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Meaning in life, connectedness, and life skills development in junior secondary school students: Teachers' perspectives in Hong Kong

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Abstract

A student's "meaning in life" and his/her connectedness to school, friends and family are believed to be factors that influence the development of life skills. Teachers could be aware of these factors in their endeavours to foster 'whole-person development' in their students. In this small-scale study, twelve secondary school teachers participated in three focus groups and reported their perceptions of students' meaning in life, connectedness and life skills. In general, they believed that having a definite goal means students have found preliminarily the meaning in life and the source of motivation. The teachers also observed that high achievers tend to set goals for *future* achievement, whereas the goals and aspirations of low achievers are much more *short-term*. Teachers suggested that development of students' connectedness and life skills can be facilitated by the opportunity to converse with teachers, and the creation of a caring culture in schools that makes students feel valued. Conversely, parental expectations and strong academic orientation of the school may restrict students' personal goal-setting. The findings have practical implications for teachers, counselling professionals and other support staff in schools because specific guidance activities can be devised to strengthen students' connectedness, meaning in life, and life skills.

[word count: 201 words]

Key words: Chinese; connectedness; Hong Kong; life skills; meaning in life; students; teachers

Introduction

An important concept that has emerged in positive psychology is “meaning in life”; and over the past decades many studies have been conducted to examine the meaning in life construct and its links to physical and mental wellbeing. Alfred Adler (1931) considered interest in mankind may contribute to individuals’ meaning in life. Viktor Frankl (1959) was another pioneer to study the construct, and used it in the practice of psychotherapy. Frankl found that certain individuals may exhibit symptoms of boredom, emptiness and depression if they lack meaning in life, while other individuals can live a healthier and more fulfilling life if they recognize the significance of their own existence and the importance of the actions they have taken. In general, it has been found that having meaning in life is associated with longer life span, fewer health problems, less maladaptive behaviour, and a greater sense of satisfaction in life (Heisel & Flett, 2004; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009; Noblejas de la Flor, 1997).

Meaning in Life — its course of development in adolescence

Because meaning in life is so important to individuals’ wellbeing and longevity, researchers and theorists have endeavored to explore how meaning in life develops over time. Theoretical tenets of identity posit that adolescence is a prime time for the development of identity and meaning in life (Erikson, 1968, 1975; Marcia, 1966). At this stage, adolescents have transited from a relatively dependent and naive childhood to a stage where they begin to quest for answers to questions like “Who am I?” and “What do I want from life?” This is a result of the physical, emotional and psychological changes that occur in adolescence, and result in an enhanced capacity to process more abstract concepts and assume more personal responsibilities in life (Marcia, 1966; Negru-Subtirica, El Pop, Luyckx, Dezutter & Steger, 2016). Identity and meaning in life are therefore key components of coherent self-development in adolescence (Steger, 2012). Negru-Subtirica et al. (2016) have taken the

concept a step further by examining how these two constructs are related during this developmental stage. By using a three-wave longitudinal study, these researchers established bidirectional longitudinal relations between identity processes and meaning in life—that is, healthy identity formation is conducive to the establishment of meaning in life, and conversely, meaning in life helps strengthening positive identity formation in adolescence.

Burrow, O’Dell and Hill (2010) explored how purpose in life develops in adolescents and they differentiated two related but distinct processes—“purpose *exploration*” and “purpose *commitment*”. The former, “exploration”, refers to adolescents’ search for goals and pathways available in life, and making personal choices and decisions to actualize such goals. The next stage, “commitment”, refers to adolescents’ actual ongoing engagement with pursuits and behaviours that will enable them to fulfill their goals (Burrow et al., 2010). When exploring purpose in life, the specific contexts and opportunities proffered by the environment—and by the people with whom youngsters come in contact—are often important determinants (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Mariano, 2014).

