

The life-metaphors of experienced teachers: A replication from China

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Metaphor analysis has been found a valid way to examine the core values and flourishing of teachers in Western culture, but empirical evidence is sparse for their Far Eastern counterparts. In the present study, 60 teachers (mean teaching experience=6.9 years) in southeastern China responded to a structured questionnaire. It elicited their personal life-metaphor, whether they had always espoused it since youth, and if not, what had caused it to change; and how it guides their actions. Teachers were also asked to indicate which of 17 life-metaphors they most and least preferred, and to rate their happiness and life meaning from teaching. Consistent with their counterparts in Costa Rica, virtually all Chinese teachers recounted a personal life-metaphor. Similar to those recounted by Costa Rican teachers, these were predominantly active and individualistic, but differed by being affectively neutral rather than optimistic. The most preferred and least preferred life-metaphors were similar but not identical among the two nationalities of teachers. Consistent with the content of their personal metaphors, Chinese teachers reported moderate happiness and personal meaning from their work. The usefulness of metaphor analysis in aiding teacher development in China is discussed, and future avenues of research are highlighted.

Keywords: metaphor analysis, life-metaphor, flourishing, teachers' values, Chinese teachers

Among the first psychological theorists to emphasize the importance of understanding the individual's core outlook on life was Alfred Adler, which he attributed to both innate and experiential factors. Adler (1927/2002) asserted that during childhood, individuals form unconscious beliefs or fictions about life, especially regarding their sense of inferiority. He called this process *fictional finalism*, and argued that everyone develops a particular outlook on life and a concomitant strategy or plan for attaining a sense of mastery; these may be unrealistic or even self-defeating. To effectively ameliorate individuals' emotional or social difficulties, Adler insisted, it is therefore vital to understand their underlying worldviews. In this context, he identified dreams as metaphoric indicators (Adler, 2005) as well as nonverbal behavior such as characteristic sleeping position, earliest memories, and particularly, current attitudes and behaviors (Adler, 2005; Hoffman, 1989).

As one of Adler's most important protégés, Abraham Maslow drew upon Adler's conceptualization of the individual's life plan in an influential paper on the worldview of the authoritarian personality (Maslow, 1943). Also during the mid-twentieth century, Campbell (1949) and Jung (1964) described the ways that myths represented metaphors for human existence. For example, Jung (1968) identified the child archetype in myths and art as an innate mental pattern signifying the hope and promise of a new beginning. Despite the emergence of such viewpoints, social science research involving metaphors was meager until the work of cognitive linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) who asserted that "Metaphors are not mere poetical or

rhetorical embellishments. They affect the ways in which we perceive, think, and act. Reality itself is defined by metaphor." (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 145.) They did not provide empirical data to support this view but offered evidence from popular American parlance like "time is money" to indicate the role of metaphors in contemporary discourse.

Metaphors We Live By catalyzed empirical research in a variety of applied fields including education. Investigators have examined the metaphors used by preservice teachers and teachers regarding the concept of pupil (Saban, 2010); teacher (Alger, 2009; Ben-Peretz, Mendelson, & Kron, 2003; Goldstein, 2005; Mahlios, Massengill-Shaw, & Barry, 2010; Poom-Valickis, 2012; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011); knowledge (Kalra & Baveja, 2012); and the educational process (Saban, Kocbeker, & Saban, 2007; Wan, Low, & Li, 2011). These studies have been found useful in uncovering core attitudes toward learning and teaching in diverse countries including China, Estonia, India, Israel, Turkey, and the United States. Thus, in assessing how a group of Chinese university teachers and students viewed the role of classroom teacher, Wan, Low, and Li (2011) found metaphor analysis to be a powerful method for understanding the two groups' beliefs and in identifying mismatches between them.

Among the earliest to examine life-metaphors empirically was Norton (1989). Conducting semi-structured interviews with Midwestern American men and women of diverse occupations and educational levels, she found that participants could be categorized into four types of coping strategy based on their particular life-metaphor: *enthusiasts* (optimistic & action-oriented), *spectators* (optimistic but passive), *antagonists* (pessimistic but action-oriented), and *fatalists* (pessimistic and passive). In Norton's view, these typologies revealed broad orientations to life and were highly resistant to change. However, she did not suggest how individuals develop their particular life-metaphor or what might cause it to change.

