

Hong Kong Chinese University Students' Conceptions of Teacher Care: A Dialectical Framework of Care

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Abstract

This paper addresses Hong Kong Chinese undergraduate students' conceptions of teacher care informed by their experiences of teacher-student relationships within university context. Utilizing the concept of teacher care from Noddings' (1984) ethics of care from a Confucian-Vygotskian perspective (Walker-Gleaves, 2009), this research considers emergent themes of teacher care from the narrative accounts of final-year students majoring in management and bilingual studies. Results indicate that teacher care is perceived as a deepening of trust, mutuality, responsiveness and reciprocity between students and teachers, and an enrichment of caring scope, embodied in the conceptualization of 'Pedagogical Care' to 'Holistic Care' and then onto 'Sustainable Care'. A dialectical framework of teacher care within Hong Kong higher education context is proposed, based on the psycho-social make-up of students and socio-cultural context of learning. This study exposes the importance of teacher care in students' learning as influenced by relational dynamics, and proposes the adoption of caring pedagogy in universities.

Keywords

Teacher care; Ethics of care; Pedagogy; Confucian-Vygotskian framework; Hong Kong; Higher Education

Introduction

Excellent teachers use an array of behaviours to create effective learning experiences and these are underpinned by high-quality teacher-student relationships, a core element of these relational approaches being care (Walker-Gleaves, 2009; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Literature demonstrates that students value these caring relationships as a central part of their learning experiences (O'Brien 2010; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). As Rogers and Webb (1991, p.174) explain,

'good teachers care, and good teaching is inextricably linked to specific acts of caring'. However, teacher care is not the panacea for solving all educational problems, nor is it the sole ingredient of good teaching (Coe et al., 2014). Nevertheless, existing studies from higher education have shown that teacher care makes a transformative and positive impact upon students' learning and behaviours, including increased academic motivation, heightened student engagement, more risk-taking, higher levels of resilience and inclusion, and increased retention (Foster, 2008; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013; Walker-Gleaves, 2016).

There is, however, a dearth of literature on teacher care **within** university context in comparison to other spheres of education (Mariskind, 2014; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Reasons for this include the fact that the pursuit of truth has been framed within the neo-positivist paradigm in recent decades (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). Academics are seen as providing knowledge transfer underpinned by market-driven neo-liberalism, rather than assuming the role of holistic student educator premised on humanistic approaches (Giroux, 2010). This approach arguably results in pedagogically frail academics (Kinchen, 2017) who fail to fully support students' development as autonomous and self-directed learners, logical and critical thinkers, and rigorous scholars. Instead, such academics focus attention on assessments and reducing conflict and challenge in their classrooms to ensure that students pass the course and get the degrees they are paying for with the minimum of dissent and conflict (Kinchen, 2017). This has resulted in the affective dimensions of learning and teacher-student interactions being largely neglected or at least misunderstood (Rattray, 2016, 2018).

Existing literature on teacher care in higher education has a narrow focus both in terms of the breadth of issues explored and the contexts in which they are experienced. Most of these studies for example address gendered constructions of teacher care, caring academics' contested constructs of professional identity, and students' perceptions of caring attributes (Mariskind, 2014; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Research into caring pedagogy amongst university students outside European contexts has also typically focused on its explicit cultural meanings and definitions, rather than examining the perceived and actual cognitive and relational aspects of pedagogical practice. Studies of cultural responsiveness, however, underline the effects of environmental- and ethos-related qualities on cognitive and achievement-oriented outcomes (Garza, 2009; Ladson-Billings,

2009; Gay, 2010). Based on the existing literature, it seems that there remains a paucity of research relating to the Chinese setting.

Given the preceding arguments, this research aims to explore Hong Kong Chinese undergraduate students' conceptions of teacher care informed by their experiences within university context and its pedagogical implications. Hong Kong higher education context is different from other Asian university settings, namely Singapore and Malaysia (Mok, 2008). The unique cultural interplay in Hong Kong shaped by deeply-rooted Confucianism and Western cultures during British colonial rule has impacted upon Hong Kong Chinese students' worldview, values and attitudes towards education, achievement goals and learning (Watkins & Biggs, 2001; Salili & Lai, 2003; Hue, 2007; Sun, 2015). Studying teacher care with this population is necessary, and gives rise to critically important and original knowledge and insights. This paper contributes to both theoretical and practical knowledge in teacher care, as informed by Hong Kong Chinese students' self-perceived lived experiences of care.

Literature Review

Ethical responsibilities and relationships are intrinsic to teacher care and central to what a caring teacher is (Kim, 2007), and hence ethics of care serves as an exemplar for care-giving in a professional pedagogical context (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). Ethics of care is a caring attitude, a long-term inclusive commitment, a moral obligation and a volitional act devoted to caring practices for the cared-for's growth and enhancement (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Kim, 2007). It is non-judgmental and originates from the pursuit of moral goodness based on equity for enhancing the moral ideal of self (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Kim, 2007). Though it is not itself natural care or an ethical principle (Noddings, 1984), it engenders compassionate and responsive behaviour which results in moral behaviour as a basis of teaching relationships (Walker-Gleaves, 2009).

