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The influence of Chinese college teachers' competence for purpose support on students' purpose development

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ABSTRACT

Research studies agree on the role formal education can play in facilitating students building a sense of life purpose. This paper examined the influence of Chinese college students' perceived competence of their teachers for supporting purpose on these same college students' purpose status. Portions of the Revised Youth Purpose Survey were adapted for Chinese college student and teacher populations, and then administered to 52 teachers and 213 students from a mid-size teacher training university in north-east China. There was inconsistency between teachers' self-evaluations and students' evaluations, with teachers rating themselves as more supportive of purpose than they were rated by their students. Upperclassmen reported higher levels of teacher competence for supporting purpose than lowerclassmen, and arts teachers were rated as more supportive of purpose than teachers of other subjects. Students who ranked obviously other-oriented goals as their most important purposes also rated their teachers as more competent in purpose support than students who endorsed other types of goals. Significant positive associations were found among students' ratings of teachers for purpose support and reports of purpose from students, including associations with students' purpose search and purpose identification; however, no relationship was found between students' purpose engagement and perceptions of teachers' purpose support.

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Introduction

Adolescence and young adulthood are times when individuals begin to seek and explore their meaning in life (Devogler and Ebersole 1983), and to set up life goals (Massey, Gebhardt, and Garnefski 2008). Purpose is associated with many positive outcomes, and youth in higher grade levels are more likely to describe their future plans, activities to pursue those plans, and reasons that consider consequences to others as well as to themselves (Moran et al. 2013). Thus, based on educational and developmental principles, there is a growing feeling that educational institutions may have a profound role in promoting purpose among

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students, and that learners at progressively higher stages in their education (i.e. later adolescence and early adulthood) are important groups in which to study the impact of teacher purpose support. The feeling that institutions of learning impact purpose is shared by educators in many countries who, until only recently, have collaborated in the study of teachers' roles in purpose education. To date, only a few studies specifically examine the role of teachers and educational institutions in promoting students' purposes, but the interest is relatively widespread (i.e. around the world, such as in studies in Finland, Singapore, Brazil, the United States and other countries [for examples see: Mariano et al. 2011; Bundick and Tirri 2014]).

This paper extends the examination of teachers' roles on youths' purposes by country and by grade or age level by focusing on college instructors and their students in China. College teachers play a vital role in students' overall learning experience, and the degree to which students perceive their college instructors as being helpful influences with overall satisfaction with the college experience and strengthens a sense of purpose. A study of more than 30,000 college graduates in the United States found that students who felt they have professors who cared, who were mentors and made them excited about learning were nearly three times as likely to be thriving than those who did not feel such support; 'thriving' included a measure of 'purpose well-being' (Gallup and Purdue University 2014, 4–7). The present study however is the first, to our knowledge, to adapt measures of purpose teaching that are first used in Western countries for use among college students and teachers in mainland China.

A broad congruence between modern Chinese concepts of purpose and at least one recent purpose definition espoused by Western scholars provides a starting point for utilising Western measures of purpose for adaptation in China. In the following pages, this paper thus first highlights similarities of the Chinese view of purpose with a current Western definition. This research then discusses the extant literature on teachers' roles in students' purpose support, and outlines and reports results of this empirical study.

In order to gain a better understanding of teachers' roles in purpose education, this paper examines whether teacher competence in supporting purpose in their students matters to the purpose of those same college students with whom these teachers work. Specifically: (1) Is students' perceived teacher competence for supporting purpose consistent with teachers' self-evaluations of their own competence? (2) Are teachers' self-evaluations and students' perceived teacher competence influenced by teachers' length of teaching experience, subject of specialty, sex, students' major, student's academic achievement or by gender? (3) Does teacher competence for purpose support influence the orientation of students' life purpose (i.e. whether students endorse beyond-the-self purposes)? and (4) Does teacher competence for supporting purpose affect students' likelihood of searching for purposes, of identifying purposes, or of being actively engaged to achieve purposes?

If students' purpose growth is dependent on how supportive students think their teachers are, then an accurate perception is important for teacher professional development. This study expected Chinese college teachers to overestimate their purpose support competence compared to students' reports. The Chinese college curriculum explicitly endorses purpose instruction through extensive and compulsory courses in ideological and political education taught by specialised teachers: competence in purpose teaching is socially desirable within Chinese culture. Although teachers surveyed were not specialists in purpose instruction, the importance placed on purpose education in China should feed into teachers' desire to see and report themselves as competent in purpose support, compared to students' perceptions.