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The first of several subsequent studies on life metaphors compared the metaphors of Russian celebrities interviewed in popular magazines about their achievements with those of non-celebrity Russians seeking psychological help (Bochaver & Fenko, 2010). Nine different types of life-metaphor emerged. For both groups, the metaphor that “life is a journey” was expressed most frequently. However, the celebrities expressed life-metaphors that were more numerous and diverse than those expressed by psychological help-seekers. In a study involving Colombian college leadership students, Hoffman and Acosta-Orozco (2015) found a predominance of personal life-metaphors that were active, affectively positive, and individualistic. When presented with a variety of life-metaphors, student leaders most preferred the metaphor that “life is like a journey or voyage” and least preferred the metaphor that “life is like a penal colony or prison.” In a related study, Hoffman, Acosta-Orozco, and Compton (2015) found that a majority of Colombian medical students preferred “life is like a journey or voyage” and “life is like an adventure,” and reported that their personal life-metaphor significantly impacted their motivation and decision-making.

Pertinent to positive psychology models, metaphor analysis has shown utility in assessing personality factors related to flourishing, a “term used in many areas of positive psychology to describe high levels of well-being” (Compton & Hoffman, 2019, p.5). Specifically, metaphor analysis has been used to assess such important aspects related to flourishing as extroversion, optimism, internal locus of control, and life meaning (Baldwin, Landau, & Swanson, 2017; McConnell et al., 1993; Nelson & Thorne, 2012) in non-clinical populations. In a recent experimental study involving Americans and Germans, individuals who applied their own life metaphor to writing about personal experiences including decisions and difficulties expressed greater perceived meaning for these events than controls in the non-metaphoric condition (Baldwin, Landau, & Swanson, 2017).

Positive psychology and teacher effectiveness

The rise of positive psychology has shown that such qualities as altruism, conscientiousness, extraversion, intrinsic motivation, life satisfaction, and optimism (Bishay, 1996; Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009; Kim, Jorg, & Klassen, 2019; Nilsson et al., 2015; Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014) as well as meaning in life (Damasio, Pimenteira de Melo, & da Silva, 2013; Tin, Hean, & Leng, 1996) are specifically linked to teacher effectiveness and to flourishing in general. Nevertheless, our review of research literature uncovered only a single study using metaphor analysis to examine the flourishing of either preservice or experienced teachers. In expanding the investigation of life-metaphors in Latin America to experienced Costa Rican teachers, Hoffman, Acosta-Orozco, and Alvarado (2019) found greatest preference for “life is like a gift” (which the authors associated with a religious outlook) and equally high rejections for “life is like a war” and “life is like a penal colony or prison.” Consistent with the teachers' high self-reported happiness and sense of meaning from their profession, their personal life-metaphors were active, affectively positive, and individualistic. Due to the absence of published studies with teachers in the Far East, we chose a replication of that study utilizing a comparable sample in China.

Hypotheses of the study

- Chinese teachers would be able to describe their personal life-

metaphor in a meaningful manner;

- When presented with a choice of diverse life-metaphors, they would most prefer those that were thematically active and moderately positive affectively: namely, “life is like a journey or voyage” and “life is like an adventure.”
- They would least prefer those life-metaphors that were highly negative affectively: namely, “life is like a war” and “life is like a penal colony or prison.”
- They would tend to report that their own life-metaphor had strong impact on their decision-making.

Method

Participants

This study was conducted in a public school of first through ninth grades, comprising approximately 1300 students in Fuzhou City, located in the southeastern Chinese province of Fujian. Demographically, most students in this school are middle-class in socio-economic status and about 15% live primarily with their grandparents due to busy parental work schedules.

The capital of Fujian province, Fuzhou City has approximately 7.115 million inhabitants, and in 2015, it was ranked by the Brookings Institute as the 10th Fastest Growing Metropolitan area in the world (cityoffuzhou, 2019).

