



Meaning in life and school guidance programs: Adolescents' voices from Hong Kong

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Abstract

This study provides insights into how Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong interpret the concept of “meaning in life.” Data were collected from nine focus groups involving 57 junior secondary school students (age range: 13 to 16 years). It was found that students tended to interpret meaning in life as equivalent to “having a plan for a career” and “setting life goals.” Information collected suggests that a reciprocal relationship exists between possession of meaning in life, connectedness, and life skills development. Students also indicated how guidance activities in school supported development of meaning in life.

Keywords Connectedness · Life skills development · Meaning in life

Résumé

Sens de la vie et programmes d'orientation scolaire: L'expression des adolescents de Hong Kong Cette étude a permis de comprendre comment les adolescents chinois à Hong Kong interprètent le concept de « sens dans la vie ». Les données ont été collectées à travers neuf focus groupes incluant 57 élèves du premier cycle du secondaire (tranche d'âge : 13 à 16 ans). Il en ressort que les élèves ont tendance à interpréter le sens de la vie comme « avoir un plan de carrière » et « se fixer des objectifs de vie ». Les informations recueillies suggèrent qu'il existe une relation réciproque entre la possession de sens dans la vie, la connectivité et le développement des compétences de vie. Les élèves ont également indiqué comment les activités d'orientation à l'école soutenaient le développement du sens de la vie.

Zusammenfassung

Sinn des Lebens und Beratungsprogramme in Schulen: Die Stimme von Jugendlichen aus Hongkong Die Studie zeigt, wie jugendliche Chinesinnen und Chinesen in Hongkong das Konzept "Sinn des Lebens" interpretieren. Die Daten wurden in neun

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Fokusgruppen mit 57 Schülerinnen und Schülern der Sekundarstufe II (Altersgruppe 13 bis 16 Jahre) erhoben. Es zeigte sich, dass die Schülerinnen und Schüler dazu neigen, den "Sinn des Lebens" gleichbedeutend mit "einen Laufbahnplan haben" und "Lebensziele setzen" zu interpretieren. Aus den erhobenen Daten geht hervor, dass eine wechselseitige Beziehung zwischen dem Sinn des Lebens, der Verbundenheit und der Entwicklung von Lebenskompetenzen besteht. Die Schülerinnen und Schüler gaben auch an, wie Beratungsaktivitäten in der Schule die Entwicklung des Sinn des Lebens unterstützten.

Resumen

Las relaciones entre las funciones de voluntariado y la identidad vocacional en adultos emergentes voluntarios El voluntariado puede ser un medio de desarrollo de identidad en la etapa adulta emergente y puede proporcionar un entorno protector para la formación de la identidad vocacional. Los objetivos de nuestro estudio giraban en torno a dos bloques: (1) investigar los estados de identidad vocacional de los estudiantes voluntarios considerados adultos emergentes ($N = 385$, 75.1% mujeres) y (2) analizar cómo estos estados están relacionados con las funciones de voluntariado. Primero, clasificamos a los voluntarios en seis estados de identidad vocacional. En segundo lugar, descubrimos cómo los voluntarios que se encontraban en estado de logro y moratoria obtuvieron las mejores calificaciones en la mayoría de las funciones de voluntariado, dado que están explorando de forma activa sus alternativas vocacionales. Se discuten las implicaciones para la investigación y la práctica.

Introduction

The advent of positive psychology contributed to a greater focus on the concept of “meaning in life,” as it relates to an individual’s motivation, goal setting, and psychological wellbeing. Frankl (1959) pioneered the study of meaning in life as a psychological construct, regarding it as a basic human motivation to seek purpose in one’s own existence. People generally understand that having meaning in one’s life offers direction when they are making important decisions and formulating life goals (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009).

Studies have found that meaning in life is associated with greater ego strength, more positive self-image, increased life satisfaction, and emotional wellbeing (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Taleb, & Finch, 2009; Burrow, O’Dell, Hill, 2010; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). These attributes may have considerable importance when designing and implementing guidance programs and career education to ensure that the content and presentation match the characteristics of the students involved (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012; McLaren, 2011; Yuen, Lee, Kam & Lau, 2015).

The Hong Kong context

According to the World Health Organization, an adolescent is any person who is between 10 and 19 years of age (WHO, 2011). The students in Hong Kong secondary schools therefore fall into this age range with ages from 12 to 18. In Asian regions, the concept of meaning in life as it applies to adolescent students was a relatively neglected topic until recent years. Traditionally, such an attribute was regarded as something that one aspired to as an adult, after having had many life experiences. In Hong Kong and other cities in Asia, research in the area of meaning in life among adolescents is therefore scarce, with only two surveys available (Yuen, Chan, Lau, Gysbers & Shea, 2014; Yuen et al., 2015). Most recently, however, concern has grown because too many teenagers in Hong Kong seem to lack a sense of purpose in life and are displaying signs of poor mental health and deteriorating emotional wellbeing. A survey in 2015 reported that nearly half of the secondary school students in Hong Kong showed signs of depression (Cheung, 2015), and another study found that 27% of secondary school students had reported having had suicidal ideation (Cheung, 2016). Suicide rate among adolescents in Hong Kong has definitely increased over the past few years (Abraham, 2017). Students are always under great pressure to achieve, because traditional family expectations are that they will work very hard in school to secure a good career path, often one that is determined by the parents.