This study also expected that the longer students remain in college, the more likely they will be to rate their teachers as competent in purpose support. Remaining in college may indicate greater satisfaction with and confidence in the efficacy of the college to support the students' life goals, and upper year classmen represent retention better than their younger counterparts, who could drop out in the future due to low satisfaction with college. Perceptions of social support are related to persistence in college (Nicpon et al. 2006). Students might see their teachers' ability to support their purposes as a proxy to provide social support more generally.

Teachers' longevity in their profession should impact students' perceptions of their teachers' purpose support competence. Longer immersion in a purpose-centred culture in which purpose teaching is dominant and explicitly sanctioned should lead to greater proficiency in purpose support.

Teacher's longevity in the profession is commonly expressed through their university title, with higher ranks suggesting longer service. Although this is not always the case (i.e. an instructor may in fact have longer teaching experience, even beyond that of many associate or full-professors), this research expects that in general, this rule will hold and that teachers' rank titles will impact students' reports of teacher purpose support in a positive direction.

It is unclear however whether teachers' subject matter specialty should influence their purpose support competence as rated by students. Traditionally, arts and humanities subjects may provide more opportunity for class discussions of social issues that relate to that aspect of purpose that pertains to contributing to the world beyond the self. On the other hand, disciplines with more hands-on fieldwork (e.g. science, engineering or art) may engender more personally meaningful experiences for students that connect schoolwork to their future work. The same argument applies to the predicted effects of college major on students' experiences with their teachers: it is therefore also unclear whether students' major would impact how they rate their teachers' purpose support competence.

It is established that teacher support is important for students' growth in many ways. By extension, this research expects that students' assessment of teachers' competence of purpose support will influence students' purpose orientation (i.e. beyond-the-selfness of their purposes) as well as their purpose identification, purpose search and purpose engagement, all in a positive direction. First, Chinese purpose education is systematic, organised and curriculum-wide and the Chinese view of purpose includes cultivating the individual's aspirations as well as service to the common good. However, Chinese purpose education most strongly emphasises instruction for a common purpose, ultimately encouraging that one forfeits personal goals for the common good, and thus advocating for beyond-the-self. Thus, students who rate their teachers as supportive of purpose likely equate that competence with teaching for beyond-the-selfness. Second, it is simple logic that purpose identification and purpose engagement associate positively with teacher purpose support: students who have supportive teachers will grow in the ways in which they are supported. But in the Chinese context, this research also expects purpose search to associate positively with teacher competence because research in Eastern cultures exhibits harmony between search and achievement, whereas the opposite view is endorsed more in Western cultures (e.g. Steger et al. 2008). Studies with Chinese populations exhibit a positive relationship between purpose search and identification, proposing that the relationship of purpose search with teacher purpose support will correspond accordingly (e.g. Chan 2014).

Gender is an important variable to consider when studying ratings of social support of any kind. In general, females of college age or younger reported higher levels and different uses of social support for their goals than males (e.g. Tam and Lim 2009), even from teachers, and with only a few studies departing from this trend. It is argued that such consistent findings warrant studying males and females separately to avoid misleading conclusions and recommendations for either group. Following on this body of research, this paper expected female students to rate teachers significantly higher on purpose support competence than their male peers.

Considerable research has been conducted on whether academic variables impact positive developmental outcomes. Results are mixed, depending on the measures used (i.e. grade point average or other reports) and other factors accounted for (e.g. see approaches in multiple countries by Kirkcaldy, Furnham, and Siefen [2004]). In the current research, students' academic achievement was not a main part of the study, but assessed nonetheless considering its potential effect on students' positive perceptions of their teachers and of school. It is reasonable to suppose that students who are doing well academically will also rate their schools and teachers as effective. For this reason, this paper expected that students' academic achievement would be positively associated with their reports of teachers' purpose support competence.

The Chinese conception of purpose

In recent years, the study of purpose has gained global attention in academic research (i.e. Moran 2001; Bronk 2012; Jiang 2013; Bundick and Tirri 2014; Mariano 2014). Both Eastern and Western scholars propose scientific definitions of purpose. In China, purpose is defined as the yearning and pursuit of one's future. It is the reflection of one's worldview and standpoint (Zhang 2006). Chinese people metaphorically look on purpose as a beacon, symbolising the guiding function it provides to life. Purpose is normally classified into social purpose and personal purpose. Social purpose is the common purpose assumed to be advocated by the majority of members of a society or culture, representing this majority's hopes for what a positive society should be like; and in China, this means building the nation into a prosperous, strong, democratic and civilised modern socialist country. Personal purpose is an umbrella term referring to the multiple aspirations that individuals have, including one's desired material, spiritual and family life, one's professional goals and one's personal moral aspirations (i.e. the kind of moral character one wants to cultivate) (Jiang and Lin 2014). Purpose education in China is organised, systematic and country-wide. It is implemented with a main focus on social purpose but also with considerable attention to personal purpose (Dong 1984).