School connectedness and life skills development

Psychologists, counsellors and educators have long been interested in identifying factors that could promote positive development in adolescents. Among all the factors that could impact adolescent development, “school connectedness” is one that could affect both the academic and personal development of youngsters. “School connectedness” pertains to adolescents’ belief that they belong in the school, and adults in the school value them, care about them, and are actively involved in their lives (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002). These adults include teachers, school administrators, counselling professionals and other support staff who interact with the students on a day-to-day basis. School connectedness has been identified as a protective factor that reduces the effects of stressful life events and

promotes resilience in adolescents when facing various challenging aspects of life (Resnick et al., 1997). Based on this concept of school connectedness, Libbey (2004) delineated different facets of such connectedness, namely: school ethos and policies, students' sense of safety and belonging, inter-personal issues (teacher support and peer relationships), and involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Since the original research by Resnick et al. (1997), a number of quantitative and qualitative studies have been conducted to investigate any relationships between school connectedness and academic outcomes. Some studies have also investigated negative psychological outcomes such as violence and deviant behaviours (Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, & Chan, 2009; McNeely & Falci, 2004; Wang, Matthew, Bellamy, & James, 2005). Results from these studies invariably point to the conclusion that positive school connectedness protects adolescents from harmful behaviours and promotes their academic achievement.

In the context of the Hong Kong education system, Yuen and colleagues (2012) explored how high school students perceived school connectedness and the factors that may foster it. By using focus group interviews, the researchers found that students in Hong Kong regard school connectedness as stemming from the care given by teachers and other significant adults, relationships with the peers, and opportunities for their own talents to develop. To help promote school connectedness, the students suggested that involving them regularly in decision-making in the school, and implementing guidance and counselling programmes that promote life skills, team spirit and competition, are effective means to enhance their feelings of connectedness to the school (Yuen et al., 2012).

In addition to studying school connectedness in the local school context, Yuen and colleagues also explored interrelationships among school connectedness, students' life skills

development and the implementation of guidance activities in schools. In their research, the term “life skills development” refers to students’ competence in mastering skills for four key areas in life—academic, personal, social, and career and talent development. These skills are not only vital to students’ success in schoolwork and social life but are also essential for their later development as adults. Throughout the six years between 2006 and 2012, Yuen and colleagues have conducted waves of surveys with junior and senior students from both primary and secondary schools to assess their self-efficacy in applying life skills in the four domains (e.g., Yuen, Hui et al., 2006; Yuen, Chan et al., 2012). The key findings of their research are twofold: first, students in Hong Kong are generally self-efficacious in applying life skills in the four areas, although it seems that the confidence level declines slightly with age; second, students’ self-efficacy in applying the skills is positively related to good relationships with the family, a sense of connectedness to school, and the provision of effective guidance programmes.

The main practical implication from this research was that well-designed and implemented guidance programmes are conducive to student achievement and personal development. For this reason, full support should be given to all schools for creating and implementing such programmes. Also, students’ development of life skills is underpinned by a strong sense of ‘belonging to the school’ (connectedness). There is therefore good reason to promote school connectedness as one of the influential factors that can foster student development.

Recently, Yuen, Lee, Kam and Lau (2017) reviewed the literature on purpose in life and found that some researchers differentiated between the construct of *purpose* in life and *meaning* in life. For example, Damon et al. (2003) proposed a hierarchical relationship between purpose and meaning—with meaning preceding purpose. Purpose, along with values, self-worth and efficacy, form a subset of meaning. Yuen, Chung, Lee, Lau, Chan,

Gysber and Shea (2020) interviewed secondary students from Hong Kong and explored their perception of 'meaning in life'. Students tend to relate 'meaning in life' to planning their career path and setting goals. Students perceived that school guidance activities could enhance their meaning in life.

As a continuation and extension of previous studies that examined links between school activities, guidance programmes and students' life skills development, the present study has investigated how teachers in Hong Kong perceive meaning in life, connectedness, and life skills development in students. The importance of investigating the teachers' perceptions is that under the prevailing 'whole-school approach to school guidance' in Hong Kong, all teachers play a pivotal role in facilitating students' personal growth and development; and all teachers work cooperatively with their school counsellors and guidance personnel. The findings derived from the study will thus be useful to in-service teachers who interact with students on a day-to-day basis, and will also have implications for counselling professionals. Teachers, counselling professionals and other support staff need to work collaboratively in designing, implementing and evaluating guidance activities and programmes that foster students' social and emotional development. The study reported here aimed to explore teachers' perspectives on how students' meaning in life is developed, and the factors that appear to be conducive to the formation of meaning in life in adolescents.