As a result of these high rates of psychological distress, there is an urgent need to find ways of helping all students develop strategies to resist pressure and to find meaning and purpose in their lives. It is in this respect that guidance activities can encourage students to reflect upon their positive attributes and their experiences in life so far that contribute to a better understanding of self and the formulation of purpose.

Student guidance in Hong Kong's secondary schools

In Hong Kong, a prosperous region located in South-East China with a unique mix of cultural influences from East and West, all schools are required to provide guidance for their students at all age levels (Hui, 2002; Sun & Hui, 2007). There is no examination subject in the formal curriculum named “guidance” or “planning your life and finding a purpose,” so programs and activities such as school clubs, leadership training courses, extracurricular activities, self-understanding workshops, class activities, and career programs are delivered outside the formal curriculum. They must play a significant role in providing opportunities for students to reflect upon and learn about life, and to prepare for their future. These extra- and cross-curricular activities are provided in all schools with the aim of assisting students’ personal, social, academic, and career development (EDB, n.d.).

In all developed countries, guidance in schools is provided in various forms to assist students in identifying their strengths and interests, solve problems that may arise in life, and make good plans for the future, including a career path. In some schools, these roles are enacted through a formal guidance program with structured

activities for groups of students plus individual counselling as necessary. Often, the term “guidance” is coupled with the term “counselling” to denote specifically the personalized application of advice to students. Guidance in Hong Kong schools is delivered through what is termed the “whole-school approach” (Education Commission Hong Kong, 1990; Hui, 1998; 2002). Under this approach, it is not left solely to designated “guidance teachers” to deliver support to students—all teaching and ancillary staff in junior and senior schools are expected to fulfill the supportive role in enhancing whole-person development of the students (EDB, n.d.). It is hoped that all schools also create a supportive climate, where all students feel valued, accepted, and connected.

Most schools also endeavor to foster what are termed students’ “life skills” as an across-the-curriculum responsibility and also through extra-curricular activities. These life skills include becoming an autonomous learner, acquiring resilience, developing good self-management and self-determination, setting personal goals, and working hard to achieve them. These life skills have obvious benefits when an individual begins to plan a career path for life beyond school (American School Counseling Association, 2003; Yuen et al., 2003).

School connectedness and life skills development

Concern for developing students’ meaning in life and strengthening their life skills has increased in the past few years (Moran, 2016). One important variable that has gained attention is “school connectedness” and its potentially mutually supportive link with development of students’ meaning in life. The term school connectedness refers to how each student identifies with the school and feels valued as a participating member of that school community (Yuen & Yau, 2015).

The construct of connectedness was first studied by Resnick et al. (1997) when they investigated risk and protective factors related to adolescent health and well-being. Research in the West explored relationships between school connectedness and various psychological or academic and affective outcomes (Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming & Hawkins, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Libbey, 2004; Niehaus, Rudasill & Rakes, 2012; Saeri et al., 2017). Studies by Whitlock (2006) revealed that school connectedness to apparently be determined mainly by four independent variables—students having meaningful roles, students feeling safe, students having creative engagement, and successful academic outcomes. Influenced by Whitlock’s work, Yuen et al. (2012) explored contextual factors that appear to affect school connectedness for senior students in Hong Kong. Their findings complement those of Whitlock by adding the factors of teacher care, peer relations, schoolwide relationships, disciplinary policies and practices, and opportunities for talent development to enhance school connectedness.

Yuen et al. also investigated any relationship between students’ connectedness and their life skills development. From 2006 to 2012, the team examined the self-efficacy of primary and secondary school students in applying life skills and relationships between life skills development and their individual characteristics. This was assessed alongside measures of their connectedness with school and family. It

was found that students' self-efficacy in life skills was consistently linked to positive relationships at school and within the family. Findings from these studies have important implications for school guidance, because promoting students' connectedness has the potential to strengthen life skills, which are then directly related to their later career path development (Yuen et al., 2014, 2015).

The apparent importance of school connectedness for a student's feeling of self-worth and mental wellbeing has implications for guidance activities that could enhance feelings of connectedness. These activities might, for example, increase opportunities for students to interact socially, display their talents in ways that garner respect and admiration from peers and teachers, and provide chances for students to take roles of leadership, responsibility, and decision-making.

Further research was deemed necessary to comprehend how students themselves view and understand meaning in their lives. If more information can be discovered about the association among variables of meaning in life, life skills, and connectedness to school and others, this could provide insights into how guidance programs and other interventions can contribute to reduction of stress and promotion of meaning in life for young adolescents. For the purpose of the study reported herein, students from grade 8 to grade 10 (age range 13–16 years) were considered most suitable participants in terms of their maturity, experience to date, and their ability to reflect on that experience and communicate their ideas.