Western researchers have also defined purpose during the past decades (Baumeister 1991; Ryff and Singer 1998). For example, at the beginning of this millennium, Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) proposed what has now become a widely accepted definition of purpose, and one that has much congruence with common Chinese conception: 'purpose is a stable and generalised intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self' (121). The Chinese notion and Damon, Menon, and Bronk's (2003) notion are similar in three ways. First, they both regard purpose as an intention which is directed towards the future. Purpose is an intention or an aim, and it does not only focus on the present. Purpose directs one's goal to the far-reaching

future. Second, both concepts incorporate current engagement to achieve purpose (i.e. 'pursuit' in the Chinese notion and 'to accomplish something' in the Western notion). Purpose is very different from fantasy or reverie in that purpose values action rather than remaining in the realm of theory. Intentions are supposed to trigger future purposeful behaviours and guide one in the right direction to achieve one's proposed endeavours. Third, both the Chinese concept and this Western concept focus on the beyond-the-self characteristics (i.e. 'social purpose' in the Chinese notion and 'the world beyond the self' in the Western notion). Thus, future orientation, engagement and beyond-the-self aspiration constitute the major characteristics of purpose shared by Chinese and Western scholars. This congruence between Chinese and popular Western notions of purpose (i.e. Damon, Menon, and Bronk 2003) may provide an initial point of comparison for designing studies and also interpreting findings about the meaning of purpose experiences from Chinese and Western perspectives. Thus, although the current research involves a Chinese population, the Western purpose definition discussed here provides a useful backdrop for this study. Consequently, in forming hypotheses and a literature review, it was useful to draw from Chinese and Western purpose research which use the same purpose concept.

The role of the teacher in students' purpose support

A sense of purpose plays critical roles in one's development as it is linked to aspects of positive development and thriving (Ulmer, Range, and Smith 1991; Damon, Menon, and Bronk 2003; White, Wagener, and Furrow 2009; Bundick et al. 2010; Hill et al. 2010) such as overall quality of life (Ulmer, Range, and Smith 1991), life satisfaction (Cotton Bronk et al. 2009; Steger 2012) and well-being (Thauberger and Cleland 1981; Keyes, Shmotkin, and Ryff 2002; Seligman 2002), prosocial behaviour (Cotton Bronk et al. 2009; Bundick et al. 2010), happiness (French and Joseph 1999), positive affect (King et al. 2006) and coping (Reker, Peacock, and Wong 1987). Additionally, purpose in life may also exert positive influences on adolescents' school behaviours. Students who have identified a life purpose tend to be more extroverted (Pearson and Sheffield 1974), and thus may be more likely to participate in campus organisations (Doerries 1970), to enjoy planning and organising events (Yarnell 1971) and to have improved academic self-regulation pertaining to important but uninteresting or tedious learning tasks (Yeager et al. 2014).

For these reasons, studying the role of the academic context on purpose is an important area of investigation. Furthermore, there is little doubt that development is a process involving reciprocal relations and mutual constitution of self and environment over time (Lerner 1982; Markus and Kitayama 2010): so, purpose, as an important component of what makes humans flourish (Seligman 2002), does not come from nowhere. Instead, purposes are discovered, engaged and realised with the guidance and support of significant others in the environment, and school is definitely a significant component of the environment in which students are embedded. Indeed, scholars believe education should play a central role in the development of identity and future goals (Guo 2011; Wei 2015), and purpose researchers note how youth who report having a general sense of purpose also describe having social supports that enhance thriving, such as through school (Moran et al. 2013).

Additionally, social supports in the environment, such as schools, also help shape what purposes youth pursue (Grotevant 1987). In this way, teachers are important persons who serve as a vital part of a school context in which purpose emerges for young people (Bundick

and Tirri 2014). Since commitment generally grows slowly but steadily in response to positive feedback, teachers could play an important role in supporting noble purposes over time by constantly providing positive feedback to students (Bronk 2012). A recent comparative study showed that in both Finland and the United States, teacher competence could help students develop purpose and students exhibited greater purpose when teachers deliberately applied some moral instruction practices among their students (Bundick and Tirri 2014). Even though people have been aware of the roles teachers could play and competencies teachers should possess to promote purpose among students, comparatively less is known about how youth purpose is supported by teachers and schools currently (Mariano et al. 2011).