Establishing good relationships with students is viewed by teachers as a key construct of care (Pishghadam et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2017), and the affective disposition is argued to be a cardinal element of genuine care (Tronto, 1993). The relational qualities generate affect which acts dialectically with cognition to stimulate the emotional-motivational drive that results in cognitive

development, knowledge co-construction, independent problem-solving, closing the gap in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978; Moll, 1990; Tappan, 1998; Goldstein 1999). Studies examining the intertwined processes of cognitive development and relational proximity suggest it is not the individuals themselves that induces increasingly critical thinking during the learning process, but how the subject knowledge is conveyed and opened up to scrutiny (Goldstein, 1999; **Chiu, 2009**). One of the most significant domains of university learning is the gradual development of critical minds (**Chiu, 2009**). Considering that teacher care is a core element of outstanding teachers' relational approaches to learning facilitation, care might be the means by which the cognitive and affective aspects of learning can be connected for students. Since children and adolescents' stages of cognitive, psychological and social developments are different from that of young adults (Plotnik & Kouyoumdjian, 2014), the role of teacher care in higher education will, potentially, be different from that in school and yet, it remains under-researched.

Care in Western societies is predicated upon universal moral laws and equality (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984) interpreted in individual ways, whilst care in Eastern societies and more particularly in the case of this paper, the Chinese perspective, is based on **collectivist** moral obligations that are matters of socialization and community. The Confucian ideal for example lays the emphasis that each of the particular socially-structured hierarchical roles are subject to specific sets of moral obligations and responsibilities in each situated and relational context (Bond, 1991; Fei, 1992; Salili & Lai, 2003; Sun, 2015). **Students who have been brought up in Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC)** are socialized from a young age to **hold the conception** that teachers assume **moral role as a 'parent', behave within socially accepted ways, and have collectivist** obligations toward students (Bond, 1991; **Watkins & Biggs, 2001**; Salili & Lai, 2003; **Chiu, 2009**; Sun, 2015). **Students thus show reverence for** and obedience to teachers, **embrace social harmony and avoid conflict in a classroom environment, and value diligent study** (Bond, 1991; Salili & Lai, 2003; **Chiu, 2009**; **Chen et al., 2014**; Sun, 2015). **The teacher-student relationships** are imbued with responsibility, respect, acceptance, warmth and affect and are conducive to learning, despite being hierarchical (Bond, 1991; Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Sun, 2015). This implies that conceptions of care are **likely to be** shaped by people's social roles and **collectivist** obligations within Hong Kong Chinese context.

As influenced by the interplay of Confucian and Western cultures, Hong Kong Chinese students' worldview, values and attitudes towards education, achievement goals and learning approaches are distinct from other Chinese groups (Watkins & Biggs, 2001; Salili & Lai, 2003; Hue, 2007; Sun, 2015). Local students' classroom learning is mediated by teachers' values, beliefs and pedagogy, and by the specific educational system within Hong Kong socio-cultural context (Watkins & Biggs, 2001; Salili & Lai, 2003). This **has exerted** impacts upon local students' learning intentions and modes, and meta-cognitive development (Watkins & Biggs, 2001; Salili & Lai, 2003; Hue, 2007; Sun, 2015). These arguments are also premised on the conceptual underpinnings of vernacular Confucianism that the interpretations of Confucian values and traditions are contextualized to the local community, which in turn will lead to different Confucian practices in different locales (Chang, 2000; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Rather than assuming a homogenous Confucian culture, studying Hong Kong Chinese undergraduate students' perceptions and experiences of teacher care has to take the local cultural context into consideration (Chang, 2000; Salili & Lai, 2003; Hue, 2007; Sun, 2015).

Studies conducted in Hong Kong school settings have shown that teachers are expected to act as moral exemplars for students' character-building, in addition to assuming the role of facilitating knowledge co-construction (Bond, 1991; Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Salili & Lai, 2003; Hue, 2007; Sun, 2015). Confucian teaching has an intrinsic element of promoting students' self-cultivation and growth, and helping them to learn and make positive behavioural changes (Salili & Lai, 2003; Hue, 2007). Teachers are also expected to take on a mentorship role for individualized coaching with students in coping with learning challenges, and engaging in friendly dialogues with them in facilitating self-cultivation and long-term reciprocal learning relationships (Bond, 1991; Salili & Lai, 2003; Hue, 2007; Shim, 2008; Walker-Gleaves, 2009). The strong emphasis on relational-based, collectivist, hierarchical social relationships with clear in- and out-group delineation, and long-term orientation in local context has led us to contemplate Hong Kong Chinese students' distinct views of teacher care and its pedagogical implications for their learning (Bond, 1991; Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Salili & Lai, 2003; Hue, 2007; Sun, 2015).