Research Questions

The focus group study aimed to explore the following key issues.

1. What are teachers' perceptions of their students' understanding of 'meaning in life'?
2. From the teachers' perspective, how is their students' acquisition of meaning in life related to their life skills development, connectedness to parents and school, and the guidance programs in schools?

Method

The study involved 12 Hong Kong secondary teachers, organized into three focus groups. The schools ranged evenly from Band 1 to Band 3. Band 1 schools cater for students with high academic achievement, while Band 3 schools contain more students of low academic achievement. These schools had also been used in a study on a related topic (Yuen, Chung, Lee, Lau, Chan, Gysber & Shea, 2020). All the teachers had at least three years of guidance practice experience and were nominated to take part in the study by their school principals. The researcher and an experienced counselling professional together conducted the focus group discussions.

Participants were asked to describe how their students currently appear to understand the concept of ‘meaning in life’. They were also asked how teachers can have a positive influence on students’ acquisition and development of meaning in life. The topics covered in the sessions are summarized in the Appendix. Probes and prompts were used frequently during the discussion—such as ‘Can you give an example of that?’ and ‘That’s a good suggestion. Please explain that in more detail for us.’

All sessions were conducted in Cantonese (the local Chinese dialect in Hong Kong). Each two-hour session was recorded on audio tape and later transcribed in Chinese. These transcripts were then analyzed following the procedures of data reduction, data display, interpretation, and drawing of conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researchers read the transcripts several times, and a preliminary coding system was developed. Relevant statements in the transcripts were identified and categorized according to the coding labels in the system. Additional labels were created, and existing labels were modified when necessary. The thematic categories emerged from the categorized coding labels. In addition, the experienced counselling professional acted as an independent reviewer to check and

confirm the assigned categories and codes. After discussion between the independent reviewer and the researcher some minor adjustments were made in the grouping of categories and subcategories.

Findings

Below are the seven key themes that emerged after the processes of analysis, coding and categorization. This information could be of practical value for teachers and counselling professionals responsible for designing pastoral care and guidance activities for adolescents.

Theme 1: Student's most common interpretation of "meaning in life" is having a definite life goal

All teachers agreed that perceiving a "meaning in life" is important to students' development and wellbeing. However, they also observed that most students do not think about this concept clearly, deeply (or at all), until teachers open up the topic and give them some guidance. It seems that the interpretation of "meaning in life" may be different in the minds of teachers and of students. For example, Teacher 7 commented:

Adults and teenagers may interpret the meaning in life in two different ways.

Some students seem not to know why anyone would ask them this question about meaning in life, because they think that seeking a meaning relates to issues that are still too far in the future. They are currently living in and enjoying the present. However, Teacher 6 suggested that if you ask students *what their goals are* for the future, they will usually give you answers. Often teachers need to give them guidance in understanding that setting a goal and having a sense of purpose is evidence that a life is meaningful.

Theme 2: Possessing a goal is the students' principal source of motivation

Teachers believed that students' goals in life are the main source of their motivation to work hard and succeed. Motivation may in turn reinforce the process of goal setting. Possessing a goal will tend to drive students to plan and act purposefully; and this can lead ultimately to success.

Teacher 5: Having a goal does create a force to push the students to learn. Achieving the outcome means a lot to them.

Teacher 8: This [goal] is the 'meaning' in their life that helps students to develop their actions and plans.

Teacher 6: Having a clear goal improves the learning outcomes.

Teacher 5: The goal helps to develop motivation. Goal and motivation together are mutually supportive. I have found that by Grade 9 most students have a very clear goal.

Teacher 5 also expressed a belief that there is a strong link between meaning in life and accomplishment. This teacher commented that whenever students experience achievement, you can see their confidence grow.

Theme 3: High achievers set goals for future achievement whereas low achievers' goals are much more short-term

During the discussion the teachers differentiated between two kinds of students—high achievers and low achievers, in relation to their general perceptions in their own school contexts. High-achievers were more likely to set goals for future achievement. For example, Teacher 3 indicated that students with high achievement usually consider that entering university is the first step to achieving their future goal of becoming a doctor, lawyer or pilot. Teachers also emphasized that the goals of some high achievers are particularly clear and precise. They already have a strong sense of direction.

