

The Importance of Integrating Career Planning Education into High School Curriculum

Qianchen Shen

Department of Animal and Plant Sciences, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S10 2TN, England, United Kingdom
Corresponding author. Email: gaoming@cas-harbour.org

ABSTRACT

Adolescents are faced with a variety of life and career options that increasingly demand knowledge and skills. In recent years, educators have placed great importance on the principle that high school should equip students not only with academic knowledge but also with career-related competencies. Hence, career planning education, which typically includes the topics of self-exploration, career exploration, and career development, plays a vital role in supporting young people to manage their experiences related to career and preparing them for the future. This study explored the impacts of career planning education on high school students, the provision of career education in high schools in western countries and China, and provided suggestions for the future delivery of career education curriculum in Chinese high schools. Research has found that students who lack career-planning knowledge and skills may be unable to make wise choices in accordance with their interests and strengths about studies or careers. Some western countries have more advanced and mature practices in career education provision, while such curriculum in Chinese high schools has yet to be comprehensively developed. This study suggests that students should be provided with timely career guidance in high schools in China, which would help them to think more critically about their future goals and possibilities, and become planned about college and career. Therefore, for the delivery of career planning education in schools to be both efficient and effective, policymakers, professional career educators, school administrators, and teachers should work together to promote the development of such curriculum in high schools.

Keywords: *China, western countries, high school, career education, career planning, curriculum*

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a crucial period for exploring career interests and making decisions that will influence future career development. The most salient of these decisions for young people is going to college or university after high school to obtain more advanced knowledge and skills demanded by many careers today [1]. However, during the current economic globalization and technological advancement where new occupations continue to emerge, today's youth are confronted with challenging post-secondary transitions and new competencies regarding college and career readiness. If students have no clear understanding of the setting of the discipline or the careers associated with each discipline, they may fail to select an appropriate college major which would lead to a lack of motivation to study during college and thus affect their future career development [1]. Besides, many students have changed their majors in university as they discovered that their

chosen disciplines are not what they expected or the programs do not match their talents [1].

Research showed that career planning education in school is important for students' career preparation, which is the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable students to make more meaningful decisions either directly about career or have positive influences on future career [2]. Additionally, there are calls in many western countries for the integration of career planning education into the high school curriculum to make learning more relevant to students, as well as to equip them with the competencies to plan their futures [2]. In the meantime, China continues to undergo vast economic and social developments, resulting in the requirements of higher levels of achievement and preparation for the changing workplace [3]. However, many Chinese adolescents lack career-planning awareness [3].

This study aims to explore the impacts of career planning education on high school students, the

provision of career education in high schools in western countries and China, and to provide suggestions for the improvement of the career education curriculum in Chinese high schools.

2. THE IMPACTS OF CAREER PLANNING EDUCATION ON HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Research has found that students lacking access to career education classes are more likely to be uncertain of their futures and have no clear career goals, which may affect students' perception of what is realistically achievable as well as their subject choices in high school, leading to choosing the courses that are either not well suited to their abilities or their desired career pathways [4]. On the contrary, students with clear career determination often took more electives during high school and were selecting subjects based on personal interests, planned study, or future careers [4]. Students who exhibited consistency between their career interests and specific subject choices would also have greater motivation in schoolwork and improvement in their approach to learning [4]. Therefore, guidance on career planning and subject selection could avoid mismatches between student's interests or strengths and school courses, as well as helping students to know the relevance of school education to post-school lives and thus enhancing their motivation in school learning.

A study examined the impacts of a career intervention workshop on adolescents' career choice preparedness and attitude toward career planning in high schools in Finland [5]. Career choice preparedness refers to the readiness to take advantage of career resources or to deal with barriers when making career choices [6]. The attitudinal factor refers to people's feelings that engagement in career planning activities would increase their possibilities of gaining a satisfying career [6]. In the workshop, the skilled trainers guided the students to develop their career plans by defining personal interests and strengths and comparing them with the educational and career options offered in society [5]. Students also discussed the topics of lifelong learning, such as methods of adapting to different tasks at work, the possible challenges related to certain occupations, and various learning opportunities presented in life to expand career-related competencies [5]. The results showed that this workshop directly improved students' career choice preparedness, which in turn enhanced their positive attitudes toward career planning [5]. Similarly, Chiesa et al. (2016) investigated the effects of a group career intervention among 280 Italian high school students, Stipanovic et al. (2017) evaluated the targeted career counseling services on high school seniors in South Carolina, and Berger et al. (2019) explored the impacts of a brief career intervention among 211 high school students in Sydney,

they all concluded that career education lessons improved participants' career decision-making confidence and enhanced their sense of preparedness for college and work [7, 8, 9].