Design and procedure

For purposes of replication, we used the questionnaire developed by Hoffman, Acosta-Orozco, and Alvarado (2019). It contained three parts. Part 1 began with the open-ended question: “If you were asked, life is like _____, how would you answer?” The second question was: “Would you always have given this same answer since you were a child or adolescent?” The third and fourth questions were also open-ended: “If not, when did your life-metaphor change, and why?” and “How do you think that it guides what you do?” Part 2 presented 17 different life-metaphors in a checklist format, and asked: “Which one or two of these metaphors most expresses your view of life?” Part 3 presented the same 17 life-metaphors in a checklist format and asked, “Which one or two least expresses your view of life?” Derived from previous studies involving metaphor analysis and wide-ranging literary sources, these comprised: Life is like: 1) a war; 2) a game of chance; 3) a jigsaw puzzle; 4) a journey or voyage; 5) a gift; 6) a school; 7) a roller coaster; 8) a day at the beach; 9) a mystery; 10) a party; 11) a sports match (soccer, tennis, golf, etc.); 12) an adventure; 13) a dance or song; 14) a chess game; 15) a love story; 16) a penal colony or prison; 17) a dream. Part 4 contained two questions: “How happy are you in your profession as an educator?” and “How much sense of meaning does being a teacher give your life?” Both questions utilized 5-point Likert scales. The questionnaire was subsequently translated into Chinese by a professional native Chinese translator and then back-translated into English by a second native Chinese professional translator to ensure accuracy.

Data collection

The third author, who is a teacher at the school, recruited participants. She is native Chinese and invited all 64 teachers besides herself to participate in this study, which she explained was about teachers' values, and with participation wholly voluntary and anonymous. Fifty-three classroom teachers completed the survey

after an administrative meeting for all teaching staff, yielding a response rate of 82.8%. In addition, seven visiting 10th-grade teachers were recruited during the same week as a convenience sample, yielding a total of 60 classroom teachers in this study. The completed questionnaires were subsequently translated into English by a native Chinese translator.

Data analysis revealed that our sample comprised 44 women, 15 men, and one gender unknown. Their duration of teaching experience ranged from 0.50 years to 39.0 years, with a mean of 6.9 years. Among the 58 teachers who provided data concerning their placement, 67.2% (n=39) taught in the first through fourth grade, 20.7% (n=12) taught in the fifth through eighth grade, and 12.1% (n=7) taught in the tenth grade.

Results

The personal life-metaphors recounted by participants on Part 1's open-ended first question ("If you were asked, life is like _____, how would you answer?") were coded by the first two authors on three dimensions: (1) active vs. passive; (2) optimistic (affectively positive), pessimistic (negative), or neutral; and (3) individualistic, collectivistic, supernatural (i.e., religious), impersonal, or nature. Inter-rater reliabilities were 94.4% for question one, concerning which 54 participants provided usable data; because three participants expressed two different metaphors, there were 57 scorable life-metaphors in all. Of this number, 47 (82.4%) were "active" and 10 (17.6%) were "passive"; 12 (21.0%) were "optimistic; 7 (12.3%) were "pessimistic", and 38 (66.7%) were "neutral"; 24 (42.1%) were "individualistic," 7 (12.3%) were "collectivist," 9 (15.8%) were "nature", 17 (29.8%) were "impersonal, and none were "supernatural," such as thematically religious. The most frequently listed combination of codes was "active, neutral, individualistic (n=15, 26.3%) followed by "active, neutral, impersonal (n=7, 12.3%), and "active, neutral, nature" (n=6, 10.5%). Next in frequency were these three: "active, optimistic, individualistic," "active, neutral, collectivist," and "passive, neutral, impersonal" (all were n=4, 7.0%). None of the other combinations accounted for more than 5% of responses. Generally, participants' qualitative responses to Part 1's 2nd through 4th questions proved quite helpful in coding their personal life-metaphor on these three dimensions.

For question 2 ("Would you always have given this same answer since you were a child or adolescent?"), 46 participants provided scorable answers, 68.5% of whom reported they would not have given the same life-metaphor in childhood or adolescence, while 31.5% said they would have given the same metaphor.

For question #3 ("If not, when did your life-metaphor change, and why?") 30 participants provided scorable answers; these were coded into six thematic categories. In frequency order, these comprised: general maturation (46.7%); involvement in work (33.3%); college attendance (10.0%); family responsibility (3.3%); a specific life crisis or challenge (3.3%); and an unspecified event (3.3%).