Given students who grow up in local Hong Kong society are socialized with both deeply-rooted Confucian and Western worldviews, this might imply that undergraduate students would hold the beliefs that teachers assume not only the professional role responsibilities but also the social, **moral and collectivist** role obligations for individualized teaching, knowledge co-construction, customized learning support and character building (Bond, 1991; Fei, 1992; Hue, 2007; Shim, 2008; Walker-Gleaves, 2009; Sun, 2015). Confucian teaching's emphasis on the dialectics of affect and cognition in knowledge co-construction could be considered as conceptually aligned and united with Vygotskian social constructivism (Chiu, 2009). A Vygotskian framework **has underpinned the centrality of affect in its dialectical interplay with cognition engaging both the student and** a capable other, namely teacher or peer, for **knowledge co-construction**, and promoting critical thinking and independent problem-solving (Vygotsky, 1978; Moll, 1990; Tappan, 1998; Goldstein, 1999). **Building on McCormick and Davenport's (2004) 'Shepherd Leadership', Chiu (2009) has further bridged the discussions of Vygotskian constructivism and CHC by means of teachers' shepherding roles to interconnect and apply a Western principle to accommodating students within Confucian context. Teachers' shepherd leadership for CHC students involves knowing each student's backgrounds and behavioural patterns individually, offering cognitive modeling, training student leadership and reaching out to quiet students (Chiu, 2009). Teachers** have to demonstrate to their students the qualities of caring, empathy, genuineness, readiness to help and trustworthiness **in order to respond to their affective needs and create a sense of belonging**, so that students would feel cared-for and accepted, and as such would derive the inner strength to make positive **cognitive and behavioural** changes (Hue, 2007; Chiu, 2009; Sun, 2015). This might suggest that care as an embodiment of affect might play a central role in effecting positive changes within a relation-oriented Confucian culture, harnessing the constructive effects built on Vygotskian social constructivism, **supplemented by shepherd leadership** (Vygotsky, 1978; Bond, 1991; Fei, 1992; Hue, 2007; Chiu, 2009; Sun, 2015).

This has led us to draw Confucian and Vygotskian perspectives together, and propose to frame our theoretical discussions of teacher care as being underpinned by a conceptual union of **CHC** and Western Vygotskian social constructivism. The strong emphasis on relational-based, hierarchical social relationships with clear in- and out-group delineation, and long-term orientation

in the local context might imply that Hong Kong Chinese students have distinct views of teacher care (Bond, 1991; Biggs & Watkins, 2001). This might suggest the importance of developing close teacher-student relationships through teacher care to let students consider teachers as **a significant other, like an in-group member. The sense of belonging created might prompt students to develop emotional bonds with teachers, and see caring teachers** as cognizant of their personal needs and difficulties. This might also imply that students would **be better engaged in studying** because of the affect and care emphasized by their teachers and continually maintained through knowledge of the students as a lived experience. Premising our discussions of teacher care on a Confucian-Vygotskian framework allows us to focus the analysis on students' perceptions of teacher's **collectivist** roles obligations and as such their authentic experiences of the caring actions. This might unveil a new conceptual plane for us to scrutinize the nuances of differences between ethical care underpinned by moral values and teacher care as influenced by **Confucian culture**. This has been germane to the purpose of this paper, which is to explore Hong Kong Chinese undergraduate students' conceptions of teacher care informed by their lived experiences.

Method

Framed within a qualitative approach, this exploratory study aimed to obtain deep insights into Hong Kong Chinese undergraduate students' conceptions and experiences of teacher care. Conversational exchanges allowed us to understand students' thoughts and interpretation of the caring phenomenon, in-depth interview was the principal data collection method to explore students' genuine views and lived experiences of teacher care, and a means for them to articulate their feelings (Seidman, 1998). This was complemented by students' written cases of exemplary teacher care and researchers' detailed notes.

Purposive sampling was employed to identify the potential participants (Babbie, 2016; Leedy et al., 2019). Emails were sent to all final-year undergraduates studying in an applied university in Hong Kong by the first author personally and via the departmental administrators (i.e. gatekeepers), to solicit those who were Hong Kong Chinese and self-identified as having lived experiences of teacher care during their university study to participate in the research. Initial responses, however, appeared to be low. The same email was re-sent, together with the author's personal solicitation. These efforts resulted in having a total of 14 undergraduates, majoring in management and

bilingual studies, self-identified as having experiences of teacher care during their university study (Table 1).

Insert < Table 1 >

Prior to the in-depth interviews, participants were requested to write up an exemplary case of teacher care experienced during their university study. These written narratives generated rich accounts of students' perceived caring qualities and caring experiences informed by in-class and after-class teacher-student interactions, and the reasons for seeing these teachers as exemplars. These written accounts were also scrutinized in terms of having broad degree of agreement with the literature on teacher care, including the pedagogical-behavioural caring exemplifiers as below (Walker-Gleaves, 2009; Walker & Gleaves, 2016):

Seven Caring Exemplifiers

- 1) Listen to students
- 2) Show empathy
- 3) Support student
- 4) Be active in the processes of learning in class
- 5) Give appropriate and encouraging feedback and praise
- 6) Have high expectations in standards of work and behaviour
- 7) Show an active concern in students' personal lives

Given this research is an exploratory study aimed to gain insights into undergraduate students' conceptions of teacher care based on their lived experiences, we tried not to limit the selection of participants based on a parochially-defined idea of care. On the other hand, the above-mentioned caring exemplifiers formed the basic conceptual threshold for appraising students' stated reasons for each exemplary case, to avoid any skewed incidents due to unusual or discipline-specific interpretation of caring behaviours (Walker & Gleaves, 2016). This 'screening' process based on the written exemplars has contributed to verifying students' self-identified authentic experiences of teacher care.