Moreover, Xie et al. (2019) investigated the career education program as part of the curriculum of a senior high school in Zhejiang province, China [10]. The program comprises career education classes, career counseling, and career practice activities, which aims to educate students with career exploration skills and help them to develop an accurate understanding of the occupations [10]. The authors found that this program improved students' overall career adaptability, including increased awareness of the importance of future planning, increased curiosity regarding the information of the world of work, and increased confidence to engage in tasks related to studies and careers [10].

3. PRACTICES OF CAREER PLANNING EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOLS IN WESTERN COUNTRIES

In England, there has been a clear instruction through the Careers Strategy published by the Department for Education in 2017 requiring high schools to provide career planning education for students [11]. The eight Gatsby Benchmarks devised from national and international research which define excellent career education practices were included in the policy and are now systematized within English schools [12]. The benchmarks advocate for a stable career education program in schools; meeting the needs of each student; offering personal guidance; introducing students the information about higher education; teaching career information in class; connecting curriculum learning to careers; providing chances for students to meet with employers; and providing students the opportunities to gain experiences of workplaces [12]. Additionally, schools are expected to designate a career education leader who will be in charge of a team and to strategically assist the whole school in achieving the Gatsby Benchmarks [11]. Those leaders would collaborate with school administrators to design career education courses and practice activities, while career advisers provide one-to-one personal guidance, hence resulting in a team approach for the delivery of career education with each member having defined duties [11].

Career planning education is also a focal point in the school curriculum in Canada, completing school-to-career transition courses has become the main requirement in the majority of Canadian high schools [13]. For example, Career and Work Exploration is a three-course program in the public high schools in Saskatoon, a city in Saskatchewan province, which is designed to provide students with real workplace experiences while supported by foundational skills taught in the classroom [13]. Career and Work

Exploration classes in grade 10 and 11 integrate theory-based lessons and focus on career awareness and exploration respectively [13]. The classes for grade 12 students commenced in 2014 emphasize experience, the experiential components include resume and cover letter development, mock interview practice, job shadowing, and working in a chosen company for a period of time where teachers would match students with the selected employers [13].

In the United States, federal education policy calls for every student, regardless of their income, race, ethnic background, or disability status, to graduate from high school and be prepared for college and a career [14]. Over the past decade, the increased recognition of the need for college and career readiness has also put emphasis on the high school curriculum to be more relevant and explicit in addressing academic knowledge, applied skills, and employability skills [14]. A senior high school in New York City created a career education program called the "Career Institute", which aims to increase students' awareness of self and the world of work, as well as encouraging them to think about college and career aspirations reflectively [15]. In the early high school years, students would develop a plan to accomplish their high school requirements, and make long- and short-term goals to approach their future careers [15]. In grade 11 and 12, students should be ready for college or university application, thus students would meet with their advisers regularly to identify criteria for college selection and discuss college resources [15]. Finally, the teacher would also arrange a field trip to local colleges, allowing students to take a tour on campus [15].

4. THE PROVISION OF CAREER PLANNING EDUCATION IN CHINESE HIGH SCHOOLS

An important event influencing the provision of career education courses in Chinese senior high schools is the reform of the Chinese National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) system launched in 2014 [16]. In the past, the primary determinant of students' university admission and the relevant major that they could study was their test scores on the NCEE, thus students did not need to make crucial choices during the university application that would influence their future career pathways [16]. In the reformed system, test scores are no longer the only criterion for university admission, students' personal qualities, creativity, and sense of social responsibility are also evaluated by the universities [16]. Additionally, the new NCEE allows students to choose non-compulsory subjects from a wider range based on their interests and the entry requirements of the major they want to apply for [16]. Therefore, Chinese students are now faced with more opportunities to explore personal interests or strengths

related to college majors and future careers. With the reformed examination system, it is necessary for high school administrators and teachers to design career education courses to help students know their values and potentials, as well as guiding students to make career plans, choose majors, and select the corresponding non-compulsory subjects.

After the reform of the NCEE system, there is an expansion of the delivery of career education which previously occurred most in the universities and now gradually to high schools, however, only a few schools have started to incorporate career education into the curriculum [17]. The career education curriculum in Hefei No. 8 Senior High School in Anhui province was recognized as an exemplary model of career planning education for all high schools in the province. [17] The school formed a core team that comprised subject teachers, teachers from the psychological center, and senior leaders to participate in training sessions as well as regular meetings to share suggestions and improve the teaching plan of career education together [17]. The curriculum highlights career cognition in grade 10, emphasizes career exploration in grade 11, and incorporates career development classes for grade 12 students [17].

Nevertheless, a recent survey of 254 senior high school students in Guangdong province reported that only 11% of students had planned about their futures, and 65% of students did not have a clear understanding of universities and careers [18]. Besides, almost 80% of students opined that they hoped schools could offer career education classes and wanted to know more about different universities and majors, various occupations and associated requirements, and what career is suitable for them [18]. Additionally, a career development analysis in the Programme for International Student Assessment revealed that compared to several other foreign countries, high school students from Shanghai, Hongkong, and Macao in China had a lower proportion of participation in career-related activities, such as attending a job fair in school, talking to a career adviser, searching on the internet about educational programs and careers, etc [17]. In general, the current status of career planning education in the majority of Chinese high schools has no specific or systematic implementation.