Research questions

The focus group study was designed to collect information directly from students in answer to the following main questions (Interview Schedule in Appendix 1): (i) What do students understand to be the meaning of the term "meaning in life" and how does it affect them? (ii) Do students perceive meaning in life to be related in any way to their life skills development and their connectedness to school and family? (iii) What are students' views on the role played by the guidance activities in their school?

Method

Participants

The study involved 57 Hong Kong junior secondary students (boys = 25, girls = 32; grade 8 students = 14, grade 9 students = 24, grade 10 students = 19) who volunteered to take part. Grade 8 to 10 students (age range 13–16 years) were selected because these students have probably arrived at the formal operational cognitive stage, according to Piaget's stage development model (Piaget, 1970). They are therefore mature enough to reflect upon and communicate their thoughts and are also very familiar with all aspects of their school and its guidance activities. They came from six typical secondary schools located in four of the five geographical constituencies of Hong Kong. The students were organized into nine focus groups. Informed

assent from students and consent from their schools and their parents/guardians was obtained before conducting the process of data collection. Appendix 2 provides detailed information on participants.

The schools ranged from those with a reputation for high academic achievement to schools with lower academic achievement profiles. The sample from each school was selected from the volunteers by the teacher in charge, based on criteria that students must be studying at grade 8 to 10, balance of males to females, and six to eight students in each group. Each group should contain two students of above-average attainment, two of average attainment, and two regarded as below average in academic performance. This group size and composition is regarded as appropriate to allow for a range of viewpoints to be expressed (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagnb, 1996).

Focus groups

Focus group interviews are regarded in research as a useful method for soliciting participants' views on particular issues (Palmer, Larkin, de Visser & Fadden, 2010). The discussions were conducted in Cantonese, the local dialect used in Hong Kong, and took place in the students' own schools. A research assistant audio recorded the sessions on an MP3 device and later transcribed them verbatim in Chinese.

In these group situations, adolescents can most easily and comfortably share their views with their peers; more so than in an intensive questioning session with an unknown adult in a one-to-one setting. In a group situation, they can express themselves more clearly and exchange ideas with their peers. This ultimately results in more useful information being collected. The only disadvantage in a focus group discussion is that a student's comments may be overly influenced by remarks of others in the group and the wish to conform to group opinion. To minimize the potential for this situation to arise, the moderators were responsible for regulating the interview sessions by praising every *new* contribution to the discussion, controlling individuals who were too dominant, and ensuring that individuals who were shy were able to contribute.

Two experienced guidance practitioners acted in turn as interviewers and moderators for the group discussions, following procedures outlined by Morgan (1997). An interview guide was prepared to ensure consistence in every focus group session (Appendix 2), and all interviewers were very familiar with details in the guide. Prior discussion among interviewers had helped clarify how questions should be asked and how additional questioning should be used to probe for more information. The interviewers were responsible for explaining the purpose of the discussion before they began, clarifying any terms or concepts that might be unfamiliar to the students, and answering any general questions the participants might have.

Before beginning the discussion, the interviewer put the group at ease by introducing some informal topics that are easy to talk about (e.g., normal school day experiences or favorite subjects in the curriculum). The discussion then became more focused on obtaining information related directly to the research questions set out above. Once the formal part of the session began, participants were asked

to explain their understanding of the term “meaning in life” and whether this concept had any relevance for them personally. Discussion then turned to whether their understanding of meaning in life is in any way related to their connectedness to school and family and to their life skills development. Finally, the students were asked about the guidance activities in their school and whether these had assisted their development of life skills, meaning in life, and connectedness.

Analysis

The interpretive analysis used in this qualitative study satisfies the underpinnings of an epistemological perspective—in that it provides the framework for collecting and interpreting real data from participants to reveal what they think within a particular context (Merriam, 2009; Richardson, 1997). Data collected have increased a knowledge base in this domain that may enhance our understanding of how adolescents conceptualize “meaning in life.” The dataset consisted entirely of transcripts of the focus group discussions. A thematic strategy based on the Miles and Huberman model was applied, and data were analyzed following the steps involved in data reduction, data display, interpretation, and drawing of conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). One team member read the transcripts several times and noted any preliminary categories that appeared to emerge from the data. These categories (themes) were then shared with the research team to enhance inter-rater reliability, and the team commenced the coding process. Appendix 3 explains the coding system.

During first reading of the transcripts, relevant statements made by students were identified and categorized according to the coding labels. Where necessary, additional labels were created or existing labels modified. Finally, after a third reading of transcripts, some important themes were combined or collapsed and then represented by an expanded code (for example, “GA + LS/ML1” stood for “Some guidance activities may lead to promotion of both life skills development and meaning in life.”). In other words, hierarchical relationships among codes were created during the final process of coding.

When the coding process was completed, some minor adjustments were made in the categories and subcategories after discussion within the research team. Inter-rater reliability for this coding and analysis procedure was determined using a calculation based on $(\text{number of agreements}) / (\text{total number of agreements} + \text{disagreements})$, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994). Comparing two independent interviewers’ categories and subcategories in all transcripts, inter-rater reliability was found to be a very acceptable 0.96.