In China, the role of teachers for students' moral purpose support dates back at least to the ancient Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD). In Chinese ideology, teachers' roles as moral guides have always been valued more highly than their role as academic instructors. The great Tang thinker and philosopher Yu Han proposed that teachers were those who should propagate social morality, impart professional knowledge and resolve doubts among their students (Li and Cui 2008), among which propagating the social morality ranks first in teachers' responsibilities. Yu Han's ideology on teachers' roles has since been regarded as a model for teachers in China.

Much research has been conducted among students at different educational levels to examine the function of teachers' support in students' personality and identity development as well as in their academic achievement. Teacher's support of students' emotions, support in providing materials and support of learning strategies could exert a direct positive effect on pupil's autonomous learning and efficiency (Fu and Guo 2012). Teacher's supporting activities predict students' self-esteem level and the frequency with which students tend to seek academic help from their teachers (Su and Feng 2009; Chen and Xu 2011; Du 2015). A recent study among college students indicated that student perceived teacher support affected academic emotion via self-determination, which could promote positive academic emotions and inhibit negative activities associated with academic emotions (Zhang 2012). Other research also discovered the importance of teachers' and counsellors' psychological support to students (Xue, Lin, and Zheng 2010).

During the past several decades, purpose education has gradually gained more and more attention in China. Ample research addresses characteristics of and reasoning behind college students' life purposes, as well as the guidelines, content, methods, effectiveness and risks of college purpose education (Liu 2005; Wang and Zheng 2008; Jiang and Huang 2009; Wang 2011; Wang and Song 2011; Wu 2011; Chen 2015). Youth purpose is a key component in all levels of Chinese education, and fostering a sense of life purpose is the core of the ideological and political education course (Yang, Huang, and Zhu 2010): This course is compulsory from grade one through the graduate level in the Chinese curriculum and provides the most direct and frequent opportunities for teachers to teach for purpose among students. Yet, even though the ideological and political education course provides a platform to bring purpose education into the curriculum and is a reason for students to learn and engage in purpose-related knowledge and practice, it has led purpose education down a narrow path. Purpose education is too dependent on ideological and political education teachers (Wei 2015). This course-centred approach not only neglects the greater influence that other subject teachers could exert in purpose education, but also weakens the responsibilities that teachers of other majors could take in cultivating purposeful citizens. Against this curricular backdrop, the present study is both important and timely because it can help assess the

importance of Chinese students' perceptions of the capabilities of their non-purpose teaching instructors for students' positive development.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and sixty-five Chinese participants from one university in north-east China including 52 college teachers and 213 college students who were pupils of these same college teacher participants participated in the study. The data were collected in spring 2011. All participants were recruited on campus and completed a paper and pencil survey following informed consent procedures. Students were gathered on a Saturday morning in two computer labs of the school library. Guided by trained survey administrators, students spent approximately 40 minutes to complete the survey. The teachers' survey was sent to the college instructors' offices and took approximately 10 minutes to complete. No incentives were offered in the data collection process.

Instructors completing the survey (54% female) held a range of professional titles/ranks and disciplinary backgrounds: 15.4% were full-professors, 36.5% were associate professors, 40.4% were lecturers and 1.9% were assistant professors. Based on the disciplinary classification in China's college entrance examination, 42% of the teachers were science and engineering teachers, 46% were arts and humanities teachers and 12% were art teachers (i.e. music, fine art and sports-related majors). None of the instructors were ideological and political education course teachers, who are specifically trained in purpose teaching. Teachers' teaching experience was distinct as well, reflected by their years of teaching. Among the teacher sample, 20% were new teachers who had been teaching for less than five years, 38% were experienced teachers who had been teaching between 5 and 10 years and 42% were very experienced teachers who had been teaching for over 10 years.

Sixty-one per cent of the students were female, ranging from the freshman to graduate level, with 73% lower graders (freshmen and sophomores) and 27% upper graders (juniors, seniors and graduate students). Students' academic achievement was also measured in this survey by students' examination scores. Fifty percent of the students ranked among the top 25% in their class, 30% ranked in the top 26–50% of their class, 13% ranked in the lower 51–75% of their class and 4% ranked in the lowest 25% of their class. Forty-eight per cent of the students were science and engineering majors, 36% were arts and humanities majors and 16% were art majors.

