

# Factors Affecting Career and Life Planning of Chinese Cross-Border Senior Secondary School Students in Hong Kong

Catherine Hui, Mantak Yuen, & Queenie A. Y. Lee

Centre for Advancement in Inclusive and Special Education, Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong

**Abstract:** This paper explores the career and life planning experiences of mainland Chinese students who cross the border daily from China to study in Hong Kong's senior secondary schools. The small-scale study explored factors that appear to influence cross-border students' access to career and life planning activities that may affect their self-concept development and their identification of future life roles. A qualitative method of inquiry was used, involving focus group discussion followed by individual in-depth interviews. Findings indicated that major influences on career and life choices were (i) fulfilling parental expectations, (ii) pursuing students' own interests, and (iii) making best use of personal strengths and aptitudes. Less significant factors included peer group influences. In terms of self-concept and lifelong development, cross-border students showed increasing tendency to see themselves as a future 'workers' and 'citizens.' They also perceive themselves to have greater flexibility than most mainland students to adapt to various working situations in the future. These findings provide new insights for schools seeking to implement high quality career and life planning programs for these students.

It is important to begin by describing what secondary schools in Hong Kong are now expected to provide for students in terms of career planning support and exposure to experiences that foster goal setting for life. It is then important to explain why these areas of learning and development may present particular difficulties to students from Mainland China who study in secondary schools in Hong Kong.

## Background to the Study

### Career Planning and Life Skills Development

Over the past decade, career and life planning for all students have become increasingly important areas of intervention in senior secondary schools around the world (Gordon, 2019; Hooley & Rice, 2019; Solberg et al., 2020). In Hong Kong, the Education

Bureau (EDB) is the body responsible for policy making in this domain, and in many ways the EDB is equivalent to the Ministry or Department of Education in other countries. In recent years, the EDB has emphasized the importance of including career and life planning as core topics for all senior secondary school students. What the EDB has recommended is a comprehensive approach to career and life planning that links closely with the existing *Comprehensive Guidance Model*, originally designed by Gysbers in collaboration with the Hong Kong Association of Career Masters and Guidance Masters (Gysbers, 2003).

In the 2014 Policy Address from the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, it was stated that public sector schools serving senior students would be given a grant equivalent to the salary of a graduate teacher to promote career and life planning programs. This "Career and Life

Planning Grant” has been given each year to public sector schools that opt to promote career and life planning for senior students. This initiative has increased the need for career and guidance teachers to deliver well-targeted interventions, guidance activities, and educational experiences designed to enhance students’ career and life planning. Career teachers and guidance teachers in Hong Kong are those members of staff who have been appointed in secondary schools to roles involving career guidance and counselling duties, often in addition to their subject-teaching role. These teachers may, or may not, have had specialist training in career education or counselling.

Before this Career and Life Planning Grant was introduced, the emphasis in Hong Kong secondary schools was narrowly focused on merely helping graduates find a job or transition to higher education. With the much broader emphasis now on guiding students’ career planning, goals setting for life, and the acquisition of life skills, the challenge for careers and guidance teachers has become how best to implement a much more diverse service. Now, teachers need to provide their students with opportunities for authentic work-related experiences, time spent exploring possible career paths, and identifying personal goals for life (Yuen et al., 2019).

At the same time as the grant became available, a *Guide on Life Planning Education and Career Guidance for Secondary Schools* (hereafter called “*The Guide*”) was published, setting out the nature and purpose of career and life planning (Career Guidance Section, Education Bureau, 2014). In essence, *The Guide* explains that career and life planning education:

...connects with the school’s curriculum components, and through it, students are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to make wise choices in accordance with their interests, abilities, and orientations, and are guided to integrate their career/academic

aspirations with whole-person development and life-long learning. (p. 3-4)

### **Students from Mainland China Studying in Hong Kong**

The focus of this study is on a particular population of Mainland Chinese students who are attending schools in Hong Kong and are now encountering career planning and life development activities for the first time. Usually, students cross the border each day to attend school. Their parents usually favor the education system in Hong Kong because they believe the academic standards are higher and that their children will also learn better English. Usually ‘cross-border students’ can speak some English, but their proficiency is not high and this can lead to difficulties in learning when English is the main language of instruction.