Teacher 12: This kind of student [high-achiever] has a very clear purpose; and their learning is aimed in that direction.

In the case of low-achievers, the teachers perceived that their goals are much more short-term—and some low-achievers appear to have no clearly defined goal at all. These students seem to ‘live for the moment’ (immediate gratification) and have given little thought to their future. When asked about their lives, low-achievers would say they just enjoy having fun, playing online games or playing with friends... or they may just reply “I don’t know” when asked about the future.

Teacher 8: They never think about long-term goals because [the future] is too far away.

A few teachers suggested that low-achievers never think about the meaning in life or the future is because they do not experience any sense of achievement, and they do not really feel connected with their schools or valued as persons.

Teacher 5: Being punished by their teachers is their regular experience of the everyday school life. They are not able to find their interests or strengths, or develop a sense of purpose. That is the reason why they cannot explain their meaning in life. They have no successful experience, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Other teachers saw the matter differently. They attributed the apparent lack of meaning to the low-achievers’ mechanism of self-protection. In order not to have stressful feelings the students may choose to give up setting goals altogether, or decide not to tell people their goals.

Teacher 5: In reality, these students have experienced failure even if they have tried their best. Things do not turn out the way they expected.

Teacher 8: In fact, they dare not think about the matter [meaning in life]. They believe you will lose if you take it [setting goals] seriously.

To overcome this negativity and lack of direction in life, Teacher 7 suggested schools should give lower-achieving students more chances to taste success. The students may then start to think that they can really achieve what they want to achieve. Successful experiences will give them hope, a sense of achievement, and also improve motivation and confidence.

Theme 4: Connectedness helps to generate meaning in life

When students are studying in a school, their connectedness is mainly developed through contact with peers, teachers and the school. The teachers in this study reported that connectedness with teachers is usually the main influence helping formation of a student's meaning in life—although some teachers believed that students' bonding with their peers was also a strong influence on connectedness. Teacher 6 suggested that:

Although the influence [of teachers] may not be direct and specific, during chats with students the teachers usually share the importance of having a life goal.

Teacher 10 saw a link between connectedness to teachers and meaning in life. He used the subject Visual Arts as an example, saying:

The meaning in life developed in students could probably be attributed to the close relationship between the Visual Arts teacher and her students. She is so caring and gives them a lot of satisfaction in the subject.

This observation caused Teacher 9 to say:

Seeing the importance of the relationship between teachers and students, I will try to develop a better relationship with my students so that they can develop a clearer life goal.

Regarding students' connectedness with peers, this was seen to be supportive of maintaining meaning in students' lives.

Teacher 6: One of the reasons that students enjoy going to school is because of their peers. Friends give them a sense of security.

Teacher 10: A relationship with peers is the students' biggest concern, and longing for good relationships is one of the students' basic needs.

Many years ago, Maslow (1954) stressed that adolescents need to feel secure before they are motivated to make close and trusting connection with others. Responses from Teacher 6 and 10 might explain why connectedness with peers is so important to students, and how it may pave their way to self-actualization. Teachers perceived that connectedness does play a key role for the formation of meaning, because it facilitates individuals to work towards their goals within a social setting.

Theme 5: The value of conversations with teachers and the creation of a caring culture on campus

Comments made by the teachers indicated that they believe conversations between teachers and students can facilitate the development meaning of life and connectedness. These conversations are not formal discussions within lesson time, but are informal friendly chats (Woolfolk, 1995). They also take place frequently between guidance counsellors and students. They are particularly powerful in helping the students feel valued and connected. Conversations with teachers and counselling professionals develop connectedness and connectedness helps formation of meaning in life.

Teacher 7: Teachers need to sacrifice time to talk with students. When you talk with them patiently, [for example] during the night time in camping activities, the students

will frankly share what they think...and they can gradually and eventually find the meaning in their lives.

Teacher 8: Sometimes, we need to ask the students many questions so that they can clearly tell you what they think.