Measures

This paper administered selected items from the Revised Stanford Youth Purpose Survey (Bundick et al. 2006), which were initially developed from a larger study of youth purpose in the United States (see Damon 2008a). Items from this survey have since been translated, adapted and utilised in studies in other countries including Finland and China (i.e. Bundick and Tirri 2014). Survey items were first translated into Mandarin by two Chinese scholars proficient in English who were doing research in moral and civic education, and then back-translated into English by a Chinese American who was a native Chinese speaker and who had earned a doctorate in education in the United States. The translated surveys were

then reviewed by another Chinese professor and piloted among Chinese college teachers and students before they were eventually applied among all the participants.

Three portions of the Revised Youth Purpose Survey (Bundick et al. 2006) were administered among the sample to examine both students' purpose status (i.e. purpose search, purpose identification, purpose engagement and purpose orientation) and students' and teachers' perceptions of teachers' competence for cultivating purpose. These three measures are described below.

Life goal ranks

In the first part of the survey, participants ranked in order of importance their first, second and third life goals from a list of 17 goals. The 17 goals were generated based on related research conducted on meaning in life and used in previous studies of youth purpose including one study in China (e.g. see Devogler and Ebersole 1980, 1981, 1983; Damon 2008b). Theoretically, a purpose in life may feature long-term intentions that are self-oriented, beyond-the-self oriented, some combination of both or simply neutral. Previous research in the United States and in China categorised the 17 life goals into these categories in this way using statistical or conceptual methods, or a combination of both (e.g. Damon 2009; Bronk and Finch 2010; Jiang and Lin 2014). Drawing from this previous work and the interpretation of the item content, the current research focused on 9 of the 17 items that have been classified as other-oriented, meaning that these items express aspiration for serving others. These items were: help others, serve God or a higher power, make the world a better place, change the way people think, create something new, make things more beautiful, discover new things about the world, support my family and friends and serve my country. The remaining eight items did not indicate obvious other-oriented intentions (i.e. the items were fulfil my duties, do the right thing and earn the respect of others) or solely reflect an interest in serving one's own material or spiritual needs (i.e. the items were make money, be successful, have fun, live life to the fullest and have a good career).

Purpose search, identification and engagement

In the second part of the survey, three subscales, with five self-report items each, assessed on a seven-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree) participants' propensity to be seeking a purpose, to have identified a purpose or to be engaged in practices to achieve their purpose (see also Steger et al. [2006]; from which several of these items originate). Higher scores on these scales indicate higher likelihood that someone is searching for a life purpose (search, a sample item is 'I am searching for my meaning in life'), has discovered a life purpose (identification, a sample item is 'My life has a clear sense of purpose') and is engaged in specific practices towards achieving purpose in life (engagement, a sample item is 'I am always working towards accomplishing my most important goals in life'). Scales showed internal reliability (search $\alpha = .709$; identification $\alpha = .804$; engagement $\alpha = .649$) ranging from adequate to excellent for an exploratory study (Nunnally 1978).

Teacher competence for purpose support: students' and teachers' perceptions

The third part of the survey examined perceptions of teachers' competence to cultivate purpose among students. Both students' and teachers' perceptions were gathered, with items phrased appropriately to address the student or the teacher. These items were developed from observations and interviews conducted at a group of American schools that were

considered exceptional for supporting purpose in their students (i.e. as used and discussed by Andrews, Rathman, and Moran 2008; Bundick and Tirri 2014). The original list constitutes six items; however, only five were retained as the sixth item was not applicable to the specific educational context of this study in China (i.e. the removed item was, 'There are special events/days where community members come to talk about what they do'). The remaining five items, endorsed dichotomously as either true or false in this study, produced a general map of students' and teachers' respective perceptions of teacher competence for purpose at school, with a 'no' answer credited 0 and a 'yes' answer credited 1. The index of teacher competence for purpose was a sum of these five items, ranging from 0 (no perceived teacher competence for purpose support) to 5 (highest perceived teacher competence for purpose support) (total $\alpha = .714$; *teacher* $\alpha = .573$; *student* $\alpha = .719$). Teachers and students endorsed the following items as true or false with language adapted so that teachers were self-referencing and students referenced their perceptions of their teachers. Thus, teachers were asked to consider whether the statements were accurate about their own teaching, and students were asked to consider whether the statements were accurate about their teachers as a group.