Results

Meaning in life, life skills development, connectedness, and school guidance were the key thematic concerns identified herein. They are supported, where relevant, by direct quotes from students.

Students' interpretation of meaning in life

In all focus groups, students were invited to explain their interpretation of the term meaning in life. Their responses indicated that the majority of students regarded meaning in life as the same as having a purpose or goal in life. They considered this theme refers to following their interests and aiming for a future career. In response to questions regarding meaning in life, 39 out of 57 interpreted this to mean the same as “purpose.” They saw it as meaning “having a goal in life, something to aim for.” During the discussions, they easily used “purpose of life” and “meaning in life” interchangeably and saw no difference. Four subthemes that emerged from the analysis are discussed below. These subthemes were derived from the main issue of meaning in life.

Purpose linked to interests and career development

It was found that some students tend to interpret the concept of meaning (or purpose) in life in terms of its importance for their future career or immediate goals and for developing their personal interests. A male student in grade 8 shared his view:

I think meaning in life refers to the interests that you are pursuing, for example, your dreams or ambitions, what you want to be, and which career you want to take up.

This view was supported by a female student in grade 10:

Meaning in life refers to doing what you are interested in and having a life goal.

Meaning in life may change over time

In this second subtheme, participants indicated that they felt meaning in life is not a static state but is open to change across the life span. A male student in grade 9 remarked:

I think purpose in life is to pursue your dreams continuously. For example, some primary students aimed for being admitted in a band-one secondary school [high academic reputation]. Once that aim has been achieved there are other dreams to pursue later. The process is ever changing.

A female student in grade 9 shared a common experience:

While I am growing up, I have changed my life goals many times. The frequency was so high that it surprised me.

And a female student in grade 9 expressed a view that:

After being admitted to a university, the next meaning in life is getting a better job in society.

Another male student in grade 8 held a very positive attitude to this change. He said:

It is not necessary to have a fixed goal. It may change year after year due to different reasons. It would be fine if I feel comfortable and enjoy the process of goal setting.

Possible challenges along the way

This is the third subtheme. Setting a goal or following an interest in life does not guarantee success. Although a student may have established a goal in life, this does not mean that the way forward will necessarily be smooth. The path often presents challenges along the way that an individual must address; for example, students understand that, even though studying hard at this moment may not be through intrinsic interest, they tolerate it until they can achieve their goal—usually obtaining a place at university. A female student in grade 9 remarked:

We may take learning mathematics as an example. It is meaningless to me ... but it is useful. If the mathematics result is not good, we may not be admitted by any universities. Therefore, my purpose in studying mathematics is as a tool.

Some students in the interviews even had negative experiences from goal setting. One female interviewee in grade 8 remarked:

My experience was different. Although my goal was to change my revision strategy, the result did not improve. It even dropped.

Another female student in grade 8 commented:

Having a clear goal does not guarantee success. I aimed for a pass before every Chinese History test, but I failed every time or just got a bare pass.

And a male student in grade 9 agreed, saying: “I think setting a goal is useless to me.” At the stage of secondary school education, an adolescent’s search for meaning and purpose in life might also cause some conflicts between his or her personal interests and family expectations. A female student in grade 10 frankly shared a view:

In terms of meaning in life, there are conflicts with my parents occasionally. They think that I am still young and not mature enough for setting goals and having a purpose in life.

Conflict with family expectations

It seems that the traditional Chinese culture in Hong Kong influences some students to give up their own interests and goals because they put their family’s expectations as first priority. One female student in grade 10 clearly illustrated this conflict, saying:

My life is owned by me. However, if I do not perform well in my studies, I may not find a good job. If I am not able to survive independently, how can I take care of my parents who brought me up? It is contradictory.

Another female student in grade 10 reported that:

Under the influence of my Mom, I chose biology as my elective. This is a subject that I am not interested in.

Association between meaning in life and life skills

Some students recognized that life skills are essential to achieve their goals. A male student in grade 8 explained:

Life skills are fundamental for your dream development. They are also career skills. Without these skills your dream will never be achieved. Therefore, basic [life] skills are essential [...] As I can remember, when I was young, I was forced to learn swimming. Later, during the process of learning, I discovered that swimming was very interesting. It became my interest. After getting the medals in a competition, I am proud of myself.

One female student in grade 8 summed this up by saying:

If you cannot take care of yourself [i.e., apply life skills], how can you pursue your dream?

In some responses, students opined that meaning in life comes before, rather than after, skills development. One female student in grade 8 said:

To me, meaning in life goes first. For example, once you have a goal, you will give effort to enhance the skills needed for achieving the goal.

Another female student in grade 10 added:

I improved in the school examination because of the goals that I have set.

Connectedness promoting meaning in life

In the discussions, students clearly expressed their view that connectedness with peers, family members, and teachers can enrich and sustain their meaning in life. They also mentioned that connectedness can support their life skills development. Hence, there are four subthemes. One female student in grade 10 commented:

When people have strong connectedness, they can find their life goal, understand their character, and be inspired through the interaction with their friends and family members. They can easily own their dreams and acquire the onward moving force.

