, and 28 (38.9%) from Business. Females and males comprised 54.2 % (n=39) and 45.8% (n=33) respectively. The participants were between 17 and 20 years old (Mage = 18.7; SD = .86).

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4.2 Instrument

Since the present study aims to examine student conceptions of effective teaching and good teachers, a qualitative method—semi-structured interview was used to explore how students perceived quality teaching and to discover the qualities and traits with students themselves used to conceive ideal teachers. The questioning was carefully designed based on prior literature so as to impose a real open framework. In the interviews, the students were asked to describe the types of teaching they perceived as good teaching and what made an exemplary teacher. Each interview, lasting 15-20 minutes, was conducted in Cantonese (1st language of the participants), recorded digitally and manually transcribed. In the process of transcription, all respondents were assigned pseudonyms. The qualitative data were analysed in Chinese, and the excerpts used to illustrate the results were translated into English.

4.3 Data analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the data were manually transcribed, initial codes were created and applied to the data set. The participants' comments were content analysed and categorised into separate descriptors, staying close to respondents' own words. Codes indicating similar content were grouped and thematic groups that described good teaching and teachers were yielded. After reviewing and refining the main themes, subthemes under each category were identified, revised, and refined. The main themes and subthemes were extracted from the interview transcriptions manually until no further ones could be extracted. Owing to the gap in empirical research that might provide a potential framework for data interpretation, the data were analysed inductively (Raufelder et al., 2016). A total of three main themes were identified in descriptions of attributes of effective teaching and traits of excellent teachers.

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5 RESULTS

Adopting qualitative thematic analysis, the results showed three main themes (see Table 1) featuring attributes of good teaching and good teachers: (1) teaching approaches and content, (2) teacher-student relationship, and (3) teacher's personal characteristics and roles.

The first main theme of "teaching approaches and content" was subdivided into i) teaching in an interesting way, ii) teaching in a clear way, and iii) teaching in an adaptive way, and iv) exam-oriented teaching. Secondly, "teacher-student relationship" implied three subthemes: i) encouragement and appreciation, ii) caring for students, and iii) friendliness. The third main theme concerning "teacher's personal characteristics and roles" was split into i) humorous, ii) enthusiastic, iii) knowledge transmitter, and iv) role model.

Table 1 Themes and subthemes of good teaching and good teachers

	n	Percentage
Theme 1: Teaching approaches and content		
Subtheme 1: Teaching in an interesting way	65	90.3%
Subtheme 2: Teaching in a clear way	57	79.2%
Subtheme 3: Teaching in an adaptive way	38	52.8%
Subtheme 4: exam-oriented teaching	52	72.2
Theme 2: Teacher-student relationship		
Subtheme 1: encouragement and appreciation	33	45.8%
Subtheme 2: caring for students	62	86.1%
Subtheme 3: friendliness	58	80.6%

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Theme 3: Teacher's personal characteristics and roles		
Subtheme 1: humorous	25	34.7%
Subtheme 2: enthusiastic	48	66.7%
Subtheme 3: knowledge transmitter	35	48.6%
Subtheme 4: role model	7	9.7%

5.1 Theme 1: Teaching approaches and content

The majority of students stated pedagogy as an essential trait of good teaching and emphasized the importance of teaching in an interesting, clear, and adaptive way.

5.1.1 Subtheme 1: teaching in an interesting way

Over 90% of the participants emphasized teaching in a motivating, interesting, and fascinating manner as an influential factor. Students expected teachers to create open, stimulating, and creative learning climate which they could learn happily and interact with their peers collaboratively.

"Good teachers should be able to teach interestingly." (Terry, 17 years)

5.1.2 Subtheme 2: teaching in a clear way

Most informants (n=57) addressed the importance of teachers' elocutionary skills and clarity of the lesson. They pointed out that well-origanised class, teaching in an understandable manner, good presentation skills, and appropriate use of instructional aids were essential characteristics of effective teaching.