Answers to question 4 ("How do you think that it guides what you do?") were coded for the impact the life-metaphor had on guiding the participant's actions using a 3-point scale (low, moderate, strong). A surprisingly large minority (42.9%, n=24) of participants did not respond to this question, perhaps reflecting their difficulty in introspecting meaningfully to it. Of the 32 participants who provided usable responses, 28.1% reported low impact, 21.9% indicated

"moderate" impact, and 50.0% indicated a "strong impact." Inter-rater reliability was 93.3%.

Table 1: Metaphor that most expresses Chinese teachers' view of life

Metaphor	Number	Percentage
Like a journey or voyage	32	28.1
Like an adventure	14	12.3
Like a jigsaw puzzle	11	9.6
Like a roller coaster	10	8.8
Like a school	8	7.0
Like a chess game	7	6.1
Like a mystery	7	6.1
Like a gift	6	5.3
Like a dance or song	4	3.5
Like a sports match	3	2.6
Like a war	2	1.8
Like a day at the beach	2	1.8
Like a party	2	1.8
Like a penal colony or prison	2	1.8
Like a love story	2	1.8
Like a game of chance	1	0.8
Like a dream	1	0.8
Sub-total	114	100%
Non-usable data	6	0%
Total	120	100%

*Note. The percentage of the answers is based on the N of usable responses

Table 2: Metaphor that least expresses Chinese teachers' view of life

Metaphor	Number	Percentage
Like a war	23	21.3
Like a game of chance	15	13.9
Like a penal colony or prison	12	11.1
Like a party	8	7.4
Like a day at the beach	8	7.4
Like a dance or song	7	6.5
Like a gift	7	6.5
Like a mystery	7	6.5
Like a chess game	4	3.7
Like an adventure	4	3.7
Like a dream	4	3.7
Like a roller coaster	3	2.8
Like a journey or voyage	2	1.9
Like a sports match	2	1.9
Like a jigsaw puzzle	1	0.9
Like a love story	1	0.9
Like a school	0	0.0
Sub-total	108	
Non usable data	12	
Total	120	100%

*Note. The percentage of the answers is based on the N of usable responses

Participants' responses on the checklists of Part 2 and 3 were entered into an Excel file and statically analyzed by the authors. As shown by Table 1, when asked, "Which one or two of these life metaphors *most* expresses your view of life?" the most frequent responses provided by 57 participants were: "life is a journey or voyage" (28.1%), followed by "life is like an adventure" (12.3%) and "life is like a jigsaw puzzle" (9.6%), "life is like a roller

coaster,” (8.8%), “life is like a school” (7.0%), and both “life is like a chess game” and “life is like a mystery” (6.1%). All ten other options were endorsed by fewer than 6% of respondents. As shown by Table 2, when asked, “Which one or two *least* expresses your view of life?” the most frequent responses provided by 54 participants were: “life is like a war” (21.3%) and “life is like a game of chance” (13.9%), “life is like a penal colony or prison” (11.1%), both “life is like a party” and “life is like a day at the beach” (7.4%), and “life is like a dance or song,” “life is like a gift,” and “life is like a mystery” (6.5%). All eight other options were rejected by fewer than 4% of respondents, including “life is like a school,” which was not rejected by any respondents.

For the two questions on Part 4, the mean scores were 3.6 out of 5 on “How happy are you in your profession as an educator?” and 3.5 out of 5 on “How much sense of meaning does being a teacher give your life?” For both questions, scale point= 4 was reported most frequently, followed by scale point= 3, then scale point=2, scale point=5, and finally, scale point=1. Thus, our participants reported moderately high levels of both happiness and life meaning from their teaching profession.

Discussion

Metaphor analysis has been increasingly favored as a means to investigate underlying attitudes of students and teachers in a variety of educational contexts. However, despite evidence that teacher effectiveness is significantly influenced by motivational and personality factors (Bishay, 1996; Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009; Kim, Jorg, & Klassen, 2019; Nilsson et al., 2015; Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014) we have identified only one study applying metaphor-analysis to teachers' broader philosophical outlook, such as their degree of optimism and pro-activeness; that study surveyed experienced Costa Rican teachers (Hoffman, Acosta-Rozco, & Alvarado, 2019). For this reason, we conducted a replication with a comparable sample of experienced teachers in China.