To design appropriate intervention and guidance programs for this group of students, teachers and counselors need to understand the learning and developmental characteristics of cross-border students, and recognize factors that may affect their successes in topics linked to career and life planning. The study reported here provides some new information that can assist teachers and counselors in implementing comprehensive career and life planning programs for these students and for others who may benefit.

### **Literature Review**

Literature in the field of career and life planning has often applied a social-cognitive model to analyze factors that influence high school students’ aspirations, career decisions, and educational choices. According to Ferry, Fouad, and Smith (2000), parental encouragement and expectations are significant influences affecting students’ decision making, planning of a career path, subject choices, and learning outcomes. Additionally, students’ own learning experiences—particularly the grades achieved in different subjects—often affect their

level of self-efficacy and their belief about their own ability to accomplish certain goals in life. It is also usual to find that students' personal interests or talents in certain subjects influence their orientation toward a future career path (Tang & Newmeyer, 2008).

Another influence appears to be gender. Male students tend to place more emphasis on job opportunities, career advancement, and high income in selecting a study path, while females tend to follow their interests and abilities more when they plan a career path (Malgwi et al., 2005).

What is most noteworthy in the literature is that, to date, very little research on career and life development issues has been conducted within Chinese cultures, and only a very few studies have explored the topic with high school students. A review of databases revealed that only one study in Hong Kong had explored students' 'career aspirations' for a specific type of occupation (nursing) (Law & Arthur, 2003). These researchers used a quantitative survey and found that among 1246 secondary school graduates in Hong Kong, only 28% expressed an interest in studying nursing in a degree program. The factors that influenced these students' choice of nursing were mainly gender, followed by subject selection in senior secondary school, past academic achievement, parents' occupation, and students' perception that nursing is a 'valued occupation'. Among other factors, the researchers found that parental expectations, guidance from career teachers, peer-group influence, and past experiences with relevant career-related activities were salient factors (Law & Arthur, 2003).

Hong Kong is a multi-cultural and international city, with citizens from many ethnic backgrounds, so it is probable that cultural factors may also influence students' career planning, self-concept, self-efficacy, and goals in life (Gushue, 2006; Lauver & Jones, 1991). Teachers need to be aware of the possible influence of ethnicity and cultural identity affecting the decisions a student makes

regarding a future career path. For example, a study of Chinese students who study abroad (Ma & Yeh, 2010) found that fluency in English language significantly affected their educational aspirations and plans. This is possibly relevant for cross-border students in Hong Kong, because their level of English is often poor. In Mainland China and Chinese schools, they are exposed mainly to Mandarin and Cantonese.

### **Research Objectives**

In order to analyze factors that might affect career and life planning for cross-border students in Hong Kong, the following objectives were formulated.

1. To explore how cross-border senior secondary students make their decisions about their career and life goals.
2. To identify factors that might affect students' decisions on their educational and career paths, and their future life.
3. To better understand cross-border students' self-concept and life goals.

### **Method**

A qualitative research method was used in this study. Data were collected from a focus-group discussion and follow-up in-depth individual interviews. The focus group used discussion and questioning to collect data related to factors which the participants believe had influenced their career planning, their self-concept, and goals in life. The students also provided their opinions regarding the quality and value of career services and support they are receiving in school. The face-to-face interviews enabled the researchers to probe for additional information not revealed in the focus group.

The theoretical framework underpinning the study is mainly informed by the 'Lifespan Career Development Theory' (Super, 1975) that suggests a person's self-concept and life plans change over time as a result of ongoing experiences.

**Participants**

All data were collected from a government-subsidized coeducational secondary school in Hong Kong, located near to the border with China. The school has a history of over 30 years and professes Christian principles and practices. There are four classes for secondary years 1-3 (junior forms), and five classes for secondary years 4-6 (senior forms). At the time data were collected, the total number of students attending the school was approximately 750.

