

Effectiveness of Career and Life Planning in a Hong Kong Secondary School for Girls: Students' Perspectives

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Abstract: This article reports findings from a small-scale exploratory study in Hong Kong investigating female secondary school students' experiences of, beliefs about, and attitudes towards career and life planning activities (CLP) in their school. Qualitative data obtained from focus group interviews with senior students were coded and analyzed to identify themes. Findings were interpreted in terms of students' current opinions of the strengths, weaknesses, and overall value of CLP as delivered in the school. Students' suggestions were obtained for how to strengthen CLP as a means of preparing them for the transition to adulthood and the world of work. Responses indicated that students felt their career-related decision-making and career adaptability could be improved by more frequent face-to-face counseling and the sharing of ideas, information, and concerns. The girls also suggested a need for more frequent opportunities for real career exploration and workplace experiences. Additionally, they felt that CLP would be strengthened by clearer intended outcomes from the learning activities, and better integration of some aspects of CLP into curriculum subjects. There was also a need for better continuity of the program from junior to senior secondary stages. These findings have practical implications for schools implementing CLP. Future studies should repeat the investigation in different types of school settings and could include the perceptions of teachers and parents.

It is claimed that career development is a process that must begin in school and continue across the life span (Athanasou & Perera, 2020; Bimrose, 2017; Cinamon et al., 2019; Nota et al., 2020; Vondracek et al., 2019). The planned provision of career education in secondary schools is seen to be a proactive way to help students comprehend the connection between their education and the reality of joining the workforce.

Studies have found that many factors influence the ultimate impact of career education (Athanasou & Perera, 2020; Cinamon et al., 2019; Falco & Summers, 2017; Hiebert, 2010; Kerner, 2011; Kerner et al., 2012; McMahon & Patton, 2017; McMahon et al.,

2015; Nota et al., 2020; Truong, 2011; Whiston et al., 2011). One very important factor appears to be the role of self-efficacy in students' career decision-making and adaptability (Bimrose, 2017; Furness, 2020; Vondracek et al., 2019; Yuen, 2018). In this context, self-efficacy refers to students' beliefs and confidence in their own ability to plan a career path, set personal goals for a path in life, and adapt to any challenges they may encounter along the way.

Efforts have increased in many countries to identify the most effective ways to implement career and life planning education (CLP) in secondary schools. For example, Holman (2014) visited countries where career education results are considered to be good (the Netherlands,

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Germany, Finland, Canada, Ireland, Hong Kong, and England), and then developed a framework to provide benchmarks that secondary schools could use to improve their CLP system. Key features of the framework are: addressing the unique needs of each individual student, providing personal guidance, establishing a strong linkage between curriculum learning and career preparation, and facilitating workplace experiences (Holman, 2014). This framework has been well received and reviewed by schools. The present study provides additional insights into the framework, and also suggests practical actions to strengthen CLP curricula.

Context

In Hong Kong, parents generally have high expectations for their children's success. Parents expect their children to have good academic performance leading to a good career. Career and life planning concepts and processes are now acknowledged to be important components of secondary school curriculum (Career Guidance Section HKSAR, 2014; Yuen et al., 2018). However, little research has been conducted so far to evaluate students' perspectives on the effectiveness of CLP in their own schools (Yuen et al., 2020). Students are clearly a key source of information when exploring whether the intended outcomes from programs are being achieved (Hui et al., 2020). In the study reported here, an effort was made to determine female secondary school students' opinions about the CLP interventions they had experienced. The school from which the students came was one of the 40 single-sex secondary schools for girls in Hong Kong. There are about 700 students in six forms and 24 classes with four classes in each form. While the majority of students are local Hong Kong students, there are about ten students who are non-Chinese speaking.