Confirming our first hypothesis, virtually all participants were able to recount their personal life-metaphor in a meaningful manner, as well as indicate their preference/repudiation for a wide variety of life-metaphors presented to them. In this regard, they were highly similar to their Costa Rican colleagues. Thus, the assessment of life-metaphors appears to be an investigative tool appropriate for teachers in China, and by extrapolation, possibly to those elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Confirming our second hypothesis, our sample most preferred life-metaphors that were thematically active with moderate positivity, namely “life is like a journey or voyage” and “life is like an adventure.” Indeed, these comprised more than 40% of all preferred metaphors in our sample and none of the other 15 metaphors were rated among the two-most preferred by more than 9.6% of our sample.

It is interesting to note that “life is like a game of chance” and “life is like a dream” were each preferred by only a single participant. In our view, both metaphors reflect worldviews incompatible with the self-discipline and responsibility entailed in teaching large groups of children or adolescents. In addition, the metaphors that “life is like a party,” “a day at the beach,” “a love story,” and “a penal colony or prison” were each preferred by only two participants. These quantitative results are not surprising, as the first three reflect affectively positive extremes, and the fourth is quite negative if not

outright gloomy; all likewise seem incompatible with the pragmatic outlook necessary for effective classroom teaching. The relatively high percentage (9.6%) of participants who viewed life as resembling “a jigsaw puzzle” reflects a logically-oriented perspective consistent with the orderly requirements of a teaching career.

This pattern of preferences was quite similar to that of Costa Rican teachers, for whom “life is like a journey or voyage” was the most second-most preferred life-metaphor and “life is like a jigsaw puzzle” placed fourth. However, a notable contrast between the two samples was that the Costa Rican teachers most preferred “life is like a gift” and only 5% most preferred “life is like an adventure.” It seems reasonable that the first difference can be attributed to the fact that “life is like a gift” is the most religiously-oriented of the 17 life-metaphors and that China is officially an atheistic country with an anti-religious ideology. As for the latter difference, it may reflect the fact that the Costa Rican educators had a more cautious outlook because they resided in a less urbanized milieu. As aforementioned, the city of Fuzhou is among the fastest-growing in the world today (cityoffofuzhou, 2019) and this dynamism may have influenced our sample.

Partially supporting our third hypothesis, participants least preferred the highly negative metaphor that “life is like a war,” consistent with the Costa Rican teachers. Certainly, this metaphor reflects a grim world view that seem incompatible with the benevolence and optimism necessary for the career choice of educator and successful achievement within it. Although our sample's second least-preferred metaphor was that life is “like a game of chance,” it was rejected only slightly more frequently (13.9%) than “life is like a prison or jail” (11.1%). It is therefore striking to note that these three life-metaphors for both Costa Rican and Chinese teachers were the least preferred despite the vast differences between these cultures. Both nationalities of teachers shared the outlook that luck is essentially irrelevant to human existence, perhaps because persons who choose a teaching career regard educational and vocational success as predicated upon self-disciplined study rather than chance events.

Although half of participants who provided data reported that their personal life-metaphor had a “strong” impact on their decision-making, nevertheless an unexpectedly high minority (nearly 43%) chose not to answer this question at all, far higher than for any other question; in addition, over 70% of Costa Rican teachers related that their personal life-metaphor had a “strong” impact. In our view, this differential finding may reflect the current emphasis in Chinese education for teachers to adhere closely to centralized directives on classroom content and methodology rather than pursue individual predilections (see Lo, 2019; Yang et al., 2019). Also, the failure of many participants to respond to this question may reflect the broader reluctance of Chinese teachers to express “opinions that might become public and offend their colleagues, parents, or school administrators,” as Kwong, Wang, and Clifton (2010, p. 122) reported in their study of job satisfaction among Beijing schoolteachers. Because of these possible cultural factors, our fourth hypothesis was only partially confirmed.