For the focus group discussion, cross-border senior secondary school students were selected.

The first author was teaching students in Year 5 (S5), so students from that year were selected for study because of the teacher’s familiarity with them. Three cross-border students (mean age: 17 years) met the selection criterion and agreed to take part in the focus group and the individual interview. Written consent to participate in the study was obtained from the parents and students, after the purpose had been clearly explained.

Information on the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

<i>Profiles of the Three Participants</i>			
	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3
Current living location	Futian, Lok Ma Chau	Sha Tau Kwok (China side)	Shenzhen
Education experience in Mainland China	Studied primary school in Mainland China	Studied in a kindergarten in Mainland China	Mainly study in Hong Kong
Reason(s) for studying in Hong Kong	Parents are looking for a better education system	Hong Kong has better English Language education and various types of activities during class time	Due to the restrictions of China’s Hukou System, the student cannot study in a public school in the Mainland

**Data Collection Procedures**

**Stage 1: Focus Group.** The focus group session took place after school on a weekday and lasted for 1.5 hours. At the beginning of the session, the exact meaning of “career planning” and “life planning” was explained to participants. The discussion was conducted in Cantonese (the local Chinese dialect) but questions are translated into English for this paper. The role of the moderator (first named author) was to create a comfortable and friendly environment for participants to express their views freely. The moderator asked six open-ended questions designed to elicit data relevant

for the objectives of the study. The questions and requests to students were:

1. Please introduce yourself briefly, including where you live.
2. Did you study in Mainland China before? When, and at what level?
3. What is the reason for you to study in Hong Kong?
4. What are the factors that you feel are affecting your career and life planning?
5. What challenges and opportunities do you have when making decisions about career and future life?
6. What is your opinion about the school-based career and life planning activities you have participated in at this school?

Questions were clarified when necessary and students were often asked ‘Can you tell us more about that?’ to facilitate them to share more in-depth ideas related to the guiding questions. The session was audio-taped and notes were taken by the moderator to record any special observations made during the discussion.

**Stage 2: Individual Interviews.** Each participant attended an in-depth individual interview as a follow-up to the focus group. The purpose of the individual interviews was to obtain more personal information, clarify key points, and explore and identify each student’s views on the support that is needed for cross-border students. Specifically, the individual interviews tried to elicit from the student participants their life roles and self-concept distribution based on the theoretical framework of the *Life Career Rainbow*. To do this, the students were asked to complete a ‘roles allocation form’ based on Super’s (1975) life roles and self-concept framework. Furthermore, factors that might affect the student’s career and life planning would also be explored in the individual interview sessions.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from the focus group and interviews were analyzed in accordance with suggestions from Miles and Huberman (1994), Saldana (2013), and Yin (2009, 2012). In the first stage, the focus group session and individual interviews were fully transcribed verbatim. The transcript was then sent to participants who could add to, or amend, the responses to ensure they represented their views accurately.

When all transcripts were returned, a coding system was implemented following methods suggested by Saldana (2013). The entire set of data was coded twice, with the most salient themes identified first, using a coding system devised by the researchers. After the first round, all transcripts were analyzed again, adding new codes where necessary or combining very similar themes to avoid repetition.

After the transcript had been coded, an independent colleague checked the coding in a section of the material to obtain a measure of inter-rater reliability. It was found that the colleague’s coding matched the research team coding for more than 85%.

### **Results**

The main themes that emerged from the discussion and interviews are presented below. Where relevant, the verbatim comments from students are reported in full.