Literature Review

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) focuses on (a) interaction between individuals'

internal cognitive processes and external contextual factors (e.g., social support; input in the form of guidance) and (b) how the interaction influences career decisions and ultimate pathways (Burga et al., 2020; Oymak, 2018). The Career Construction Theory (CCT) suggests that students play an active role in determining their own career path by adapting to experiences and forming work-life expectations (Blustein, 2015; Rudolph et al., 2019; Savickas et al., 2009). The SCCT suggests that feelings of competence (self-efficacy) positively influence career choice and goal setting (Bandura, 2012; Blustein, 2015; Burga et al., 2020). It has also been proposed that self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations lead to the development of career interests (Blustein, 2015; Burga et al., 2020). Similarly, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides principles for what motivates people to explore and to reflect on experiences that may cause them to make changes in career goals—resulting eventually in more positive outcomes, adaptability, and resilience (Blustein, 2015; Burga et al., 2020; Johnson, 2013). “Career adaptability” is the term used to describe the willingness to modify one's career path and aspirations in the light of changing conditions and new challenges in the nature of employment (Furness, 2020; Nota et al., 2015; Savickas, 2013; Stoddard et al., 2011; Yuen, 2018). According to the CCT, there are four dimensions to career adaptability: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Maree, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2019; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Yuen, 2018).

In general, past research suggests that schools do exert a positive influence on students' career decision-making (Borghans et al., 2015; Loera et al., 2013; Mihyeon, 2010). Many contextual factors at school may influence students' development of life skills and aspirations for a career path, such as the creation of a nurturing environment, the provisions of a comprehensive school guidance and counseling program, and the extent to which students feel valued as individuals and connected to teachers

and peers (Yuen et al., 2010). It is widely recognized that schools should give greater emphasis to teaching senior secondary students the “skills and strategies required for career planning and preparation” (Yuen et al., 2010, p. 307) with the aim of enhancing their self-development and autonomy. The development of positive attitudes and competencies, and the construction of self-identities and vocational identities are significant to achieve effective career planning and extend the potential for life satisfaction (Hartung & Taber, 2015; Maree, 2020; Porfeli & Lee, 2012; Santilli, et al., 2018).

It is often claimed that females in many countries and societies do not have (or believe they do not have) the same range of options for career paths when they leave school (International Labour Organization, 2018; Nauen, 2017). Gender-sensitive approaches in career guidance in schools may be a form of affirmative action that facilitates female students to realize their potential (Bimrose, 2020). Gender-sensitive programs may be significant to the development of positive attitudes and competencies in female students’ career choices, and may strengthen their life planning. For example, an effective science program for girls can make a difference to how females view possible careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and may encourage more young women to pursue careers in STEM (Falco & Summers, 2017; Tyler-Wood et al., 2012).

With the above background information on factors that influence students’ motivation to choose a career path and to set their own goals for a path in life, the small-scale study reported here was undertaken in a girls’ secondary school in Hong Kong.

Research Questions

- What are the reactions of secondary school female students in the case school to their experience of career and life planning activities?

- What are secondary school female students’ beliefs on, and attitudes to, the implementation of CLP in the secondary school curriculum?
- To what extent does early intervention and development of CLP in the case school curriculum help achieve the intended outcomes of CLP programs?

Career and Life Planning Education in the Case School

The topic of career and life planning (CLP) is one of the major concerns of the school. The implementation and development of CLP adopts a whole-school approach and covers all girls and all year levels. The whole-school approach means that all class teachers work collaboratively with career teachers, guidance teachers, and social workers to implement and reinforce the program. CLP objectives are matched to year levels, and include: increasing self-understanding (in relation to one’s abilities, talents, interests, and aspirations); knowing how to set goals for oneself; cultivating career-related values (sense of responsibility, diligence, motivation, sense of commitment, and perseverance); making meaning of the experiences one undergoes in school; enhancing leadership qualities; acquiring a better understanding of the New Senior Secondary (NSS) subjects and tertiary courses; and being able to make sensible and informed choices accordingly.

The CLP activities arranged in this school are typical of career development interventions elsewhere and include: introduction to the field (e.g., guidance workshops on academic planning, guidance workshops on career development, and workplace visits); work-based interventions (e.g., mentorship programs, service learning, and workplace visits); advising interventions (e.g., academic planning counseling, career counseling, career interests assessment, personal/social counseling, and referral to external training programs); and curriculum-based topics (e.g., career

information infused into subject curriculum)(Hooley et al., 2011; McMahon & Patton, 2017). Regular “alumni sharing sessions” are arranged for current students to learn from girls who have gone before them, and to help them to reflect on their social, academic, and intellectual identities. These sessions may also assist them in aspiring to take up non-traditional career paths—such as becoming engineers, scientists, technicians, or tradespersons. The overall aim of CLP in the case school is to positively influence the educational and career aspirations of female students. The purpose of this study was to investigate how effectively this aim has been achieved.