"I think a good teacher should be able to teach in a clear way that I can understand easily." (Vincent, 18 years)

5.1.3 Subtheme 3: teaching in an adaptive way

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38 participants mentioned that a good teacher would be flexible and able to adopt a variety of pedagogies, teaching and learning materials, and class activities according to different students' needs, abilities, and learning progresses.

"Different classmates have different needs. I think good teachers should take our various needs into account." (Owen, 20 years)

5.1.4 Subtheme 4 exam-oriented teaching

While the associate-degree programmes aim to provide post-secondary students with opportunity to acquire broad-based general education, the need for exam-oriented teaching was highlighted by the participants in the interviews. Even without the pressure of public examinations, the students were still very sensitive to assessments and grades. They perceived good teachers should provide them measurement-oriented materials and help them to get good grades in assessment tasks.

"I think a good teacher is a teacher who can help me to pass the course, for example providing exam-oriented drills." (George, 18 years)

5.2 Theme 2: Teacher–student-relationship

The majority of participants stated that ideal teachers could not only transfer skills and knowledge, but also build a good rapport with students and interact with them on a personal level. In the narratives, the participants showed their personal needs for praise and care. These expectations are further specified in 3 subthemes.

5.2.1 Subtheme 1: encouragement and appreciation

Around a half (n =33) of students reported their desire to be praised and recognized by their teachers. They believed that teachers' positive feedback was a direct indication of their success.

"I'm very happy when my teachers praise me. It's really encouraging." (Ada, 19 years)

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5.2.2 Subtheme 2: caring for students

About 86% of the participants expressed the need for teacher's concern and care. The students placed importance on teacher's sensitivity to their learning and individual needs.

"I like teachers who are willing to make effort and time to help when we have problems, no matter study problems or personal issues." (Pauline, 20 years)

5.2.3 Subtheme 3: friendliness

Mutual feelings of sympathy, respect, and affection were also perceived as important attributes of exemplary teachers. Many participants (n = 58) desired a healthy, friendly, and good relationship with their teachers. Instead of the traditional authoritative role, they wished their teachers could be their "friends" and get along with them even outside of the classroom.

"I hope my teachers can be my friends who are kind and nice." (Sally, 17 years)

5.3 Theme 3: Teacher's personal characteristics and roles

The results showed that teachers' personal characteristics and roles were related to teacher-student relationship, teachers' performance and practice, and students' perceptions of best teachers. According to the students' narratives, many participants talked about personal traits of ideal teachers. They tended to cherish teachers who were "humorous" and "enthusiastic", while they placed less importance on teachers' roles of "knowledge transmitter" and "role model".

5.3.1 Subtheme 1: humorous

While the participants expected their teachers to retain their assertiveness and authority, about one-third of the students expressed that a sense of humor was a

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valuable personal quality. They found humorous teachers tended to make the class "more fun" and "interesting".

"I like teachers who are humorous. For example, they can make some jokes in the class." (Mimi, 18 years)

5.3.2 Subtheme 2: enthusiastic

The results revealed that many respondents (n=48) valued teachers' enthusiasm for both the subject and teaching. They tended to classify their teachers as "good" if they perceived their teachers were enthusiastic and compassionate.

"Good teachers should love teaching and love their students." (Miller, 20 years)

5.3.3 Subtheme 3: knowledge transmitter

Around a half of participants expressed that the primary role of a good teacher was to transmit knowledge. The results suggested that the students tended to rely overwhelmingly on their teachers. It seemed that some students preferred their teachers to pour knowledge into their heads instead of assisting them in the construction of knowledge by creating discovery experiences.

"A teacher is a source of knowledge. Good teachers should tell me directly what they know." (Richard, 19 years)

5.3.4 Subtheme 4: role model

There were only seven participants commented that ideal teachers should be a role model or a moral guide to cultivate students' conduct and moral value. They did not put great emphasis on the morality and ethics of teachers nor the Confucian education model.

"A good teacher should also teach us how to be a good person." (Stephen, 20 years)

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6 DISCUSSION

The present research concurs with past literature that students perceive good teachers should be caring, friendly, and humorous (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996) as well as possess professional knowledge and elocutionary skills (Fledman, 1996).