#### **Theme 1: How Cross-border Students Make a Decision on Career and Life Planning**

When thinking about career and life planning of cross-border students, the participants mainly talked about their subject selection in the New Senior Secondary curriculum and their future career development. The comments suggest that students’ subject selection was based on a combination of their (i) academic abilities, (ii) interest in the subject, (iii) relevance of a subject for future career prospects, and (iv) quality of instruction and teaching style of the teacher. For instance, one student shared this:

(Student #2): *“I have chosen ICT (multimedia stream) and Chinese History as my elective subjects in NSS. I am interested in the movie industry, computer special effects, and writing webpages. I believe taking these subjects would benefit me if I work in the movie industry in the future.”*

Some students may also choose a subject based on their personal interest in the subject content and the teacher’s teaching style, as seen in this student’s comment:

(Student #3): *“I am studying Geography and Chinese Literature. I am interested in Geography because of its diverse subject content and I love the teacher’s teaching style. Based on my academic performance, subject selection is limited under the current subject selection*

*mechanism in the school. I was forced to take Chinese Literature because I was not competitive enough in the selection system and as a result, my performance in the subject is not good.”*

One student chose elective subjects merely based on future prospects, rather than having a genuine interest in the topic. The student explained:

*(Student #1): “I am now studying Economics, Biology, Chemistry, and Mathematics. Generally speaking, I am not interested in all these subjects. Originally, I would have liked to take Economics and BAFS—but I am careless with calculation so I gave up taking BAFS. Studying Economics, Biology, and Chemistry mean I can have more choices in choosing a major in the college years. I plan to study for a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in the future. It is what Hong Kong needs in the present and future.”*

No matter what a student intends to choose to study, in reality his or her past academic performance often limits subject selection. Without getting a good grade for a particular subject in Secondary 3, it is often not possible to take the subject at senior secondary level because of keen competition with students in the same grade.

## **Theme 2: Factors Affecting Students’ Career Planning and Life Decisions**

Data gained from the focus group discussion revealed some similarities for all three cross-border students. These related to the nature of schooling in China, perceived status of certain future careers and parents’ expectations, siblings past experiences, peer influences, personal preferences, working culture, and other random factors.

### **Nature of Schooling in China**

All interviewees shared the same worries about the quality of schooling in Mainland China. For instance, the education system there

places heavy emphasis on rote memorization rather than investigation and active learning. There is also an emphasis on Chinese and mathematics, and only a limited focus on English language curriculum. Schools in Hong Kong make much greater use of English, and English is one of the two official languages in that special administrative region.

### **Perceived Status of Certain Future Careers and Parents’ Expectations**

All interviewees agreed that their studies under the Hong Kong curriculum and English teaching might provide a better linkage and recognition for finding jobs in Hong Kong after graduation from a secondary school or college. Parental expectations were reported to be one of the major influencing factors among cross-border students. These parents impose various levels of expectation on their child, especially education attainment, future work location, types of occupation and the prospect to earn a good and decent living.

One student participant shared:

*(Student #1): “My parents want me to study in a university, so it would be better if I could study for postgraduate and PhD degree before I enter the work force. They think more qualifications can make my future path easier. Moreover, they want me to find a job in Central District in Hong Kong or the newly-developed economic district of Hau Hoi (後海) in Shenzhen.”*

Another student talked about parental influence in his case:

*(Student #3): “My parents did not specify what I should do in the future but some jobs I mentioned were not acceptable in their eyes. For example, some ordinary job such as working as a salesperson was not okay...”*

### **Peer Influences**

The peers of the cross-border students can be divided into local Hong Kong friends and friends in Mainland China. For Hong Kong

peers, they exchange ideas on subject selection, discuss difficulties in studying the Hong Kong curriculum, and explore future job opportunities. For Mainland China peers, they may provide some information about studies and work in China. At the same time, the Mainland peers are always interested in learning about Hong Kong's schools and the employment environment. One interesting similarity among the three interviewees was that they exchange ideas on career issues with local and mainland peers, although the final decision often depended mainly on their parents' opinions. One interviewee expressed a view that peer influences become weaker as they move up the year levels in the secondary school and become more mature and independent.