Method

Participants

A total sample of 14 female students aged from 14 to 18 (four or five Hong Kong students from each of the three forms covering Grade 10 to Grade 12) were interviewed in groups to obtain their views on CLP in their school, and their attitude toward the effectiveness of CLP interventions.

Data Collection

Face-to-face semi-structured focus group interviews were arranged for Grade 10 to Grade 12 Hong Kong students. Three sessions of interviews were organized and conducted by the first named author. All sessions were conducted in Cantonese.

Although the purpose of the interview was to obtain information that would address the research questions, flexibility was applied in terms of the order in which topics were considered. Most questions were open-ended, and, where necessary, follow-up questions were asked to obtain a clearer understanding of interviewees’ thoughts on any issues that emerged during the discussions. The main topics addressed were: how had CLP activities changed students’ perception of career and life planning; what is lacking in the existing CLP curriculum; and what improvements could be

made? The questions asked in the interviews are presented in Appendix A.

The interviewer monitored the interview process to ensure that no interviewee dominated the session. All the interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed later. To establish credibility of the interview process and data collection, all transcripts, analysis data, interpretations, and conclusions were shared with a career teacher.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis in this study involved generating relevant codes for the transcripts from interviews to identify emerging themes and related categories (Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). To establish credibility of the coding process—and to confirm the emergent themes identified by the researcher—all relevant information was cross-checked with a career teacher.

Findings

How Had CLP Activities Changed Students’ Perception of Career and Life Planning?

Interviewees reported that as a result of the activities in CLP they changed their views on the importance and value of career and life planning. What follows is a sample of participants’ responses:

- “I have raised my awareness of the significance of planning ahead for my study and career path.”
- “I am willing to do more to prepare for a better future.”
- “I am more ready to propose and apply different plans.”

These statements support the belief that CLP activities enhance students’ willingness to prepare for the future, set achievable goals, and implement specific plans.

What is Lacking in the Existing CLP Curriculum?

One student suggested that the CLP framework would be more helpful if the aims and intended outcomes of each activity could be

stated explicitly at the start. This would ensure that students know the significance of every activity so that they can engage in it with a sense of purpose. At the moment, the purpose of an activity was not always clear to students, and often there was no clear connection between activities from week to week. A student suggested that activities could be organized with distinctive pre-, during-, and post-task stages. Interviewees reported that there were several seminars where they still remained unsure about what to study or to aim for in the future. These statements suggest that the scope of information provided in some CLP activities may not be adequately targeted.

Most interviewees agreed that there should be clearer bridging for the transition from Grade 9 (junior secondary) to Grade 10 (senior secondary) in the CLP curriculum. A student suggested that everyone would have a clearer sense of purpose if they have an overview of the gradual increase of information and knowledge that would be covered across junior secondary and senior secondary.

Some interviewees suggested that more individual counseling could be given to students, because one-to-one counseling is more effective than talking to groups. They said that they feel more relaxed to ask in-depth questions when in an individual consultation.

Suggestions for Improvement in CLP

The students mentioned that the breadth and depth of CLP should be extended. One student suggested that it would be more effective if there could be follow-up sessions to consolidate their understanding of a particular area related to CLP. Another stated that it would be valuable to have more interactions and sharing of ideas with alumni who now have interesting and uncommon jobs. Grade 11 interviewees showed their favorable attitudes towards such classroom-based sharing. More atypical jobs could be introduced to students to widen their horizon of possible study and career paths.

There was wide agreement that CLP activities should be increased. More focus

should be placed on enhancing students' opportunities to engage in authentic workplaces and to assume responsibility. A student opined that internships or job placement are valuable experiences as they expose students to possible challenges faced in the workplace. Insights gained in this way could help facilitate later career adaptability in terms of control and confidence. Grade 11 interviewees, in particular, suggested that there should be more chances to experience the daily routine of a person in the workplace, or what is involved in being a university student. Senior secondary students agreed that career exploration could be enhanced through a range of activities that represent real experiences of work situations. Such activities could strengthen their CLP-related soft skills required in the workplace.