Teacher 1: You have to guide them to think about their life goal step by step. You should also teach them how to get to the goal and what they should do after achieving the goal.

It is not easy work.

Teacher 5 thought that interests and students' conversations with teachers are strongly related to a caring culture in the schools. This culture or environment makes students feel valued and can facilitate the development of both connectedness and life skills. Teacher 2 praised one colleague who often spends more time than the parents do, to take care of the students.

Teacher 5: If a student does not feel connected, this would not help with formation of meaning in life. It is a pity that it is difficult to have deep conversations with students because teachers have no spare time. Life skills are not developed through studying, rather they are developed by participating in a wide range of activities, interactions with people and the conversations with significant others. They [significant others] are the models who shape who you are. For developing some life skills that are more mental or spiritual, having conversations with teachers would be more effective.

Teacher 1: The first priority for a teacher is to give students individual care. Teachers do spend a great deal of effort and time in helping low achievers and students with behaviour problems get back on the right track gradually.

Teacher 2: Students' connectedness with the school is affected by the school culture.

Teacher 6: In fact, many teachers are more than happy to take up this caring duty.

Otherwise, the teachers may have some negative feelings toward the school management.

Teacher 3: It is all because of the meaning of being a teacher. Some teachers are so good that they will do everything for their students without considering the limitation of resources.

Theme 6: Parents' expectations and a school's strong academic orientation may restrict students' own goal-setting, and thus also restrict the development of meaning in life and connectedness

Teachers expressed a view that there are forces that may restrict students' development of meaning in life and connectedness. These forces are the parents' expectations and the school's strong academic orientation. In relation to parental pressure, Teacher 7 explained:

The students' meaning of life is decided by their parents. The students may have their own goals, but they are afraid that their parents will stop them from achieving them. Their parents will ban them. The goals will not materialize at all. The students dare not share their thoughts if we ask them.

The teacher mentioned that this situation happens when the students start to select their school subjects after Grade 9. The students have no power to bargain with their parents if there is no teachers' support. Teacher 4 agreed that the students may have no strong desire to seek a meaning in life. Parents may restrict the students' own goal-setting because they have already a set expectation for what their children will do. The goal and the plan have already been decided by the parents. Clearly, teachers and career counselling practitioners have an important part to play in liaising between parents and students to reach a compromise in such cases.

Similarly, schools themselves tend to limit students' free choice and goal setting if too much focus is placed on academic outcomes. Lack of free choice and limited exposure to 'non-academic' curricula overlook the importance of students seeking a deeper meaning in life. Teachers in the group shared the same feeling that lack of time and the schools' high expectation on academic performance creates an obstacle to 'whole-person' development of the students.

Teacher 7: I notice that chasing the students' homework is the only focus in the school.

Teacher 6: Teachers do not have any time left after school. Nowadays, what the teachers can see after school is students sit and attend supplementary classes and tutorials. It is because the school directors only look for better academic outcomes. The parents would ask you why there are no after-school tutorials. I think there is nothing left except homework, academic results, and public examinations.

Teacher 10: My school is rather academically-oriented. At the beginning of the school year the teachers must emphasize that 'studying is the meaning in life' in front of the students.

Theme 7: Supportive learning opportunities, resources and programmes can strengthen the development of life skills

For the development of life skills, Teacher 4 said that the school will intentionally provide a wide range of learning opportunities for student participation.

Teacher 4: These opportunities include learning trips overseas, and exchange programmes with affiliated schools in other countries to broaden students' horizons and to facilitate their life skills development.

Teacher 2: It is a common school policy [to arrange trips], no matter if the school is rich or not. It seems that the school becomes a travel agency and there are at least eight to ten tours every year. Our students do have a lot of opportunities to participate.

Teacher 3: The wide range of opportunities can help students become more confident and capable once they have made the effort. This culture will gradually be developed in the school. Money is not the biggest concern, rather the real challenge is the time needed to build networks and deal with a great deal of administrative procedures to contact the potential partners outside school. We do not just invite professionals to come and give talks. We try our best to arrange authentic experiences for our students by organizing tailor-made programmes, such as visits to hotels and the airport.