As noted earlier, the most frequent personal metaphor was active, individualistic, and affectively neutral; these comprised over 25% of all responses. Typical of this combination was the statement by a fourth-grade teacher specializing in sports and calligraphy that,

“Life is like being a soldier in a traditional Chinese chess game. I think you must work hard to win.” Likewise, a first-grade reading-and-writing teacher opined, “Life is like riding on a roller-coaster. You have ups and downs on the rail.” As to how their personal life-metaphor influenced their decision-making, a tenth-grade basketball teacher with a representatively active, individualist, and optimistic outlook commented, “Life is like an ocean. There are many things waiting for us to explore, but we mustn't be hard on ourselves.” Contrastingly, typical of those espousing an active, individualistic, and pessimistic outlook, a third-grade classroom teacher said, “Life is like a marathon. It's not easy running through the whole process, but we still have to keep moving and running, although we may not win first place.”

Finally, it should be noted that our participants scored lower than their Costa Rican colleagues in both the happiness and sense of life meaning they experience as professional educators (3.6 & 3.5 compared to 4.6 & 4.5 respectively). This finding is consistent with our sample's lower degree of optimism, and higher degree of pessimism, in their personal life-metaphors compared to those recounted by Costa Rican teachers. It also appears to reflect accurately the results of recent studies on job satisfaction among urban Chinese teachers (Gu & Li, 2013; Lo, 2019; Yang, You, Zhang, Lian, & Feng, 2019).

Implications for teacher development in China

Similar to their counterparts throughout the world, Chinese teachers commonly experience emotional and physical challenges in their profession. Burnout and stress among Chinese teachers have been studied for more than a dozen years (Cheung, Tang, & Tang, 2011; Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012; Wang et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2006; Yang et al., 2019). Researchers have consistently identified work overload, limited professional development, inadequate administrative support, and comparatively low salary as primary causal factors of occupational stress among Chinese teachers, as well as such additional factors as student misbehavior and parental demands (Kwong, Wang, & Clifton, 2010; Sargent & Hannum, 2005; Yang et al., 2009). A growing number of studies have examined positive functioning among teachers in China. In a seminal study of teacher resilience, Gu and Li (2013) found that teachers who described themselves as being committed and resilient reported greater fulfillment and optimism at work. In investigating the link between emotional intelligence (EI) and job satisfaction among Chinese primary school teachers, Sun, Chen, and Jiang (2013) found coping humor significantly related to job satisfaction and EI, particularly emotion regulation. In the first study conducted in China on growth mind set and its influences on well-being among teachers, researchers found that “growth mind sets can predict well-being, perseverance of effort and work engagement in the Chinese culture” (Zeng, Chen, Cheung, & Peng, 2019, p. 851).

In light of increased attention to strengthening resilience among Chinese teachers, life-metaphor analysis appears to be a relevant tool. For example, teachers' psychological well-being could be assessed to identify core values, motivations, and goals that will impact upon student achievement. For instance, results showing greater passivity, pessimism, or disengagement could be overcome through seminars, workshops, and innovative collaborative projects. In this regard, teacher burnout might be significantly reduced and reversed. Life-metaphor analysis might also prove effective in teacher training in China. For example, academic and administrative

staff can annually assess the psychological well-being of their preservice student body and design pertinent training activities.

Limitations of the present study and future directions

The generalizability of our findings regarding the life-metaphors of Chinese teachers is limited by several factors. First, the small sample size warrants subsequent investigations with additional populations of teachers in China, especially because of large regional differences in education within that country (Lo, 2019; Sargent & Hannum, 2005). For instance, teachers in poorly-funded rural areas might reveal a differing metaphoric profile, such as lower pro-activeness or optimism, than those in fast-growing cities with greater economic resources. Also, because the teachers in our study mainly taught in the lower primary grades, future research might fruitfully focus on the life-metaphors of those in secondary education. In addition, our sample comprised teachers who averaged approximately seven years of teaching experience; though this number varied widely by participant, it would be advantageous for future metaphor analysis to be conducted with newly-minted teachers as well as those with considerably greater tenure. Finally, in light of growing interest in teacher resilience throughout the world including China, we recommend that teachers' life-metaphors be studied in relation to such factors as occupational stress and coping ability. Despite the limitations of our study, we found a high replicability in the utility of metaphor analysis in assessing the broader outlook of teachers in countries as diverse as Costa Rica and China. The examination of teachers' life-metaphors thus appears to be an effective means to uncover underlying values impacting individual flourishing in this vital profession.

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