Finally, the discussions with the groups indicated that the packed schedule and heavy workload of senior students is the main reason why some students are reluctant to engage fully in CLP activities. The students suggested that CLP activities should be incorporated more effectively into the subject-based curriculum. The students added that incorporating CLP into the general curriculum would allow students to regard it more positively and not see it as an additional burden in terms of time and involvement. For example, more could be done in STEM subjects to indicate clearly (with real-life examples) the many roles that females can now take in forging a career in science, technology, or branches of engineering. Alumni already pursuing STEM careers should be presented during lesson time. Additionally, during internships and field placements in STEM work environments efforts could be made to ensure female mentoring.

Discussion

In this era of rapid change in the nature of work—and the often-limited opportunities available to school leavers—there is clearly a need to strengthen career education in senior secondary schools (Lee, 2017). The most

positive finding from this small-scale study was that the girls generally felt positive about the potential benefits of CLP. The study findings illustrated that the more exposure to, and greater involvement in, appropriate and well-structured CLP experiences, the more positive were the attitudes of students towards CLP. However, the workload of senior students acts as a negative influence on the amount of effort some students are willing to give. To help achieve the intended outcomes of CLP programs, it is important to motivate and engage students more by providing *in situ* workplace experiences, and also using alumni to return to school to share their own insights and authentic experiences (Borghans et al., 2015; Loera et al., 2013; Mihyeon, 2010).

This study illustrates that female secondary school students' perception of how CLP can help them with career construction is determined greatly by the effectiveness of the social support from stakeholders, range and varieties of CLP activities, provision of life-career planning opportunities, and extensiveness of CLP experiences. A clearer link between study opportunities and career choices could be achieved by enhancing work experience through activities such as job

shadowing and internship. In Hong Kong, adding these activities to the curriculum is no easy task, because traditional academic subjects still occupy most of the typical timetable.

The main purpose of CLP activities is to develop students' competencies, and for them to construct self-identities and vocational-identities for effective career progress and life satisfaction (Hartung & Taber, 2015; Porfeli & Lee, 2012; Santilli, et al., 2018). The school used for the present study has shown the effectiveness of early intervention with career-related activities and problem solving. Overall, the information provided by the girls suggests that any CLP curriculum in Hong Kong secondary schools should have more emphasis on workplace-related experiences and decision-making. The curriculum should also include more detailed coverage of how current employment situations and career paths require employees to be adaptable. This latter topic is certainly one that has cross-curriculum possibilities.

Figure 1 illustrates the key findings from this study, and at the same time indicates some possible topics worthy of further research.