The preliminary insights generated from students' written exemplary cases moreover paved the way for probing their conceptions of teacher care informed by their lived experiences in subsequent interviews. Open-ended interview questions were developed for guiding the semi-structured interviews as below:

Examples of Open-ended Interview Questions

- 1) How do you experience care through daily interactions with teachers?
- 2) What are the most important qualities of teacher care expressed in the experiences described?
- 3) Please use a metaphor to describe the role of caring teacher, and elaborate on the metaphor

At the beginning of interviews, the author as interviewer engaged in a small discussion with the participant based on the written exemplar. During our brief conversation, we explored the term 'teacher care' together to co-construct our conceptual plane built on mutual grounds framed within the student's lived experiences and the broad pedagogical-behavioural caring exemplifiers (Walker-Gleaves, 2009; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). This was to avoid any conceptual misunderstanding or ambiguity. Each of the interviews lasted for around 45 to 75 minutes, and was audio-recorded with permission. These recordings were transcribed as quickly as possible following each interview. Verbatim transcription was used to maintain the integrity of participants' unmediated, self-disclosed accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step guidelines for data-driven thematic analysis were adapted for analyzing the empirical data. Framed within thematic analysis, data coding procedures were applied to scrutinizing participants' interview transcripts and written cases of teacher care, and researchers' notes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The repeated and salient words, phrases and sentences were coded to generate open codes. More than 500 open codes were generated after initial coding. These open codes were examined in an exhaustive process, by comparing and contrasting their meanings within students' narrative contexts, to identify and discover the manifested and hidden relationships among all the codes to generate lower-order themes. After iterative refining processes, ten lower-order themes were

generated by comparing and contrasting each of the codes within the caring themes. All these lower-order themes were subject to a thorough scrutinizing process of comparison and contrast to generate overarching themes. Three overarching themes representing ‘Pedagogical Care’, ‘Holistic Care’ and ‘Sustainable Care’ thus were generated. Table 2 presented a summary of highlighted open codes, lower-order themes and overarching themes generated from thematic analysis. This aimed to demonstrate the interconnections among all these codes and the hierarchical levels grounded on Hong Kong Chinese undergraduate students’ conceptions of teacher care informed by their lived experiences within local university context. Despite the sample size, the use of member check, triangulation of methods and analysts, iterative data analysis procedures and saturation of results contributed to establishing trustworthiness of research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Insert < Table 2 >

Results

Teacher care was perceived as a deepening of trust, mutuality, responsiveness and reciprocity between students and teachers, and an enrichment of caring scope, embodied in the conceptualization of ‘Pedagogical Care’ to ‘Holistic Care’ and then onto ‘Sustainable Care’. ‘Pedagogical Care’ centred around teachers’ instructional qualities, ‘Holistic Care’ focused on a holistic caring support, whilst ‘Sustainable Care’ featured reciprocal care with sustainable bonds, supported by a rich range of caring behaviours.

Pedagogical Care

‘Pedagogical Care’ was conceptualized as the initiation of teacher care. Students considered teachers’ fundamental obligations relating to their role as teacher. They emphasized the importance of instructional qualities for learning facilitation and achievement of academic goals. Care generated from teachers’ commitment to teaching their disciplines well also marked the beginning of a caring teacher-student relationship. This has shaped their views that teachers’ primary responsibilities are pedagogical, as an expression of their care.

Amelia: *'Teachers do far more than just share their knowledge with us. An ancient Chinese scholar said, "(Teacher's responsibilities are to) propagate the doctrine, impart professional knowledge, and resolve doubts."'*

Through daily contact with teachers, students distinguished the subtle and nuanced differences between the caring teachers who cared about students' needs and those who merely assumed their teaching duties. Caring teachers, for example, spent time and effort planning the delivery of content, were responsive to students' questions raised, arranged additional sessions to explain difficult concepts and provided guidance on project assignments. Students were impressed by the caring teachers' 'ownership' of students' study concerns and their endeavour to address them in a variety of ways.

Aimer: *'I find independent learning not sufficient to solve the problems or make me understand the subject sometimes. Teacher care will make me feel more comfortable with seeking help from the caring teachers, who are obviously willing to help me, and will offer me the facilitation and support to cope with the problems.'*

A second factor relating to 'Pedagogical Care' links to the status of Hong Kong as a materialistic and meritocratic society, in which students see education as a legitimate way of gaining upward social mobility (Bond, 1991; Salili & Lai, 2003). They have been inculcated with such a mindset which led them place a high value on their academic results. Good academic results were valid proof of their capabilities, and would have profound effects on their careers and future success.