Connectedness to peers

One student (female; grade 9) admitted: “My friends inspired me to think about the meaning in life;” while another female in the same grade took a positive and active role among her peers, stating: “I will accompany my friends to help them achieve their goals.”

The influence of peers on interest development can be illustrated by some students’ personal experiences; for example, one grade 10 female student said:

My friends like playing badminton, and they made me interested in this sport. And because of my friends, I also learned to play the guitar. Once I know how to play it, I love playing it. The interest drives me to learn more.

Connectedness to family members

There are two possible forces operating within a family. Some parents encourage their children to be “dream chasers;” and they may even act as role models. They help in setting goals and then give advice to their offspring on how best to work towards them. This supportive connectedness between parent and child could promote a stronger sense of meaning in life. Some students did describe how their family members have supported their development of their meaning in life. One male student in grade 9 said:

My grandfather loves sharing and teaching moral stories. For example, he thinks money is not truly useful. His teaching has changed my life goal.

And a female student in grade 8 added:

My mother is working in the field of medical care. She always tells me that this career is good. I am then convinced by her and my interest in this field has developed.

Students appeared to regard peers and family members as having the same importance to them. A female student in grade 8 shared a belief that:

When you are growing up, you know more friends and get closer to them but you also remain close to your family members. In particular, when you get lost in your life you may get support and direction from the people around you. If you think their advice is good, you may follow their directions.

Friends and family members sometimes play the role of teacher. A female student in grade 10 commented:

Friends and family members can teach me how to see a matter or an issue. I therefore gain some meaning in my life.

In addition, connectedness can help students to be confident enough to try new things and confront difficulties. According to a female student in grade 10:

When you have a good relationship with your friends and family members (strong connectedness) you will feel supported. You are more likely to try new things without any misgiving. You may do whatever you like. Otherwise, you may easily find difficulties while pursuing your dreams.

However, it is important to note that, in traditional Chinese families (there are many of these in Hong Kong), there could be a different force operating, with the parents enforcing their own will on the goals their children should set. This practice can often create conflict between parents and adolescents and can be detrimental to connectedness and negatively affect a student's meaning in life.

Connectedness to teachers

Some students expressed the view that connectedness with teachers can help them reflect upon meaning in life and also encourages them to cope with difficulties. A female student in grade 9 expressed how a teacher influenced her life goal:

When I was young, I loved astronomy. After being a secondary school student, I have got along with a Physics teacher. I like him very much. Because of his influence, I am now quite sure that studying astronomy is my life goal.

A male student in grade 9 shared his belief that:

Teachers influence me a lot. They like to teach us, and talk to us about life goals ... and this has encouraged me to work hard.

And another female student in grade 9 added:

They [teachers] encourage me to follow my wishes, so I therefore choose electives according to my goal.

A school's religious background can also impact on students' meaning in life, as illustrated by a male student in grade 8:

This is a protestant Christian school. As I was brought up in a Christian school, and have listened to the teaching, my meaning in life is therefore related to Christianity.

Connectedness supporting life skills development

Connectedness was regarded by the students as one of the factors that support their life skills development. It provides them with a psychological feeling of being valued as individuals, so they are confident and motivated to learn new skills, face challenges, and solve problems. Life skills contain the competency as well as the positive attitude to cope with difficulties. A grade 9 female student remarked:

When you work and play with other schoolmates, you can take care of each other. You may ask them, if you do not know something. This connectedness with peers had a big impact on me. In particular, the peers in my secondary

school were assertive and positive in their thinking, and this influenced me so that I can face difficulties with optimism.

Another male student in grade 9 shared the same view:

Yes, this connectedness is helpful to me. It encourages me to share with my teammates when encountering difficulties.

It also appears that students can have the motivation to learn life skills because of the influence of their friends.

I learned the computer skills in Chinese character input because I want to make connection with my friends.

Connectedness also affords effective support to students' learning. As one student (male; grade 8) observed:

If I have a strong connectedness with a teacher, I will spontaneously pay more attention to his or her class, and apply more concentration on revision. This results in better performance and higher confidence. Schoolmates can also help each other to solve some problems in study.

Guidance activities enhancing connectedness

Communication skills are life skills that can facilitate connectedness among people. Students clearly revealed that both formal guidance activities and informal interactions with teachers, schoolmates, and professional adults can make contributions to enhancing their connectedness to school and developing communication skills.

We learned all kinds of life skills through a wide range of activities. The skills can be applied in daily life ...for example, wild life survival skills and communication skills (female; grade 9).

Formal guidance activities

It is evident that guidance activities organized in schools can be regarded as potentially valuable extensions to the broader school curriculum for enhancing connectedness, promoting meaning in life, and developing life skills. These guidance activities need not be confined to the formal student guidance program/activities delivered by teachers in the guidance team (EDB, n.d.). The whole-school approach involves other teachers in areas such as extracurricular pursuits and in-class sessions designed to assist students' whole-person development. Under the policy of whole-school approach, these activities mainly involve daily contact between teachers and students with implicit purposes of guidance. An example is career planning sessions and career talks; but extracurricular activities were also mentioned by students, including music concerts, class teacher sessions, orientation days for newcomers, moral and civic education sessions, workplace internship programs, thematic learning week, and even the school picnic. Most of these activities facilitate students' informal interaction with teachers and provide opportunities for giving emotional

support to individual students, thus strengthening their feelings of self-worth and connectedness. In situations where different parties can work and play together, students can feel there is real connectedness with school mates. Comments from students included:

My school has inter-class competitions, like jumping rope. We have basketball games in Years S2, S3 and S6. All these can build friendship among school-mates (male; grade 9).