### **Personal Preferences**

When thinking about future pathways, students would also consider personal preferences, such as interest in the future job and their own living style, as demonstrated by one student's comment:

(Student #3): *"I will consider my future job by thinking whether it fits my living style or not."*

One interviewee did not have any personal preference though, because she believed that the results from the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) would determine her future development:

(Student #2): *"I would like to find a job I am really interested in in the future. Since I have a sense of belonging to Hong Kong, I would like to stay in Hong Kong for my future development."*

### **Working Culture**

When comparing the working culture between Hong Kong and Mainland China, cross-border students might have some negative impressions of China's working culture. For instance, they are concerned about moral values and the working conditions. They understand that China is experiencing a boost in economy, but they worry about limited job opportunities

in the Chinese market in the future. Most of the students have the wish to stay and work in Hong Kong.

### **Other Factors**

All the cross-border students shared the same concern that their geographical location might affect options available for their working location. They all have a tendency to move closer to their working place to minimize traveling time, no matter if they are working in Hong Kong or China. Some cross-border students receive updated information related to China's recent development, and they showed willingness to work in new industries in China. This shows cross-border students might be flexible when it comes to making a decision in choosing a career in a different setting.

Some cross-border students receive opinions from their relatives in Mainland China. They share the most updated news and trends related to the political climate and employment situations in Hong Kong. This can also influence plans the students make for the future.

### **Cross-border Students' Self-concept and Life Roles**

With reference to Donald Super's framework of life roles and lifelong developmental patterns, each individual tends to see themselves playing certain roles at different stages in their life. The individual interviews invited participants to think about their current allocation of life roles, and then their roles five years from now.

In order to investigate individuals' life roles and self-concept in a systematic way, the *Life Career Rainbow* helps one think about the different roles which are played at different times in one's life. The *Life Career Rainbow* is a useful tool for thinking about how one's life changes depending on various circumstances. Comparing the differences between two periods (current vs. 5 years from now) can add to our understanding of the students' life planning (Figures 1-3 below).

With reference to Figures 1 to 3, the interviewees explained their role as a “child” (i.e., someone who is the responsibility of their parents and caregivers) will not change much in five years’ time, but their reliance on their parents’ opinions and wishes may reduce over time. For the role of a ‘student,’ they think that in 5 years’ time they may study in the final year of an undergraduate program, or they have already entered into the job market but still have the intention to keep learning. As for the role of a ‘leisurite,’ the three interviewees think that 5 years later they would not have much time for leisure because they will have to put more emphasis on their studies and work.