Esther: *'Most students' concerns are future-oriented, relating to careers. Getting good results will help me graduate with a bachelor's degree, and will help me get good jobs in the future. Good results will determine my future prospects. Teacher care could help me achieve these things.'*

This implied that students' short-term academic goals and long-term career prospects were interconnected, and caring teachers were seen as leverage to facilitate students' ability to cope with

study and achieve higher academic performances. They appreciated that the caring teachers supported and guided them to solve their own study problems as a way of facilitating their learning and development, rather than depriving them of opportunities for trial and error. This in turn would ensure promising careers. Though students' reciprocity was at a minimum, 'Pedagogical Care' informed the beginning of a trusting caring relationships and formed the basis for a deepening of mutuality, responsiveness and scope.

Holistic Care

With a deepening of mutuality, responsiveness and scope of teacher care, 'Holistic Care' was manifested building on a maturing of caring and trusting relationships. The purview of teacher care expressed in 'Holistic Care' was no longer limited to the study matter but extended to the mentorship role.

Kinki: 'Enlightenment of students' future is one of the points that teachers should show their care to the students. They can connect the lectures with the profession and talk more about the real life to give students a clearer picture to their future pathways.'

Students considered university study as the last formal learning stage, and an ideal place for them to equip themselves with professional knowledge and qualities for developing into fully-fledged young adults with critical minds. They appreciated the caring teachers' sharing of past work experiences to support them to choose careers and manage the associated challenges, when they sought career advice from those teachers. This conceptualization of care was expressed in the metaphors the students used in depicting the caring teachers' mentorship role for letting them experience trial and error during their self and professional developments

Eva used the metaphor of 'Learning to ride a bicycle': 'You have to put your own endeavour into learning how to ride a bicycle. The mentor is just there to accompany you at the beginning. When help is no longer needed at the end, he/she will watch over your ride to finish the whole journey. He/she will definitely be there to accompany you from a distance.'

Teacher care was conceptualized as guiding and coaching the students through their learning journey rather than restricting their actions. A trusting relationship imbued with feelings of security was implied in participants' metaphors, because the mentor was always by the side of the students ready to support and empower them.

James utilized the metaphor of the 'Invisible hand': *'In order for students to learn, there must be someone right behind to take care of them. Learning will be more effective. Teacher care is the invisible pillar behind the students.'*

These metaphors suggested the importance of trust and learning empowerment. Teacher care within university context was no longer expected to manifest as spoon-feeding or indulgence, as seen in school settings. The mentorship role was perceived as empowering students, including developing their critical thinking and independent problem-solving, and providing them with psychological comfort during the coping stages.

Amelia drew on the metaphor of 'Subsistence food supplies in military operations': *'Teacher care is like an unwavering back-up. It is as if we are fighting a battle at the front. If there is a caring teacher, I will feel that he/she is managing the subsistence supplies at the back. I will never worry about the issue of subsistence supplies. However, if the teacher is not caring ... I'm not sure whether he/she will back me at the rear. I feel helpless. Somehow, it is psychologically comforting. I may not need to use the help available. But, you know, there is always someone there. He/she will offer help whenever I am in need.'*

The metaphor stressed the primacy of emotional security for learning empowerment built on a maturing of caring and trusting teacher-student relationships and a deepening of trust, mutuality and responsiveness. It was not just about getting teachers' assistance or resources that mattered, and indeed, students might not have needed to seek help from the faculty. Yet, whenever they were in need of help, they trusted that the caring teachers would offer guidance to help them, emphasizing the centrality of a holistic caring support in teacher care.

Olivia: *‘Care in university doesn’t have to be like the care in the school context. But, it has to assure the students that teachers have taken on the caring role, and are always there. Whenever I’m in need, I can seek help from the caring teachers, who will teach and coach me on how to cope with the changes and challenges.’*

Aimer: *‘The caring teachers have to show you that “I’m not mechanical like an android. I’m affective and compassionate. If you have any study problems, I’m responsive to discuss them with you.”’*

Although students’ reciprocity was not explicit, ‘Holistic Care’ informed a deepening of trust, mutuality, responsiveness and emotional security, and an enrichment of caring scope while forming a safety net. This contributed to furthering a caring relationship.

Sustainable Care

With a continuity of deepening of trust, mutuality, responsiveness and scope of teacher care, ‘Sustainable Care’ was distinguished by two core constructs, sustainable bonds and reciprocal care. With a continuous deepening of trust, mutuality and responsiveness, participants wanted to maintain sustainable relationships with teachers, as they perceived learning as an ongoing and cumulative process. They believed that developing long-lasting relationships with the caring teachers was an important buffer against the future challenges far beyond graduation. A genuinely caring and trusting teacher-student relationship would not be limited by an academic semester.

Care was no longer limited to a uni-directional flow of care from teachers to students. With the continuous immersion in teacher care, students were eager to express care and return favours to the caring teachers in the future as ways of expressing gratitude towards them. Although they perceived their lack of sufficient experiences or competences to reciprocate the caring teachers at this stage, they expected that they would grow in personal and professional aspects and one day be able to return the favour to them.