Being involved in the activities in organizing the student union helped me improve my communication skills. These skills can be applied in future daily life and career (male; grade 9).

Teachers, parents and students are involved in some school activities, for example joining together run sports day and basketball competition. These are good opportunities to enhance relationships (female; grade 8).

Informal guidance activities

In addition to these formal and scheduled activities, it is also evident that informal opportunities for teachers to share ideas and chat with individual students help to foster students' connectedness and give meaning in life. Students wanted to have more individual talks with teachers:

Teachers often sit together and chat with us. They would share their experiences and we would share our difficulties so that we can solve the problems together. (female; grade 8).

My class teacher intentionally invited me to talk individually. I will share my future directions in study and career (male; grade 8).

Teachers chat with every student during lunch time and they are sincere. I feel our relationship is very close (female; grade 8).

Teachers will talk to us about goal setting and life direction. It helps students know more about themselves (female; grade 8).

Our teachers sometimes talk with some designated students individually in the past three years. I know that teachers often need to counsel students with special needs, but I hope they could talk like that with every student (male; grade 8).

Useful activities proposed by students

In the discussions, the students were invited to suggest additional activities that could help promote connectedness, meaning in life, and life skills. The activities that the students proposed included class-based activities, forum discussion on school life, camping activities, virtual trade business, and service learning. A female student in grade 9 expressed her appreciation of additional contact with her teachers. She suggested that teachers could pay home visits to establish a link with her family, and she hoped that teachers could come to her home on liaison visits. The students

emphasized that any effective activity must be authentic and interactive. A female student in grade 10 stated that:

It would be useful if professionals in a particular field could share their expertise to provide us with authentic experiences.

It is sometimes argued that competition among students can have negative effects (Eccles et al., 1993; Ogihara & Uchida, 2014), but some students proposed having more competitions to build team spirit and connectedness within a class or at whole-school level; For example, more interclass or interlevel competitions were recommended. A male student in grade 8 believed that competitions can give students a purpose in life and encourage them to form relationships and develop team-working skills.

Discussion

Adolescence is a formative and receptive time when meaning in life begins to take shape (Hill, Burrow, O'Dell, & Thornton, 2010; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Moran, 2009). This study in Hong Kong provides a clearer picture of how adolescents in that territory interpret the concept of “meaning in life” and how they recognize that setting goals in life is a continuous and sometimes challenging process. According to Thibault (2003) and Mariano (2014), meaning and purpose in life are always contextualized by a person's immediate environment, and a key finding in this study is that meaning in life for Hong Kong adolescents is mainly related to their future career plans. This may possibly be due to the fact that they have grown up in an environment that is largely influenced by economic factors and the employment market. Consumerism, materialism, and the demands of the job market in Hong Kong tend to make career choice a preoccupation during the senior secondary school years. Adolescents are well aware of the realities they will face growing up in this fast-paced and competitive culture. The discussions uncovered some of the challenges that adolescents may face when they implement their life plan. They seem to realize that sometimes their career choice must be determined by factors outside their direct control (Raza, Akhtar, Husnain & Akhtar, 2015), and this shows that teenagers in Hong Kong are realistic and practical.

Students' interpretation of meaning in life and their deeper discussion of the various topics in the group sessions revealed a mutual association between meaning in life and life skills development. It was also clear from students' comments that connectedness to school can support promotion of both meaning in life and development of life skills. In some situations, meaning in life leads to life skills such as resilience, autonomy, and goal setting; and in others, life skills development stimulates and strengthens meaning in life. It seems that development of life skills can trigger new interests and give new purposes that contribute to meaning in life. It was also found that adolescents' connectedness with significant others in family and school helps to develop their feelings of self-worth, add meaning in their lives, and give them a sense of purpose.

Another finding in the present study is that guidance activities in schools are regarded by students as conducive to development of meaning and purpose in life as well as encouraging various life skills. The development of students' life skills, cultivation of positive values in life, and promotion of a caring culture on campus are objectives of all school guidance programs and activities (EDB, n.d.). Sometimes, extracurricular activities serve to enhance students' whole-person development by including guidance and counselling components. Guidance-related activities organized at school and classroom levels can contribute to students' sense of connectedness to teachers and school (Sun & Hui, 2007), and they should remain an important component of the whole-school approach to guidance. Discussion with these students suggests that, alongside these objectives, guidance programs and activities should help students search for and formulate meaning in their lives.