Teacher 4: Our network [for arranging out-of-school visits] is extraordinary, and is formed by our parent-teacher association and our alumni.

Organizing structured programmes to strengthen development of life skills is also very common. Teachers 7 and 8 described how their schools use themes at different stages to promote key concerns in life skills, such as sense of belonging, caring communities, self-caring, and career planning. Teacher 2 said her school organizes a “mentorship scheme” under which every Grade 11 student will have the opportunity to get in touch with a wide range of careers in society. Some schools would assign committees, such as student development committee, discipline and guidance committee, civic education committee, to organize programmes for the students to develop relevant life skills (Teacher 6). However, Teacher 5 reported that his school does not have these kinds of arrangement for life skills development.

Discussion

The information provided by the teachers in this qualitative research shed some positive light on our understanding of the construct “meaning in life” and its relationships to school connectedness, school guidance activities and students’ life skills development. In particular, the information provides some sense of direction for ways in which schools, teachers and counselling professionals can attempt to encourage students’ natural search for meaning in life, and how school connectedness and life skill development can be a focus of attention.

In terms of the meaning in life construct, adolescents are likely to be undergoing the process of active search for identity (Marcia, 1966). The responses collected from the teachers reflect that they and their students hold a rather pragmatic view of the construct. The finding that teachers believe their students interpret ‘having a goal’ as representing ‘meaning’ in life suggests that this must be the starting point for deeper discussions on meaning in life and personal aspirations. In Hong Kong, the students’ life goal is most commonly associated with career development, due perhaps to the socio-economic environment in which they live. Hong Kong, like many well-developed metropolitan regions in Asia, is noted for its fast pace, competitiveness and high cost of living. It is also a place where the school system is characterized by a competition and dominated by examinations (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2015). To secure a job and pay the mortgage and bills would be the ‘way of life’ for most city-dwellers in the territory. Leading a successful life seems to be directly associated with achieving career goals, and is both the motivation and need of many youngsters and grown-ups in Hong Kong. Teachers are no different in this respect, and their goals and values in this competitive world may have projected onto their students. Indeed, pragmatic teachers may believe that students have found a meaning in life if they have a formulated a definite career-related goal for the future. But such a view is rather narrow, given that the “meaning in life” construct is actually philosophical and existential rather than pragmatic. But, meaning in life

is certainly shaped by the culture and reality one is situated in, and meaning in life can be grounded solely in one's existence. In societies like Hong Kong, meaning in life is more often than not a result of pragmatic aims and achievement. As Steger, Frazier, Oishi and Kale (2006, p. 81) describe: "[Meaning in life] is the sense made of, and significance felt, regarding the nature of one's being and existence."

A second finding was that high-achievers and low-achievers in terms of academic success within the school curriculum are perceived by their teachers as setting themselves different goals in life. High-achievers usually have clearer future plans and goals, while low-achievers often have no clear long-term plans and no clear recognition of meaning in their lives. Perhaps this indicates that the urgency for seeking and finding meaning in life may be associated with one's ability level and achievement. On the other hand, lack of family support, limited financial resources and absence of good role models to follow may explain why students from disadvantaged home backgrounds find it harder to formulate clear goals and purposes in life. In order to help underprivileged teens, providing them with good role models who exemplify a 'meaningful life' can be one way to inspire their ambition. School teachers and counselling professionals could try to design and implement guidance activities in which students meet and learn from a mentor who has been successful in finding meaning in life and is rich in life and work experiences. The ongoing relationship built between the mentor and the mentees could be an invaluable source of motivation and inspiration as to what one could pursue in life.

Kashdan and McKnight (2009) suggest that social learning through observation, imitation and modelling helps the formation of purpose in adolescents. In view of this, teachers and career guidance practitioners can organize pastoral care and guidance programmes that involve successful alumni, outstanding seniors in the school and even celebrities to guide and inspire younger students. These programmes, normally treated as

informal or extra-curricular activities, could instead be given a higher profile within the more formal school curriculum. It is clear from teachers' remarks that informal chats with students outside school hours, meetings, and visits to the workplaces contribute to connectedness and also inspire future career paths. They also add social contact and social capital that may not be available from home. The link between teacher care, students' meaning in life, and life skills development is established as teachers share informal chats with students as an effective way to build up relationships and influence the development of the adolescents. This connectedness can definitely enhance students' sense of belonging to the school, which is needed if students are to be motivated to aim for a higher level of achievement (Maslow, 1954).