Isabella: *'I don't want to confine my relationships with my professors to the years of university study. After embarking on my career, I want to share my life and work in the long run. If I encounter difficulties in my prospective careers, I will seek advice from the professors. I will help them if my work can help them in any aspects. An interactive relationship.'*

The cared-for students would gradually be socialized and take on the role of the one-caring. Students' views of caring relationships and reciprocity were long-term oriented. 'Sustainable Care' thus informed a continuity of deepening of trust, mutuality and responsiveness, and a future-oriented reciprocity and enrichment of caring scope.

Discussion

This research aimed to investigate Hong Kong Chinese undergraduate students' conceptions of teacher care. Adopting a care-ethics orientation viewed through a Confucian-Vygotskian framework (Noddings, 1984; Walker-Gleaves, 2009), our empirical findings have demonstrated that teacher care is perceived as a deepening of trust, mutuality, responsiveness and reciprocity between students and teachers, and an enrichment of caring scope, embodied in the conceptualization of 'Pedagogical Care' to 'Holistic Care' and then onto 'Sustainable Care', through a set of coherent caring actions. This paper has corroborated the significance of synthesizing the psycho-social make-up of students and socio-cultural context of learning in conceptualizing teacher care within Hong Kong higher education context.

In experiencing 'Pedagogical Care', students conceptualize teacher care with a special emphasis on instructional qualities integrating an interplay of affect and cognitive components (Vygotsky, 1978; Tappan, 1998; Goldstein, 1999). Predicated upon Vygotskian social constructivism, this paper has corroborated that instructional qualities and relational dynamics dialectically mediated between students and teachers amidst the caring encounters contribute to **responding to students' affective needs, and hence facilitating their** knowledge co-construction, **critical-thinking development** and independent problem-solving (Vygotsky, 1978; Noddings, 1984; Goldstein, 1999; **Chiu, 2009**). This study has substantiated the centrality of affect in its interplay with cognition in **promotion of students' positive cognitive and** behavioural

changes (Vygotsky, 1978; Moll, 1990; Goldstein, 1999; **Chiu, 2009**). These research results are supported by literature that suggests the importance of care and affect as expressed in the qualities of caring, nurturing, empathy, willingness to help, genuineness and trustworthiness in effecting positive changes within a relation-oriented Confucian culture (Bond, 1991; Fei, 1992; Hue, 2007; **Chiu, 2009; Chen et al., 2014; Sun, 2015**). Contrary to Noddings' (1984) discussion of reciprocity in ethical care, this research has unveiled a different result that students experience teacher care in the form of 'Pedagogical Care' focusing the attention on instructional qualities and academic support, despite minimum reciprocity on students' part. This might be partly explained by that students consider themselves having limited capability to reciprocate help to teachers; while seeing that teachers have the inherited social, **moral and collectivist** obligations to help them (Bond, 1991; Fei, 1992; Hue, 2007; **Chiu, 2009; Sun, 2015**). This might suggest that students' conceptions are influenced by the Confucian worldview that teachers assume **the role of a mentor, and as such the moral and collectivist** responsibilities for individualizing coaching in facilitating their intellectual and holistic development (Bond, 1991; Hue, 2007; Shim, 2008; **Chiu, 2009; Walker-Gleaves, 2009**). This might show that Confucian values have exerted influences on students' interpretation and articulation of teacher care within Hong Kong higher education context (Salili & Lai, 2003; Hue, 2007; Sun, 2015). Noddings' (1984) ethics of care might not fully account for students' conception of care in this local context.

Students subsequently attempt to seek more guidance and help from the caring teachers embodied in 'Holistic Care'. The tendency to solicit more caring support in different aspects of their lives, however, is conditional upon whether or not a trusting and caring relationship has been established between students and teachers in the local deeply-rooted Confucian culture (Hue, 2007; Sun, 2015). This might imply, **Hong Kong Chinese students who are influenced by the relation-oriented, collectivist Confucian culture tend to confide their** difficulties and **seek help from the trusted significant others, like one's** in-group members (Bond, 1991; Fei, 1992; Salili & Lai, 2003; Hue, 2007; Sun, 2015). **Aligned with Chiu's (2009) discussion of shepherd leadership, the caring teachers' unwavering commitment and persistence in reaching out to all students, including the quiet ones, as shown in their initiative in extending help and coaching them** in coping with challenges in academic and non-academic situations, **contribute to deepening** the trust and mutuality. In Confucian culture, teachers are conceptualized not only assuming a teaching

role, but also taking on a mentorship **and guidance** role for individualized coaching with students to engage them in self-cultivation for developing their critical minds and coping challenges in different aspects of lives (Bond, 1991; Salili & Lai, 2003; Shim, 2008; Hue, 2007; **Chiu, 2009**; Walker-Gleaves, 2009). Navigating this relational dynamics of ‘Holistic Care’, caring teachers would be seen as **a mentor and moral exemplar, and** one of the significant **others, like an in-group member**, for help-seeking (Bond, 1991; Fei, 1992; Hue, 2007). This prompts students to continuously develop relationships with teachers who have demonstrated the qualities of caring, trust, empathy, preparedness to help and genuineness, **and who initiate to reaching out to the quiet students, responding to their affective needs and creating a sense of belonging, resulted in gradually maturing** the relations into a trustworthy **bonds, like that with an in-group member**, amidst the relation-oriented Confucian culture (Bond, 1991; Fei, 1992; Hue, 2007; **Chiu, 2009**; Sun, 2015). **Predicated upon our proposed conceptual union of CHC and Western Vygotskian social constructivism**, this research has corroborated the importance of affect in contributing to creating a caring and trusting context congenial to students to seek help, support and mentorship, and as such to be socialized and developed into a cultured person by means of the caring encounters generated from the relational dynamics mediated between students and teachers.