Figure 1
Key findings from the present study



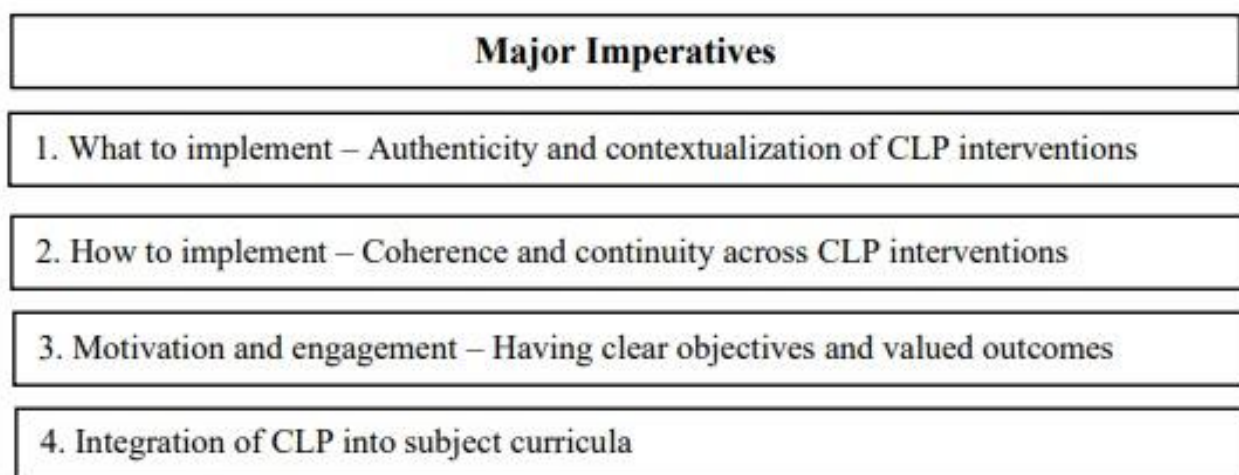
Recommendations

A comprehensive life planning education and career guidance service has been explicitly emphasized by the Hong Kong Education Bureau in order to provide a framework for

planning and implementing career education (Career Guidance Section HKSAR, 2014). Findings from the present study could be used to provide additional guidance as explained in more detail below (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Major imperatives based on findings and recommendations from the present study



Authenticity and Contextualization of CLP Interventions

The interviews yielded information suggesting that what students valued most was engaging in authentic and contextualized activities that can enhance their workplace experience and help them develop skills and attitudes needed to deal with real workplace challenges (e.g., work routines, understanding employers' expectations, and coping with criticism). CLP experiences should strengthen students' effort to achieve personal goals and establishing positive work attitudes. The main aim should be to help students construct their "vocational identity" based on an understanding of their own strengths, weaknesses, interests, and abilities. Authenticity can best be ensured by experiencing real work situations and exploring real career path options. This is also where input from alumni is valuable because

they can share their experiences and give credible advice.

Coherence and Continuity of CLP Interventions

When planning a career and life development program, the content should be considered in term of stages of learning, with deliberate continuity across the stages. Rather than providing a series of unrelated, one-off sessions, there should be clear bridging between topics with one CLP intervention building on and developed from another. Deciding upon the scope and sequence can be thought of as vertical planning, while the linkage across topics is horizontal. These interviews with the Hong Kong students indicate that they can benefit more from a clear and coherent CLP curriculum, with an emphasis on smooth transitions between topics and sets of firsthand experiences.

Motivation and Engagement – Clear Objectives and Valued Outcomes

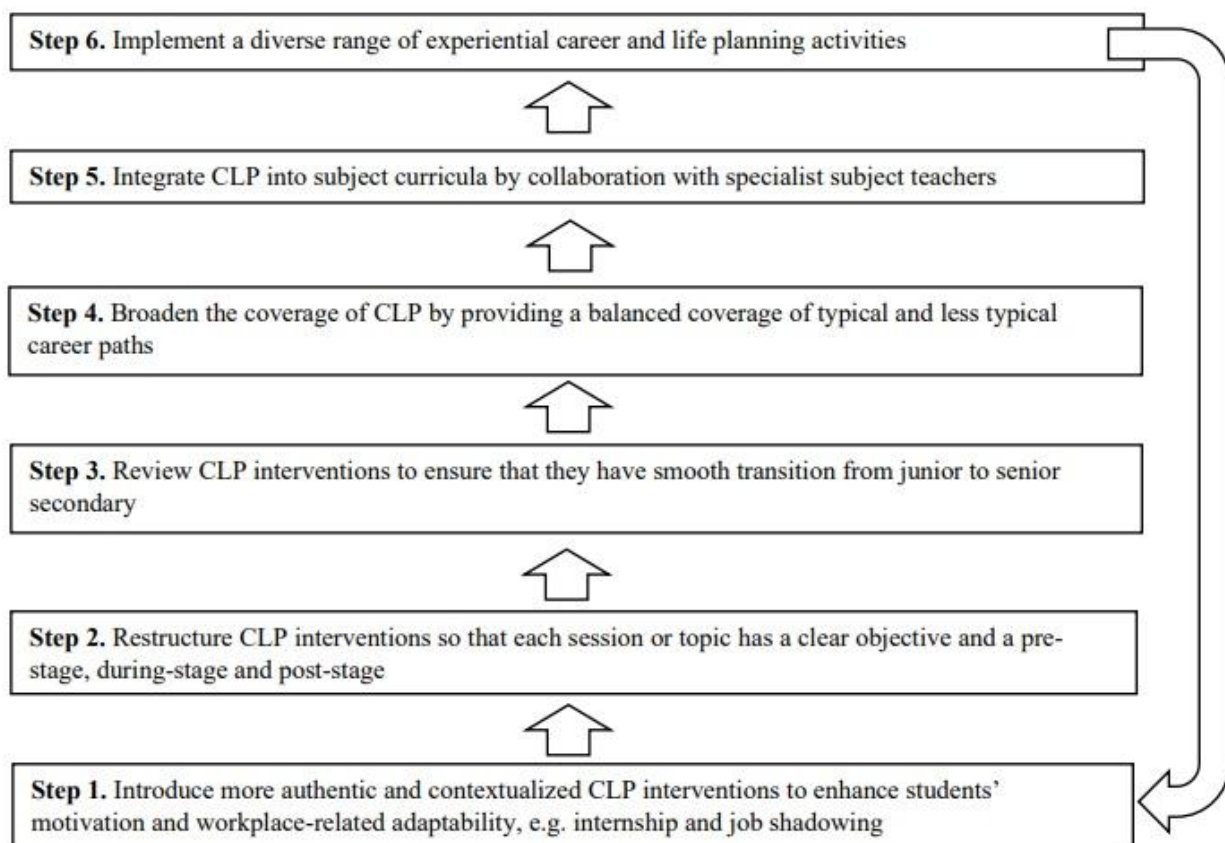
To enhance students' active participation and continuous effort in CLP, the topics and experiences provided must have clear objectives and be considered worthwhile by the students. Students need to appreciate the necessity of joining an activity because of the new insights they will obtain from it.