Item 1: Understanding of the consequences of one's actions. This item was: 'the consequences of my decisions and actions are pointed out to me'. Purpose requires an understanding of the connection between one's efforts and actions and one's goals (Bundick and Tirri 2014, 152); this ability involves judging which actions may lead to successful fulfilment of a purpose and which may not. Furthermore, understanding consequences of one's actions involves recognition of potential benefits or harms of one's purpose for the world beyond the self (i.e. beyond-the-self purpose orientation) (Bundick and Tirri 2014, 152).

Item 2: Understanding of the importance of one's engagements. This item was: 'I am taught WHY a lesson or task or experience is important'. Students who understand how what they are doing in college is important to their lives are also more likely to see how their college coursework serves their purpose (Bundick and Tirri 2014, 153).

Item 3: Understanding of the importance of persistence towards accomplishment. This item was: 'My teachers give me opportunities to improve and resubmit my work'. Purpose involves persistence often in the face of challenge, and teachers can provide opportunities for students' improvement in schoolwork, which is particularly relevant when the student views coursework as serving their purposes.

Item 4: Understanding that one's purpose is important. This item was: 'I am expected to figure out what my purpose in life is'. The importance of cultivating one's purpose is already explicitly embedded in the Chinese college curriculum; this item assesses the perceived effectiveness of non-purpose specialist teachers in communicating this culturally endorsed value.

Item 5: Future planning. This item was: 'teachers teach me how to plan for the future'. As an ability involving prospection, the formation and pursuit of purpose suppose the ability to plan (Bundick and Tirri 2014, 152).

Background and academic achievement

Information on students' subject major, students' sex and students' grade level was collected via self-reports on the survey. Students' academic achievement was collected through their scores on the latest examination.

Analysis method

SPSS 20.0 was used in all data analysis. Independent samples *t*-tests were utilised to assess differences between students' and teachers' ratings of the teachers' purpose support competence, and to identify where any potential variation existed by specific survey question. A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) then examined potential differences in students' teacher purpose support ratings by the students' purpose beyond-the-selfness orientation (i.e. via selection of first ranked life goals). ANOVAs assessed for effects on students' rating of teachers by students' grade level, subject major, sex and academic achievement, and by teacher's gender, professional position, length of teaching experience and area of teaching specialisation. Finally, correlations were run among students' perception of teacher purpose support competence and aspects of students' purpose status (i.e. purpose search, purpose identification and purpose engagement).

Results

Teachers' self-evaluations surpassed students' evaluations

As expected, independent sample *t*-test showed that teachers' self-evaluations on their competence for purpose support ($M = 4.56$, $SD = .85$) were significantly greater than students' evaluations of these same teachers' support ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.35$) ($t = 3.875$, $df = 122.535$, $p < .001$; $d = 0.51$). The efforts teachers believed they had devoted to purpose teaching were not equally perceived by their students in most cases. A series of independent sample *t*-tests revealed significant differences between teachers' self-evaluations and students' evaluations on four of the five items, including 'I am expected to figure out what my purpose in life is' ($t = 2.161$, $df = 114.251$, $p < .05$; $d = 0.30$; *teacher* $M = 0.94$, $SD = 0.235$; *student* $M = 0.85$, $SD = 0.353$), 'teachers teach me how to plan for the future' ($t = 3.259$, $df = 112.595$, $p < .01$; $d = 0.43$; *teacher* $M = 0.90$, $SD = 0.298$; *Student* $M = 0.74$, $SD = 0.441$), 'the consequences of my decisions and actions are pointed out to me' ($t = 3.767$, $df = 116.738$, $p < .001$; $d = 0.49$; *teacher* $M = 0.90$, $SD = 0.298$; *student* $M = 0.71$, $SD = 0.45$) and 'I am taught why a lesson or task or experience is important' ($t = 3.712$, $df = 212.000$, $p < .001$; $d = 0.35$; *teacher* $M = 1.00$, $SD = 0$; *student* $M = 0.94$, $SD = 0.24$). No significant difference was found on the item 'my teachers give me opportunities to improve and resubmit my work' (*teacher* $M = 0.81$, $SD = 0.39$; *student* $M = 0.74$, $SD = 0.44$).