Other than eliciting supporting from personnel outside the school, teachers and career guidance practitioners are actually one valuable resource students can count on for guidance and support—and this is one of the ways by which meaning of life emerges (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Mariano, 2014). It is sad that lack of time in the day-to-day work of Hong Kong teachers deters them from meeting and nurturing the students in ways that they recognize as important for 'whole-person' development. It is to be hoped that teachers can be given more time to deliver pastoral care to students, in addition to their daily teaching and administrative duties. A review of the current education reforms, policies and operations at school level could take into account this important role of pastoral care and give it higher priority than at present. For example, redistribution of resources might alleviate the burden on teachers such that they could be freed to nurture whole-person development of their students, including the search for the meaning in life.

It was found in the present study that extra-curricular activities could help students feel more connected to their schools, teachers and peers, and at the same time support their search for a meaning in life. Specifically, teachers mentioned that overseas trips and

exchange programmes between local schools help students understand more about themselves, develop important life skills, and formulate future goals in life. The implication of this is that school can organize more guidance activities that broaden students' horizons, encourage them to be more confident and independent, and build up social networks that may help future academic and occupational development (Frostick, Tong, Moore, Renton & Netuveli 2018). Teachers must encourage students in exploring talent development opportunities, solving problems creatively, making choices in their educational course selection, and taking actions to achieve their career and life aspirations (Lee & Cunningham, 2019; Yuan, Wu, Hu & Lin, 2019; Zhang, Yuen & Chen, 2020).

While schools endeavour to widen the experiences provided for students, it is also important to look into the growing workload of teachers (Lee & Yuen, 2019). Some extra-curricular activities create much additional work and exhaust teachers' time and energy. Taking care of teachers' wellbeing is of importance; and the Education Bureau in Hong Kong should consider allocating more resources to assist in organizing large-scale activities like overseas tours. Hiring more full-time guidance teachers, counselling professionals, teaching assistants and other school support staff, or out-sourcing the arrangements to licensed travel agencies, could be feasible methods for supporting schools (Littlecott, Moore & Murphy, 2018).

Conclusion

These discussions with practising teachers have shed some light on our understanding of junior secondary school students' interpretation of 'meaning in life'. The teachers' observations have also made clearer the interrelationships among students' search for meaning in life, school connectedness and life skills development. Also, meaningful guidance

activities that can expand students' horizons are found to promote their life skills development and the meaning of life.

The information here should be of relevance for teachers, counselling professionals and other school support staff, helping them understand how students can be assisted in their search for meaning of life and the roles played by connectedness and life skills.

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Appendix: Discussion Topics Used in the Focus Groups

1. Tell us what comes to your mind when we ask you about your students' "meaning in life". How do you think they understand this concept?
2. What do you, as teachers, do that has a positive influence on your students' development of "meaning in life"? What more could teachers do?
3. What do you understand the term 'students' *connectedness*' to mean? Can you provide some concrete examples of how students connect to teachers, peers, parents and the community?
4. What do teachers do that has a positive influence on students' connectedness to school, peers, parents and community? What more could teachers do?
5. Describe to us the 'life skills' that your students need to apply in school, at home, and in the community? Give some examples, and in particular, any examples of life skills that relate to career development.
6. How have your students acquired or developed these skills at home, in school, and in the community?
7. Do you think there is any link between your students' 'meaning in life' and their connectedness to others? Is there also a link with their confidence in applying life skills?
8. In your schools, are there any guidance programmes or activities that are related to:
 - (a) Encouraging students' in their search for meaning in life?
 - (b) Teaching and supporting students' development of "life skills"?
 - (c) Encouraging students' connectedness?
9. Are these activities or interventions useful? If so, how are they helpful?
10. What policies, programmes, or activities do you suggest a school should introduce that would help students develop meaning in life, life skills and connectedness?