6.1 Teaching approaches and content

The present results seem to be consistent with perceptions of Chinese students in Xiao and Dyson's (1999) study that important attributes of good teaching include effective teaching skills, making teaching interesting, and stimulating students' motivation. Moreover, in line with Kember and Wong's (2000) study that focused on Hong Kong undergraduates, the participants in the present study value logical origanised delivery, systematic step-by-step covering of the content, and clear teaching information. One thing worth mentioning is that the results suggest that teachers' professional subject knowledge might not guarantee outstanding teaching performance. Stronger academic background might not necessarily lead to better teaching effectiveness. It seems there are more and more teachers possess a doctorate degree, but not many of them have received formal teacher training (Robinson & Hope, 2013). In addition to subject matter content knowledge, it is important for teachers to capture pedagogical content knowledge in order to advance quality teaching. The results also substantiate previous findings in the literature (e.g. Woods et al., 2012) that the students highlight the importance of adaptiveness and use of effective pedagogies. Best teachers should be able to use a variety of teaching methods, choose appropriate materials based on students' aptitudes and personal interests, make sure students fully understand the materials, motivate students by providing stimulating and supportive learning environment. This reflects the traditional notion

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of Confucianism "*Yin Cai Shi Jiao*" (all individuals should be educated according to their abilities) has penetrated into conceptions of good teaching and teachers.

In contrast to many researchers (e.g. Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011) who emphasize the backwash effect of exam-oriented education and suggest that exam-oriented teaching is not favourably received by students, the participants pointed out the practical benefits of measurement-oriented teaching. While the exam-dominated culture of Hong Kong education has long been criticized, the results suggest that the students still focus overwhelmingly on academic performance and thus prefer to have extensive exam-oriented materials and practice so that they might get a higher GPA and gain admission offers from publicly funded universities. Holding these short-term pragmatic objectives, they believe assessment-oriented materials and goal-oriented teaching are practical and useful to help them to improve their exam techniques and achieve better academic results.

6.2 Teacher-student relationship

In line with previous research (e.g. Phillipson & Lam, 2011), the results suggest that teachers' praise is an inexpensive and effective modifier of student performance. It is perhaps due to the Chinese culture, it is less common for teachers to praise students, especially low-achieving learners. It appears that sub-degree students might sometimes be labelled as lower-achievers comparing with undergraduate students. Hence, the participants might have a stronger desire for appreciation. It is suggested that appreciation may encourage students' self-efficacy and enhance teacher-student relationship. The results also support previous research (e.g. Devlin & O'Shea, 2012) that many students need teachers' individual consideration for their personal needs and problems. It is observed that many associate degree students, especially final-year students, generally struggle to find a job or pursue further study when they graduate. They need insightful advice to help actualize their career or study aspirations.

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It is probably because of Chinese cultural values and Confucianism, the teacher's identity is traditionally regarded as authoritative and thus there is teacher-student power distance (Wenren, 2014). Indeed, this traditional value of high power distance has been changing. The results reveal that the participants prefer student-centered learning and fair teacher-student relationship. In the class, they can "have more freedom" and "challenge their teachers". Students nowadays generally expect teachers to use polite words, respect their ideas, and address their concerns (Kasuya, 2008). It is suggested that the roles, power distance, and relationship between teachers and students have significant changes.

6.3 Teacher's personal characteristics and roles

The results imply that enthusiastic and humorous teachers tend to be more able to adopt innovative teaching methods, create a stimulating learning environment, and promote creative thinking. It is suggested that the use of humor may not only minimize boredom, but also provide social, cognitive, and pedagogical benefits, such as enhancing teacher-student interaction and teaching effectiveness (Hackathorn, Garczynski, Blankmeyer, Tennial, & Solomon, 2012). Furthermore, the results are in accordance with the literature in the area, which shows enthusiasm is an oft-cited characteristic of ideal teachers (e.g. Basow, 2000; Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010; Hativa, Barak, & Simhi, 2001). It is suggested that passionate teachers are more likely to reflect on how and what they teach and strive for excellence far beyond transmission of knowledge and assessment of measurable achievement.