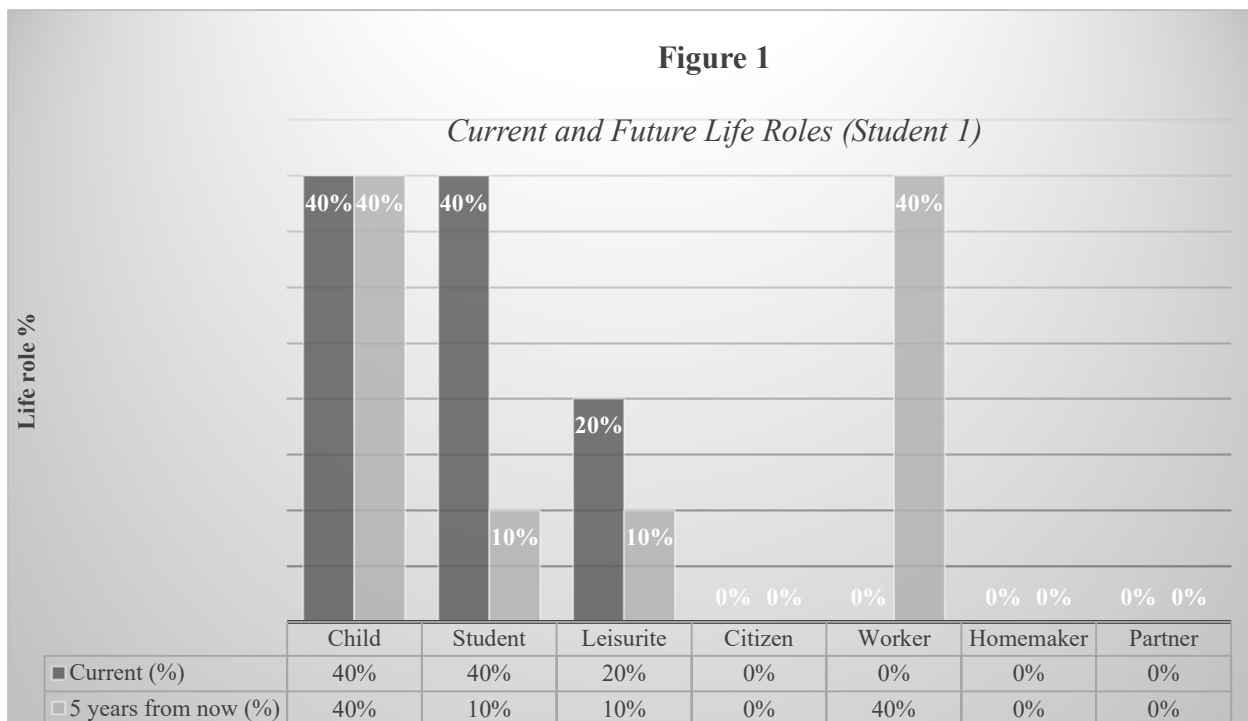
For the role of a ‘citizen,’ the results here show great differences among the three participants. One student reported no commitment to the role of citizen in both periods. She explained that she does not think she needs to take up the role of a citizen since she does not want to get involved in any political issues or take up any civic responsibility. She just wants to get her own jobs done. The other participants have shown an increase in their role as a citizen over time because they believe they will

contribute more to society (e.g., they will become a taxpayer).