Major and grade-level influence on students' perceptions of teacher competence

A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) found effects of major and of grade level on students' perceptions of teacher competence (major $F(2, 210) = 7.717$, $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = 0.068$) grade level ($F(1, 211) = 4.650$, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = 0.022$). Art majors had significantly higher perceptions of their teachers' competence for purpose support ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.66$) than science

Table 1. Students' first ranked life goals organised by purpose orientation.

Purpose orientation	Number of times ranked #1
<i>Obviously other-oriented</i>	
Help others	10
Serve God or a higher power	0
Make the world a better place	10
Change the way people think	0
Create something new	2
Make things more beautiful	0
Discover new things about the world	4
Support my family and friends	30
Serve my country	
<i>Not obviously other-oriented</i>	
Fulfil my duties	20
Do the right thing	10
Earn the respect of others	5
<i>Mostly self-oriented</i>	
Make money	3
Be successful	22
Have fun	0
Live life to the fullest	61
Have a good career	27

and engineering majors ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.36$; $p < .01$), and arts and humanities majors ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.65$; $p < .01$). There was no significant difference in perceptions between science and engineering majors and arts and humanities majors. Art majors reported the highest teacher competence for purpose support.

As expected, upper level classmen (juniors, seniors and graduate students, $M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.16$) reported greater teacher competence in purpose support than their lower grade counterparts (freshman and sophomore, $M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.38$). Possibly, the longer students stay in college, the more likely they are to glean positive experiences for their purpose from the curriculum, therefore yielding these higher reports of their teachers' competence for supporting them. No differences were found by students' gender or by academic achievement. Contrary to expectations, none of the teacher characteristics (i.e. sex, length of teaching experience, professional title or subject of specialty) were related to teachers' self-evaluations of competence.

Students' purpose is influenced by perceived teachers' purpose support

As noted, this paper specifically examined the influence of perceived teacher competence for purpose support on four important aspects of students' purpose: the beyond-the-self orientation of students' most important life purpose, and students' reports of purpose search, purpose identification and purpose engagement.

Students' beyond-the-self purpose orientation

Table 1 shows frequencies of students' first ranked life goals, which were conceptually grouped as either obviously other-oriented, not obviously other-oriented or mostly self-oriented. Thus, the beyond-the-selfness of students' purpose content was assessed via their first ranked life goals from a list of 17 possible goals (i.e. using ANOVA). As expected, students who ranked the obviously other-oriented life goals first saw their teachers as more purpose

Table 2. Correlations among students' ratings of teachers' purpose support and students' purpose.

	Teachers' purpose support	Purpose search	Purpose identification	Purpose engagement
Teachers' purpose support	1	0.448**	0.303**	0.035
Purpose search		1	0.179**	0.114
Purpose identification			1	0.000
Purpose engagement				1

Note: Purpose search, purpose identification and purpose engagement refer to students' self-reports.
** $p < 0.001$; $N = 213$.

supportive ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.95$) than did the students who ranked other types of life goals first (not obviously oriented life goals $M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.49$; Mostly self-oriented life goals $M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.42$) ($F(2, 210) = 5.862$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.053$).

Students' purpose search, identification and engagement

In keeping with expectations, Table 2 shows significant positive associations between students' ratings of teacher purpose support and students' purpose search and purpose identification (effect sizes were medium; Cohen [1992, 157]); although it occurred in a positive direction, no significant relationship was found with purpose engagement.

Discussion

According to theory and previous research, promoting purpose should exert positive influence on students' school behaviours (Yeager et al. 2014) and also ultimately facilitate positive youth development (Damon, Menon, and Bronk 2003). The current study was thus designed to assess whether, and how, perceptions of college teachers' supportiveness in fact *matter* to students' purpose in life: this research especially sought to know whether this was the case within a Chinese educational context where purpose teaching is widely endorsed and officially promoted. Ultimately, understanding the role of teacher support in students' purpose in life could guide teachers' daily teaching activities, influence school policies and help structure teacher training. Results confirmed several of the expectations while revealing several nuances.

First, as expected, college teachers provided significantly higher evaluations of how competent they were in supporting their students' purpose in life than did the students themselves about their own teachers. This finding may indicate the social desirability and positivity associated with identifying oneself as an effective purpose teacher in China. However, it also indicates a possible disconnect between teachers' and students' perceptions about the efficacy of college for supporting one of the most important aspects of one's existence: one's purpose in life. A disconnect among youth and their older educators would not be unusual in any country. Such divergence seems the norm in modern society where rapid change in lifestyles and economies has led to intense transformations in people's lives even within one generation (i.e. see Giddens 1991). The finding might encourage educators in China, and elsewhere, to closely consider young people's own views of purpose and how they can be supported. Insights derived from such studies could inform teacher training. Further studies of young people's emic views may be in order and college educators should give them special attention (e.g. see Moran [2014]).