Regarding to teachers' roles, the results indicate that while the students value a student-oriented approach, it appears that they tend to take a passive role in learning and expect their teachers to act as a knowledge transmitter. This resonances to Bond's (2010) assertation that students' conceptions of learning and learning styles might shape their perceptions of good teaching. When students perceive their role as a

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learner is to absorb the knowledge delivered by the teacher, they tend to prefer a didactic teaching process of transmitting knowledge. Previous studies (e.g. Gao & Watkins, 2001) have generally suggested that the Chinese teacher is expected to be a good moral role model in all aspects of life because of the Chinese cultural value of "*Jiao Shu Yu Ren*" (teaching entails development of a good person) and "*Wei Ren Shi Biao*" (a teacher being a role model for students). Teachers have traditionally been regarded as a role model of moral value to cultivate students' attitudes and good citizenship in Confucian heritage contexts. However, this research shows that only less than 10% of the students value the importance of moral example. It appears that the students perceive achieving short term goals (e.g. getting a job or admission offer) is more significant than moral development.

7 CONCLUSION

To conclude, in line with previous literature, the results of the present study reveal 3 main themes featuring attributes of quality teaching and good teachers: (1) teaching approaches and content, (2) teacher-student relationship, and (3) teacher's personal characteristics and roles. It is worthwhile noting that the findings suggest that students perceive teachers' personal traits might be inter-related with their teaching methods and rapport with students. For instance, teachers who are enthusiastic, dedicated, and devoted tend to take a more active role to care about their students and teach clearly and adaptively by using a variety of pedagogies in respond to students' needs. Teachers who are humorous and friendly may be more likely to teach in an interesting way and develop positive teacher-student relations.

In terms of traditional Chinese beliefs, contrary to some studies conducted in Chinese contexts, the results of the present research suggest while the Chinese philosophy of "*Yin Cai Shi Jiao*" still has a considerable impact on today's Chinese teachers and students, some Confucian-Heritage cultural values, such as role model

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(*Wei Ren Shi Biao*), might no longer penetrate into conceptions of exemplary teachers. It is generally believed that perceptions are context-dependent and cultural-bound, the results of this study reveal the unique characteristics of Hong Kong culture, which was developed in a sophisticated fusion of East and West. The present study supports Lai's (2000) assertion that Hong Kong culture is influenced jointly by both the traditional Confucian and the modern Western ways of thinking owing to its colonial background.

This study sheds valuable new light on associate degree students' conceptions of outstanding teaching and best teachers and yields several practical implications for school administrators, teacher trainers as well as teachers. In general, the results show the discrepancy of teachers' subject matter content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. While faculties rising the academic requirements of teachers, school administrators may need to provide appropriate training or workshops to help teachers to develop content-specific pedagogical knowledge. This study demonstrates the changing impact of the traditional Chinese educational philosophy and beliefs. Thus, it is important for teacher trainers to equip pre-service and in-service teachers with updated knowledge and skills. Teacher reflection is a significant part of teacher growth and quality teaching. Understanding of students' conceptions of excellent teaching and exemplary teachers is important for teachers themselves to reflect on their own teaching approaches and content, relationship with students, and their roles in this ever-changing society. This study also implies students' learning goals and styles may shape their perceptions of effective teaching and good teachers. The results concur with previous research (e.g. Kember & Wong, 2000; Lai, 2000) that many Hong Kong students are relatively dependent and focus overwhelmingly on direct knowledge transmission and assessment results. It is important for various stakeholders to take effective measures to promote all-around development and whole-person education.

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Despite its strengths and important results, this current research is not free of limitation. First, the small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, only qualitative data of students' overall perceptions were content analysed. Hence, further research may explore students' views in relation to different background characteristics, such as gender, field of study, and type of sub-degree programmes. It might also be useful to investigate and compare conceptions of quality teaching and good teachers perceived by various stakeholders, such as teachers and faculties.

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