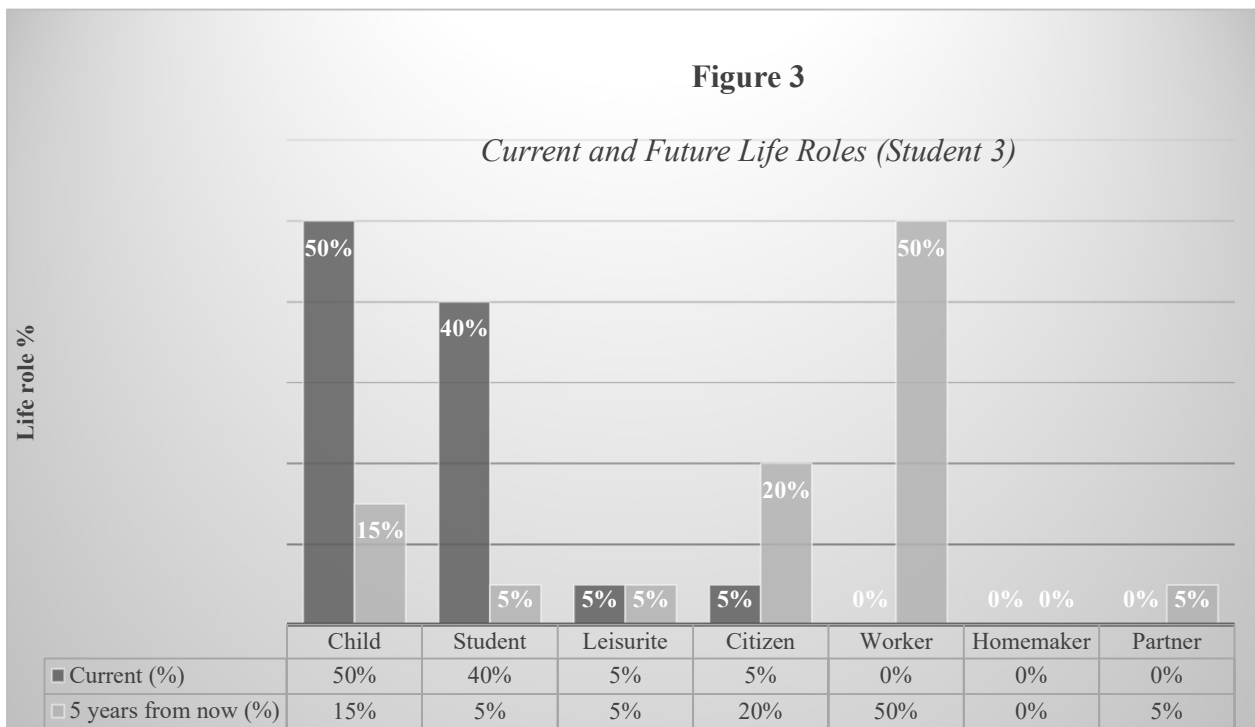
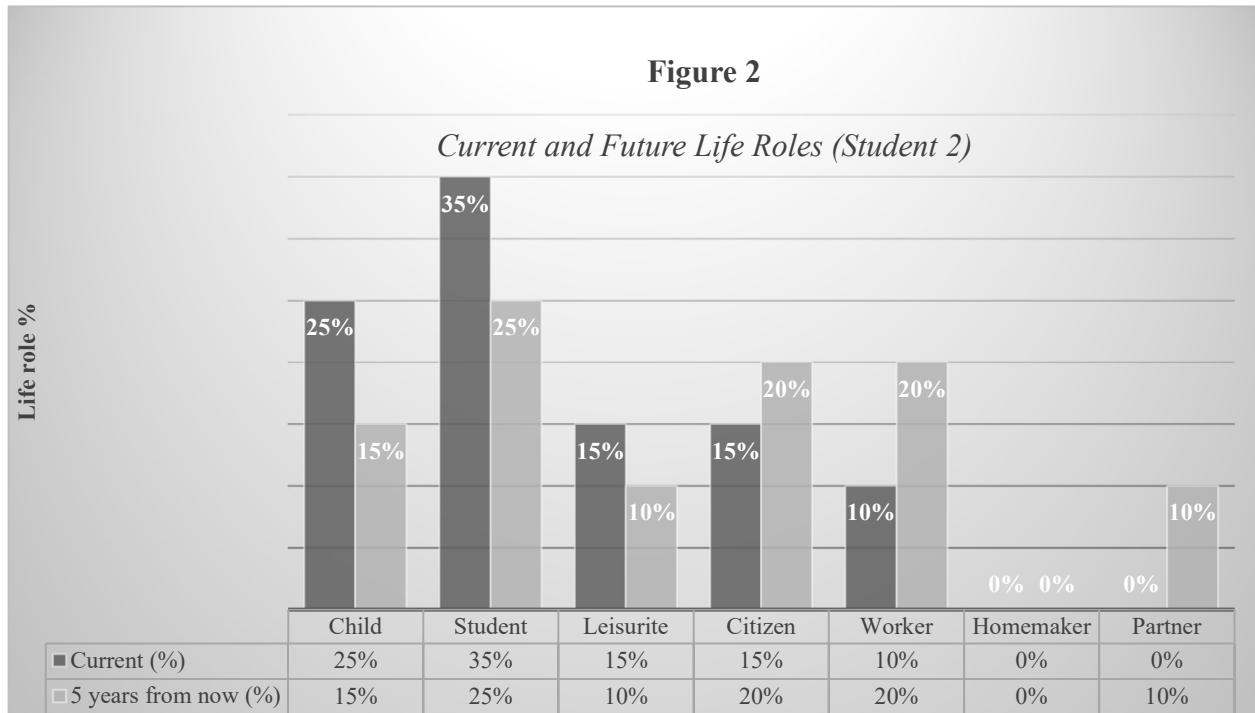
The role as a ‘worker’ has the most significant increase over 5 years. All the participants agreed that they would have some major changes from being a student to becoming a full-time worker. The roles as a ‘homemaker’ and ‘partner’ got the lowest percentage in both periods. Participants explained that even 5 years from now, they do not see themselves as becoming a homemaker although they would probably like to have a partner.