Integration of CLP Into Subject Curricula

Integration of CLP into subject curricula is not easy, because it requires collaboration among teachers to ensure that it can occur. This integration could occur when, for example, a science teacher provides a clear demonstration of how a particular physics principle is applied

in specific type of work (e.g., welding); or when a mathematics teacher explains the skills that a chartered accountant or an architect need to have. The civics teacher might explore how changes in recent years have made finding work after leaving school more difficult, and how individuals need to be adaptable. Drama lessons could involve role playing different types of job interviews or conflicts at work. Language lessons should teach students to write their own resumés and application letters for various types of employment. Incorporating CLP components into school-based subject curricula can help students acquire hard skills (e.g., using information technology) and soft skills (interpersonal skills, problem-solving, and communication) which are significant for

Figure 3
Checklist for improving and strengthening career and life planning education



enhancing self-efficacy in career decision-making and adaptability. Integration of CLP into subject curricula promotes student engagement and should be regarded as one of the major concerns of a more advanced CLP curriculum.

Strengthening the CLP Curriculum of the Case School

Based on findings from the present study, a checklist is proposed (Figure 3) with six steps towards strengthening career and life planning in the school used for the present study. The list may be of value to other secondary schools that provide CLP.

Significance of the Study and Limitations

The present study contributes data to our existing knowledge-base on the role and implementation of career and life planning activities in secondary schools in Asia. The results reveal that this secondary school in Hong Kong is making a very serious attempt to implement an effective CLP program for its girls, and the participants recognize that it has value. The Education Bureau in Hong Kong has also acknowledged that the case school is enacting the program for CLP as recommended through a whole-school approach (Career Guidance Section HKSAR, 2014). The program is meeting key benchmarks as suggested in the life-career planning and guidance framework proposed by Holman (2014). This framework has key components of enhancing career-related experiences for secondary school students, and includes strategies for addressing the needs of each individual student through personal guidance, providing links between curriculum learning and possible career paths, and providing authentic workplace experiences.

Previous research on CLP has focused mainly on determining the content and goals for such programs, rather than students' perception of the value of the program to them. It is always important to investigate students' reactions to any programs that schools introduce, because

they are the active participants. This study provides insights into students' perspectives on the effectiveness of CLP in their own school, which in turn provides evidence for refining CLP programs in other settings. Students' perceptions are influenced by the range and variety of activities they experience, the life-career planning opportunities they are provided, and the support they receive in career path construction (Hartung & Vess, 2016; Santilli et al., 2018; Savickas, 2011). In this respect, students' perception of their CLP experiences is in line with tenets of the social cognitive career theory, which places emphasis on the interaction between individuals' internal cognitive processes and external contextual factors (Oymak, 2018).