Before 2015, career guidance programs relied heavily on "career talks" delivered to large groups during students' transitional periods (e.g., moving from junior to senior secondary). However, since 2015, schools receive the career life planning recurrent grant from the government to provide more comprehensive and personalized support in career guidance services and life planning for students. Since then, more guidance programs and activities, including career and life planning concerns, have been introduced; For example, supporting students to produce career portfolios and helping them devise personal strategies for life planning for their career. In addition, more attention has been given to conducting assessment of career interests of students, providing them with follow-up guidance and liaising with communities and agencies to provide career-related experiences (including job-shadowing and internships) (Ho and Leung, 2016).

The students in this study identified connectedness as an important supportive influence in their lives. The students' comments indicate that they greatly value close contact with their teachers and that they derive benefit from it in affirming their own values and purposes in life. Bundick and Tirri (2014) have acknowledged that teachers do make a positive difference to students' development of purpose in life and establishing positive teacher-student relationships. When teachers give support at a personal level to students' life goals, this can contribute to their happiness, wellbeing, and realization of meaning in life. However, at the moment, it must be admitted that, in Hong Kong, teachers are often loaded with heavy clerical or administrative duties that tend to reduce their opportunity to interact with students at this personal guidance level.

Limitations

Two limitations in this study need to be acknowledged. The responses obtained from participants in focus groups may not be identical to those that would have been obtained in one-to-one interviews. In a group situation, a student may be influenced by comments he or she hears from others during discussion and may wish to be seen as conforming to group opinions. As indicated above, the persons conducting the group discussions were well aware of this possibility and took appropriate steps to minimize the effects.

It is also important to acknowledge that persons carrying out the coding and analysis of discussion transcripts might have inadvertently allowed personal biases to influence their interpretations. This possibility was minimized by having all coding checked by other research team members to reach consensus.

Implications for practice

Implications for practice cover different levels in a school context. At an individual level, what teachers need to do more proactively is to get in touch more closely with their students by building a strong connection through casual and informal interactions and chats during activity times. It is clear that students welcome this opportunity and benefit from it. It is unfortunate that the education reforms implemented in Hong Kong since the year 2000, with the additional administrative responsibilities now placed on all teachers, have reduced the time available for teachers and students to chat freely about life, its purpose, and its challenges (Lee, 2017; Tsang & Kwong, 2017). The main obstacles include heavy workload, insufficient training in guidance, and conflicts due to the traditional societal expectation of emphasis on academic learning rather than on students' social and emotional development (Lam & Hui, 2010). In this regard, school social workers can help teachers and parents engage in more effective communication about students' aspirations and thus facilitate better home–school cooperation. More needs to be done in Hong Kong's schools to build this type of cooperation. It must be acknowledged that parents are essential influences in helping their son or daughter develop as a well-rounded person and to achieve and maintain a meaning in life.

At a school level, the value of guidance activities must be recognized as important in addressing students' whole-person development. These activities should combine student guidance and career guidance. Although teachers now view guidance as an integral part of their role in schools, the heavy workloads mentioned above negatively affect their actual day-to-day involvement in school guidance. More emphasis should be placed on strengthening guidance activities, both formal and informal, to facilitate frequent and closer interaction between teachers and students that can promote students' wellbeing, life skills, connectivity, and purpose in life. It is hoped that, in future years, life planning education and career guidance can become better integrated into the general curriculum rather than exist as a separate “add-on” service. Additional resources should also be allocated to nongovernmental and professional organizations to encourage them to provide more workplace experiences to students as part of a school's support for career awareness (Ho & Leung, 2016).

Recommendations for future research

“Meaning in life” is a complex construct in psychology, so it is difficult to take all influences into account when investigating the topic. To some extent, age, ability, and gender were considered in structuring the groups studied herein, but in the future, any *quantitative* research on meaning in life should control related issues such as the factor of socioeconomic status, because it can affect the experiences an

individual has had and therefore determine the responses they give in group discussions. A thorough investigation of the development of meaning in life in adolescents should also use longitudinal studies to collect and compare data over time. Future studies (e.g., teacher interviews, classroom observations) might focus more deeply on determining the content of school guidance programs that appear to have the most positive influences on students' development of meaning in life, life skills, and connectedness. This would have immediate influence on the design and implementation of guidance activities for adolescents. Research with older subjects who are already in employment could usefully investigate how meaning in life may influence (and be influenced by) "objective career success" and "subjective career success."

Conclusions

Implementing meaningful and well-designed guidance activities in schools can help promote students' meaning in life and can foster a strong sense of connectedness to important people in a student's life. Family influences and connectedness within families have been found to be important sources of inspiration for youngsters in developing their meaning in life and in planning pathways to actualize their dreams (McKnigh & Kashdan, 2009; Yuen et al., 2015). In this connection, career guidance activities should also extend to parents' involvement in the process (Ho & Leung, 2016). Parents are often willing and eager to support what schools are attempting to do, but they need to be kept fully informed by much closer liaison between school and home.

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Appendix 1

Discussion guide

Theme: Meaning in life and school guidance programs

1. Purpose of focus group

To explore adolescents' perception of meaning in life in connection with school connectedness, life skills development and school guidance activities.