Caring relationships are reciprocal, accommodating and future-oriented as embodied in ‘Sustainable Care’. This study has shown that reciprocal care and sustainable bonds are the key elements of ‘Sustainable Care’ in distinguishing teacher care **in** Hong Kong Chinese cultural setting. These research findings are supported by cross-cultural studies that suggest Chinese people’s worldviews are discerned along the dimensions of collectivist relational base and long-term orientation (Bond, 1991; Hofstede et al., 2010). This results in a cultural web of social relationships in Chinese society built on *guanxi* (relations) of offering help and support, and returning gratitude and favours extending to the future (Bond, 1991; Fei, 1992). Students conceptualize teacher care in the form of long-term reciprocal relationships and with the expectations that reciprocal help and support would be mutually sought after, extending beyond graduation as protection against vicissitude of life (Bond, 1991; Fei, 1992). Contrary to students’ minimum reciprocity shown in experiencing ‘Pedagogical Care’, a deepening of future-oriented reciprocity and bonding is all-pervading in ‘Sustainable Care’. This leads to a continuity of deepening of trust, mutuality and responsiveness, a future-oriented enrichment of caring scope and

reciprocity, and a lasting sense of belonging. The qualities of caring, trust, readiness to help, genuineness and responsiveness to affective needs, have formed the central elements in sustaining a long-lasting, deepening relationship within a relation-oriented, in-group based Confucian culture (Bond, 1991; Fei, 1992; Hue, 2007; Chiu, 2009; Sun, 2015). This research has corroborated that Confucian culture impacts upon students' conceptions and interpretation of teacher care within Hong Kong context (Salili & Lai, 2003; Hue, 2007; Sun, 2015). Based on our findings and the cross-cultural literature, we propose that the relational dynamics enacted between students and teachers result in a mutually-customized, future-oriented caring relationship accommodating both of their needs and concerns.

On the basis of this work, we propose that teacher care within Hong Kong higher education context is underpinned by the conceptualization of 'Pedagogical Care', 'Holistic Care' and 'Sustainable Care', synthesizing the psycho-social make-up of students and socio-cultural context of learning in influencing conceptions of teacher care. The articulation of teacher care has exemplified a deepening of trust, mutuality, responsiveness and reciprocity established between dialectical and authentic interactions and relationship-building between students and teachers. The dynamic articulation process reflects students' active agency in dialectically co-constructing care and caring relationships with teachers, suggesting that relational dynamics and caring responses are a unique expression of social relationships mediated within a specific setting. Students' capacity for agency impacts upon the mediation of caring behaviours, and deepening of trust and mutuality with teachers. This might imply that students' articulation and construct of care and caring relationships with teachers, and its meanings are conditional upon the particular relational dynamics within the socio-cultural setting. Furthermore, the individual responsive nature of both teachers and students means that each domain of care is in a constant cycle of reinvention and spiralling, and that at each level of care, there is the potential for strengthening or attenuating care. Teacher care is an intensely active and dynamic process and potentially the site for both student and teacher transformation. This paper has demonstrated the dialectical influences of the relational dynamics and the socio-cultural context on shaping students' conceptions of teacher care (Vygotsky, 1978; Garza, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Gay, 2010). It has also reinforced the significance of taking the psycho-social make-up of students and socio-cultural context of learning into account when integrating care into pedagogy.

Conclusion

This study contributes to generating insights into the under-researched issue of teacher care within university context. Teacher care is perceived as a deepening of trust, mutuality, responsiveness and reciprocity between students and teachers, and an enrichment of caring scope, embodied in the conceptualization of ‘Pedagogical Care’ to ‘Holistic Care’ and then onto ‘Sustainable Care’. This research has shown that teacher care within Hong Kong university context is distinguished by its progressive, spiral and transitional nature with a long-term orientation. It has exposed the complexity and subtlety of teacher care within higher education setting, and questioned the notion in literature concerning the main positioning of teacher care as menial work.