The findings of the study revealed that students believed CLP activities should begin at an earlier stage in schooling, and that there should be clearer statements of expected outcomes at each stage, and better continuity across the stages. This view is in keeping with Lee's (2017) criticism that there is lack of balance and continuity between junior and senior CLP curricula in Hong Kong. The opinions of the girls also pointed towards the need for more effective integration of some CLP information and activities into the subject curricula. This would help to prove the value and importance of certain school subjects for a student's later career.

The obvious limitation of this study was the small sample size and the fact that it was conducted in only one single-sex girls' school in Hong Kong. The findings may not generalize to other schools with different characteristics and CLP programs. The findings will, however, be of value for other secondary schools for girls that are planning to implement CLP; and the specific questions used in the study (Appendix A) could well prove useful for any schools wishing to evaluate their existing CLP program.

Directions for Future Research and Development

Future studies should repeat the investigation in different types of school settings, and could include the perceptions of teachers and parents. In any single school, similar studies are recommended to be conducted each academic year to evaluate students' perceptions concerning authenticity, contextualization, coherence, and coverage of CLP. Such perspectives may vary in accordance with factors such as family background and academic achievements.

It would be valuable to know in more detail how family background (socio-economic status and level of education) impacts students' ability to gain from CLP experiences. It is worth asking, do CLP activities need to be differentiated according to students' academic ability, or if they have special needs or a disability? Do special considerations need to be given to preparing transition to employment for those with disabilities? How might such support be included in CLP?

Figure 1 suggests some areas in which further research could be conducted, and curriculum design could be strengthened. For example, investigating which contextual factors in a school positively influence students' career decisions and life path development; establishing a clear link between study opportunities and specific career choice; and how to ensure that CLP experiences really do match existing employment opportunities. Consideration might also be given to exploring how age-appropriate CLP experiences could be provided at an earlier stage in schooling, to establish students' interest and provide a foundation for later content.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

[translated from Chinese to English for this paper]

NOTE: First put the group at ease by using informal and friendly chat before beginning the questioning.

- Q1. You have all engaged in CLP in this school—what was your *most memorable* CLP experience?
- Q2. Use one adjective to describe your feelings towards CLP in general, and the CLP curriculum of your school in particular.
- Q3. To what extent does the CLP curriculum of your school help facilitate the development of your personal career and life planning?
- Q4. Who and what has the most influence on your career and life planning?
- Q5. What steps are you taking to prepare for your career?
- Q6. Name three valuable things you have learned from career and life planning in this school?
- Q7. Do you think that the whole-school approach of CLP education in your school is effective?
- Q8. Is the implementation of CLP across all age groups effective? Why or why not?
- Q9. To what extent do you think the CLP helps you connect study opportunities with career choices and life planning?
- Q10. To what extent do you think the CLP curriculum of your school helps cultivate your positive career and life values and attitudes?
- Q11. Are you satisfied with the junior and senior secondary CLP curriculum in your school?
- Q12. Do you think CLP curriculum of your school is too traditional? Why or why not?
- Q13. From your perspective, is there a clear CLP framework in your school? Is it well structured?
- Q14. What affects your participation in CLP activities? What activities or topics motivate you most?
- Q15. To what extent do you agree that the higher the form you are in, the wider exposure you have, and the more positive attitudes you develop towards CLP?
- Q16. Do you think that CLP education should start as early as possible in a students' school life? At what age are students ready for this type of learning?
- Q17. Do you feel confident that you can make decisions about your own future career and life based on the experiences gained through CLP?
- Q18. What else would you like to know about or experience in terms of career and life planning? What other types of activities would you like to have? Why?
- Q19. How have the CLP activities changed your perception of career and life planning?
- Q20. How do you use the information and skills obtained from career and life planning activities in a real-life context?
- Q21. How has your experience of career and life planning helped you to understand the notion of 'career adaptability'?
- Q22. Are CLP issues integrated into any of your other school subjects—such as mathematics, science, technology, or social studies?