2. Ground rules of discussion

- A facilitator will introduce the broad questions.
- The participants will discuss the questions and issues, share their views, perspectives, and experiences.
- Participation is voluntary.

- Participants can choose to withdraw the discussion at any time without negative consequences.
- The facilitator will not record the information of the participants who withdraw from the discussion.
- The discussion will take about one hour.
- The discussion will be audio-recorded. Taking notes of transcription is only for research purpose.
- Confidentiality of comments/responses is guaranteed. Participants will be quoted as “Student A, B...” in future report.
- Individual opinion is respected. There is no right or wrong answer.
- Encourage only one participant to speak at a time.
- Every participant can raise questions about the ground rules. All are requested to respond “I agree” to indicate that they understand and accept the rules.
- For those who do not want to be audio-recorded, our researcher will take notes instead and their conversations will not be audio-recorded.

Focus group discussion topics

[These topics were discussed in Cantonese, not English. Additional probes were used by the interviewer when necessary to obtain extra information.]

1. Tell me what comes into your mind when I ask you about “meaning in life”.
2. Do you think you have meaning in your life, or are you still searching for it?
3. Are “meaning” and “purpose” actually the same thing?
4. What guidance activities at school do you find most useful for developing and strengthening your meaning and purpose in life?
5. What do teachers do that has a positive influence on your development of meaning in your life?
6. What more could teachers do?
7. What activities do you suggest the school should introduce into the curriculum or extracurricular activities that would help strengthen your meaning and purpose in life?
8. How does your connectedness to others in school and family influence development of meaning in your life?
9. What are the useful life skills for a junior secondary student?
10. Do you see any links between connectedness to others, meaning in life, and acquiring life skills?

Appendix 2

Composition of focus groups

| School | Students' academic performance | Grade 8 | | Grade 9 | | Grade 10 | | Total |
|----------|--------------------------------|---------|---|---------|----|----------|----|-------|
| | | M | F | M | F | M | F | |
| School 1 | High | | | | | | | |
| Group 1 | | | | 1 | 4 | | | 5 |
| Group 2 | | | | 3 | 3 | | | 6 |
| School 2 | High | | | | | | | |
| Group 3 | | | | 2 | 2 | | | 4 |
| School 3 | Average | | | | | | | |
| Group 4 | | | | 5 | 4 | | | 9 |
| School 4 | Low | | | | | | | |
| Group 5 | | | | | | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| Group 7 | | 4 | 4 | | | | | 8 |
| School 5 | Low | | | | | | | |
| Group 6 | | | | | | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| School 6 | Average | | | | | | | |
| Group 8 | | 3 | 3 | | | | | 6 |
| Group 9 | | | | | | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Total | | 7 | 7 | 11 | 13 | 7 | 12 | 57 |

Male: 25; Female: 32

Appendix 3

Coding table

| Coding | | | Repeating ideas |
|---------|----------|---------|---|
| Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 | |
| ML | | | Meaning in life/Purpose of life? |
| LS | | | Life skills |
| C | | | Connectedness |
| | | Theme: | What is “Meaning in life”/“purpose of life”? |
| ML3 | | | “ML” refers to future career |
| ML5 | | | “ML” refers to dreams (goals)to be realized |
| ML9 | | | “ML” refers to the effort (process) you have paid |
| ML11 | | | Wherever there is a life. It may help people think positive |
| ML14 | | | “ML” refers to the involvement in your work because of the interest |
| | ML + LS3 | | “ML” may not lead to achievement |
| | | Theme: | Possible challenges and conflicts |

| Coding | | | Repeating ideas |
|---------|----------|-------------|---|
| Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 | |
| ML10 | | | “ML” may have conflicts with family members |
| ML15 | | | “ML” has priority: first, the need; second: the interest |
| ML17 | | | “ML” has priority: first, the interest; second: the need |
| ML20 | | | “ML” should be true to ourselves |
| | | Theme: | Mutual association between meaning in life and life skills development |
| | LS + ML | | Skills develop “ML” |
| | ML + LS1 | | “ML” can promote life skills development (through joining activities or setting goals) |
| | | ML/C + LS1 | “ML” with encouragement may lead to improve life skills |
| | | Theme: | Connectedness promoting meaning in life |
| | C + ML1 | | Connectedness with friends induces “ML” |
| | C + ML2 | | Connectedness with family members induces “ML” |
| | C + ML3 | | Connectedness with teachers (school) induces “ML” |
| | | Theme: | Connectedness supporting life skills development |
| | C + LS1 | | Connectedness can improve life skills |
| | | Theme: | Guidance activities enhancing connectedness |
| GA | | | What are guidance activities? |
| | GA + C1 | | Some guidance activities can help to enhance the connectedness with family members |
| | GA + C2 | | Some guidance activities can help to enhance the connectedness with school members |
| | GA + ML1 | | Some guidance activities/ECA can promote “ML” |
| | GA + ML4 | | Media (e.g., reading, IT) can promote “ML” |
| | GA + LS1 | | Guidance activities can develop and improve life skills |
| | | GA + LS/ML1 | Some guidance activities may lead to the promotion of both life skills development and “ML” |

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