This paper contributes to gaining more understanding of Hong Kong undergraduate students’ conceptions of teacher care framed within Confucian-Vygotskian framework. Based on our empirical findings underpinned by the conceptual union of **CHC** and Western Vygotskian social constructivism, it is reasonable to draw the implications for the importance of developing close, **trusting** teacher-student relationships through teacher care to **respond to students’ affective needs and create a sense of belonging, in order to** let students consider teachers as **a mentor and significant other, like an in-group member. This will promote the building up of an emotional bonding and a secure base, prompting students to confide their difficulties faced, and to seek help and guidance from the caring teachers. The caring teachers’ commitment to walk the students through the challenges might further promote study engagement** because of teachers’ affect and care and continually maintained through authentic caring student-teacher encounters. The importance of relationship-cultivation **and trust-building** could not be over-estimated. This might be facilitated by providing more individualized coaching and student-centred learning support customized to students’ backgrounds and needs for knowledge co-construction and character cultivation. Building the trust with students to establish a secure base and safe haven, **and a sense of belonging** for sustaining long-term student-teacher relationships is of prime importance for engaging students in a sustainable process of meta-learning and holistic development. These recommendations are underpinned by our proposed conceptual union of **CHC** and Western Vygotskian social constructivism. This has underlined the centrality of being

culturally-responsive in enacting caring pedagogy (Garza, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Gay, 2010).

Given this exploratory study had a limited sample size of Hong Kong Chinese undergraduate students, a research limitation concerned about the generalizability of empirical findings to other context. **We do** not claim to generalize the findings to represent university students more widely. Despite this, it is expected that teachers could be inspired to express culturally-responsive care to accommodate students' needs for their learning facilitation and holistic development. To gain deeper understanding of university students' perceptions and experiences of teacher care, future studies could be conducted on undergraduates and postgraduates from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds in different university contexts. It is intriguing to learn that 13 out of our 14 self-identified participants were females. This might suggest that care still has a maternal and even feminist undertone, and implying its inherited gendered construction. Since we did not pursue the discussion of teacher care with our participants on the feminist or gendered conceptual plane, it is hard for us to draw any conclusion in this regard. **Nevertheless**, the gendered construction of care would remain a research topic worth exploring to examine any nuances of differences between female and male students' conceptions of teacher care as informed by their lived experiences. This is not to reinforce the gender stereotypes or reduce teacher care to feminist construct, but has significant pedagogical implications. Considering that some disciplines (namely engineering) tend to have relatively more male students, whilst some **others** might be inclined to have more females, gaining deeper insights into their perceptions and expectations of teacher care would facilitate practitioners to well plan how teacher care would be integrated into pedagogies. Overall, this empirical research, together with the recommended prospective studies, are expected to contribute to engaging teachers, researchers and administrators in more dialogues to re-conceptualize teacher care where differently conceived pedagogies may flourish.

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Table 1. Participants' Profiles

Student	Gender	Ethnicity	Year	Discipline
Amelia	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Esther	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Eva	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Isabella	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Joey	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Mandy	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Mia	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Olivia	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Ruth	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Sophie	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
James	Male	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Management
Aimer	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Bilingual Studies
J.J.	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Bilingual Studies
Kinki	Female	Hong Kong Chinese	Final Year	Bilingual Studies

Table 2. Summary of Open Codes, Lower-order Themes and Overarching Themes of Teacher Care

Open Codes (Highlighted)	Lower-Order Themes	Overarching Themes
Teach Subjects Well; Teach Subject Knowledge; Teach Subject-related Practical Skills; Teach Responsibilities; Teaching Roles; Good Teaching Skills; Deliver Materials Effectively; Share Real-world Examples; Clear Explanation; Spend Time and Efforts on Teaching Preparation	Instructional Qualities	Pedagogical Care
Learning Facilitation; Responsive to Students' Questions; Ownership of Students' Study Problems; Help Students Cope with Study Problems; Endeavour to Help Students with Study Problems; Additional Study Consultations; Quality Project Consultations; Help Students Get High GPA; Achieve Academic Goals; Good Academic Results Related to Future Careers	Academic Support	
Care is the Beginning of Relationships; Start to Develop Trust and Relationships; Minimum Reciprocity	Start to Develop Trust and Relationships	
Mentorship; Coaching; Guidance; Inspiration; Critical Thinking; Role Model; Learning Empowerment; Students' Cope with Problems Independently	Mentorship	Holistic Care

Always Available Help; Unwavering Support; Always There; Psychological Comfort; Emotional Security; Willing to Spend Extra Time	Safety Net and Felt Security	
Holistic Development; Career-related Matters; Young Professionals; Professional Knowledge; Professional Qualities; Professional Development; Sharing Past Work Experiences; Counselling; Cope with Study and Career Problems	Holistic Support	
Develop Trust, Mutuality and Relationships; More Responsive and Reciprocal; Broadening of Scope of Care Covering Study and Careers	Further Developing Trust, Mutuality, Relationships, Responsiveness; Reciprocity; Broadening Scope of Care	
Return Care; Return Help; Return Favour; Reciprocate; Express Gratitude; Share Professional Life	Reciprocal Care	Sustainable Care
Long-lasting Relationships; Long-term Views; Not Limited by Semester; Return to Seek Help and Support whenever in Need; Life beyond Graduation	Sustainable Bonds	
Deepening of Trust, Mutuality and Responsiveness; Future-oriented Reciprocity; Long-term Relationships; Interactive Relationships;	A Continuity of Deepening of Trust, Mutuality and Responsiveness, with Future-oriented Scope of Care, Reciprocity	

A future-oriented Scope of Care Covering Personal Life and Professional Work Life	and Long-term Relationships	
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