As expected, upper level classmen gave their teachers the highest ratings of purpose support competence. But the result may not necessarily indicate a general length of experience effect. Teachers' ratings of their own purpose support competence did not significantly increase by their length of experience or by their professional title, which is also an indicator of time in the profession.

Students majoring in art, however, did rate their teachers higher in purpose support competence than did their classmates with all other majors. A recent study of students with arts-related purposes may explain this. Young artists, it seems, tend to lose their sense of meaning in their artistic activity as they transition from school to work possibly more than youth pursuing other subjects (Malin 2015). Pursuing an artistic career is challenging: arts teachers in college may therefore be seen as especially important mentors and supporters by art students.

Also as expected, students' perceptions of their teachers' supportiveness did matter for their purpose in life. Students with higher teacher support ratings chose obviously other-oriented life goals as most important. According to Chinese and to some Western definitions of purpose, this choice is 'purposeful' because purpose inherently involves a beyond-the-self focus. It is surprising therefore that the same significant relationship was not found between reported teachers' support and actual purpose engagement. This could indicate a deficiency with this measure of engagement: unlike self-reports of one's inner condition of seeking and identifying purpose, engagement may be better assessed through behavioural observations and over time. Furthermore, it could be that students simply don't connect their sense of identified purpose to their actions in their lives: in-depth interviews might better capture that.

Students with higher teacher support ratings also reported greater purpose identification and search. In some other countries, purpose search would not indicate greater purpose. Yet, it is likely that in China, the harmonious relationship between identification and search is indicative of higher purpose overall, as the two variables positively correlate.

Several more findings that did not align with expectations are worth noting. Students' gender did not make a difference for their purpose support ratings. This finding does not match previous research showing gender differences in young people's reports of social support. It could be, however, that purpose support is a more specific and different type of support than the types usually assessed in such studies (i.e. instrumental support and/or emotional support), thus not yielding the same gender differences. Students' ratings of their teachers also did not show variance by academic achievement. The measure of this variable, however, was limited to examination scores. In China, such scores are common ways of assessing academic prowess; however, other achievement variables may better align with purpose.

Implications for research and for college teachers' practice in China

The findings provide a chance to look at the real situation of the implementation of teachers' role as purpose promoters in Chinese colleges. Teachers' roles as moral guides may be widely advocated in general, but may be inadequately implemented in practice (Wang and Song 2011). Purpose education is still mainly dependent on ideological and political education teachers, whereas other subject teachers' purpose teaching function is neglected (Guo 2011; Wei 2015). The reason mainly lies in the education system: first, cultivating teacher

competence for purpose is not a necessary part of teacher education and teacher competence to promote purpose is not a part of teachers' evaluations. In fact, for college subject teachers, being a purpose instructor is more of a cultural tradition (Li and Cui 2008) than a real requirement. Even in *The Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (1998, Chapter V Article 47), requirements on college teachers merely focus on their knowledge background, academic teaching skills and scientific research capabilities. This reality may be a good reason to consider ways that the teaching of purpose could be integrated more deliberately into the training of non-ideological and political education teachers. Additionally, there is a need for more research into the specific teaching practices that can support students' purposes, especially from the view of the students themselves.

Limitations of this study should be considered in further research. Purpose measures were initially developed outside of the Chinese context and then adapted to it. This is a common practice and best efforts were made to align purpose definitions, and meaningful Chinese translations and interpretations to the measures; however, measures developed initially within the country might better represent Chinese emic views of purpose. Measurement invariance studies of the purpose, life goals and other measures that have not been widely used would also be informative.

Clearly, many important questions about how young people experience purpose in China and elsewhere are raised from the findings such as: What can account for the fact that upper classman rate their teachers as more purpose supportive? Is it because purpose naturally develops and is more prominent in older people, or rather is it something to do with the efficacy of the college experience itself in which students are immersed over time? If it is the latter, what aspect of that experience is impactful for purpose? This is a question that is pertinent to educators everywhere, and there are many others. Indeed, whether purpose is explicitly or indirectly taught in the curriculum, and whether it is advocated culturally or not in any country, may be a moot point. Overall, this paper would suggest that the study of how teachers and colleges can support young people's positive purposes in life is absolutely critical for young people's development, everywhere.

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