**Self-concept**

In order to understand the self-concept of cross-border students, it was necessary to focus on their self-reported (subjective) self-understanding. The participants believed they have some advantages by being cross-border students. First, they all enjoy the language advantage of being able to speak fluently and communicate easily in both the Putonghua as well as Cantonese dialects. Second, they are proud of their open-minded thinking that results from living in China and studying in Hong Kong. They can understand the norms and values in both Hong Kong and Mainland China. Third,







they think they have greater flexibility in adapting to different environments when compared with the local Hong Kong students.

### Students' Views on Career and Life Planning Support in School

Generally speaking, the student participants agreed that their school has provided various types of career and guidance programs for students. However, some of the information that

the students provided has implications for improving what schools can do in the area of career preparation for students.

In order to design and implement high-quality career and life planning education and services for senior secondary students, participants agreed that 'job shadowing' is useful for future employment exploration. However, at the moment, job practicums of this type provide only limited choices; for instance, kindergarten teaching and voluntary work in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It is suggested that first-hand experiences with more job types can be provided for students.

The school has already organized some interview skills workshops to teach appropriate interview behaviors as well as questioning and answering techniques. It is now suggested that more practical workshops can be provided which cover skills such as CV writing and preparation of personal portfolios. In addition, the school has provided some information on sub-degrees and options for study or work abroad. It would be useful if the school can provide more information on programs available for students so that they can be assisted choosing the most suitable path for their future career development.

\*\*It was also reported that cross-border students are encountering difficulties at home in accessing information from the Internet. Due to firewall blockage, they may have problems using some search engines, such as Google and Facebook, for gathering information in Mainland China. The printed study and career guidebooks are seen as useful for their future planning, but due to the limited number of copies available for Secondary 5 student use, it was suggested that each student should have their own copy to better prepare for their future academic and career development.

### **Limitations**

There are two limitations in this research. First, the sample size was very small and the study should be viewed as small-scale and

exploratory. There may be other important information that did not emerge from discussions with these three students. Second, the findings may have relatively limited generalizability to other populations of students because the sample comes from only one school in Hong Kong. Future research should extend to schools in other districts where cross-border students are enrolled (e.g., Fanling, Sha Tau Kok and Ta Kwu Ling which are districts close to the border in Hong Kong).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The discussion in the focus group and individual interviews with cross-border students confirmed many of the traditional influences on students' career decisions and life planning. For example, decisions are made to fulfill parental expectations, to pursue students' own interests, and to make use of their personal strengths and endowment. A less significant factor that affects career and life planning decisions is peer group influences. The findings are in line with factors that Law and Arthur (2003) reported as affecting students' choice to study nursing in an undergraduate program.

This study has enhanced our understanding of how and why cross-border students make their decisions on career and life planning, based on their parents' wishes, their own interests, academic abilities, geographic location, and future prospects. The findings echo extant research which establishes how parental involvement affects adolescents' career development (Park et al., 2018; Seabi et al., 2010) and how affectional and academic barriers – as in the case of cross-border students who could be disadvantaged by their lack of English proficiency – may influence their academic and career attainment (Hwang et al., 2019).

In terms of self-concept and lifelong development, the cross-border students reported positive development in various aspects of life. They perceive themselves as being able to communicate fluently in Putonghua and

Cantonese, and have increased in English language proficiency. They believe they are liberal in thinking and have a good understanding of various norms and cultures in China and Hong Kong. As a result, they believe they have greater flexibility in adapting to various working situations in the future. This finding coincides with previous research which found that adolescents who are active in career exploration and goal-setting possess stronger vocational identity and higher self-efficacy (Conkel-Ziebell et al., 2018).

In order to cope with the rising population of cross-border students in Hong Kong, conducting more comprehensive research on their career and life planning is highly recommended. We await further research into this special population of students to understand their needs and dreams, their struggles and difficulties, their successes and triumphs, so that more tailored career and life planning guidance programs can be designed and implemented to assist and support this group of students.

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