Furthermore, the purpose of adding career planning education to the curriculum is often ambiguous in contrast to the main focus on academic performance. In the Chinese educational context, many students and parents believe that admission to prestigious universities will guarantee the students to find a high-quality job after graduation [19]. Also, some students still have the mindset of valuing the old NCEE system and consider career practice activities are counteractive to academic achievement and they are a waste of time [19].

However, there is no empirical evidence indicating the impeding effect of career education on academic outcomes, conversely, research has largely supported the positive influence of such courses on academic achievement [19]. Therefore, it is critical to set a public policy at the national level for the implementation of a systematic career education curriculum in Chinese high schools.

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE DELIVERY OF CAREER PLANNING EDUCATION IN CHINESE HIGH SCHOOLS

Given the importance of enhancing students' career-planning competencies to promote their successful post-school transitions, Chinese high schools should establish a more proactive career education curriculum as the schools in many western countries. Several suggestions could be considered by the Ministry of Education and school administrators for the progressive integration of career planning education into the high school curriculum. Firstly, career advisers and professional career education teachers could be employed and involved in the curriculum. Career advisers should have well-developed counseling skills that will make students feel comfortable to share their goals and aspirations. Career advisers could also arrange one-to-one guidance sessions or a small workshop with students who lack career preparedness. Besides, schools could recruit career education teachers to directly teach career planning lessons, or assist in designing the curriculum with other subject teachers. Alternatively, they could also train current teachers to become adjunct career educators, which may effectively relieve the shortage of career education teachers which is a common issue in most Chinese schools [3].

Certain experiences from western countries could also be adopted into the teaching of career planning education in Chinese high schools. For example, Teach First enterprise in England identified several tasks that subject teachers could carry out in the delivery of career education, such as sharing information with students about their own career pathways, offering initial advice on college majors and career choices, and helping students to link subject learning to applications in the workplace [20]. Therefore, school teachers should pay attention to the daily communications with students and know each student's needs, then guide students to select electives that best meet their interests and strengths, also helping them to identify possible majors and careers. Besides, teachers could infuse career topics into subjects for students to link academic content to careers, for example, a biology teacher can relate biology knowledge being taught in class to relevant occupations, students can also demonstrate their career knowledge in assignments by writing essays to introduce a career.

Additionally, schools should arrange more practical activities to deepen students' understanding of career-planning knowledge and skills. Schools could set up after-school activities related to career development and contests about occupation knowledge to raise students' career aspirations. In class, teachers could organize mock job interviews and role-playing activities that simulate a real working scenario to strengthen students' abilities to apply the learned theories into practice. Schools could hold university fairs and job fairs on campus, and also invite alumni, university faculties, and employers to give talks on the entry requirements of various college majors and the development trends of different industries. Teachers could also arrange a field trip to local universities, as well as organizing students to visit some well-known companies and to observe how each department operates, thus allowing students to gain first-hand experiences of the workplace.

Furthermore, in the Chinese socio-cultural context, parental roles are emphasized in children's growth, especially in relation to the educational and career development. Chinese parents often exert great influences on shaping children's knowledge and values about career choices through their distinct culture-based expectations [21]. Also, Chinese students used to be dependent on their parents for career-related advice along with emotional support [21]. Therefore, as an authoritative figure in children's lives, parental involvement in school's career education program is also an important way to facilitate students' career development. Teachers could explain the significance of the career education curriculum to parents during the parent meeting, which in turn encourages parents to support their children's participation in such curriculum. Specific lectures could also be held for parents, helping them to learn about the appropriate parenting style which may increase children's intrinsic motivation to be actively thinking about their career plans and goals.

6. CONCLUSION

Preparing students for life beyond school is education's main mission that requires all teachers working to provide students with the knowledge and skills to manage their studies and careers. Career planning education can result in a variety of positive outcomes, such as having a better alignment of educational and career aspirations thus increasing motivation towards school learning; enhancing confidence and positive attitude in making career-related decisions; and promoting career-planning awareness and career exploration behaviors. The conception of embedding a systematic career education curriculum within high schools has been gaining momentum, with some countries more advanced in this endeavor than others. Some exemplary high-school

career education courses in western countries assisted students to know their interests, abilities, and goals; understand the prerequisites for various universities and occupations; acquire knowledge and skills regarding career planning and development; and ultimately to be ready upon graduation from high school. After the reform of the national college entrance examination system in China, Chinese students are now confronted with more options of potential career pathways in earlier periods of their lives, yet a clear career education curriculum remains absent in many Chinese high schools. Recommendations for the future development of career planning education in Chinese high schools include recruiting qualified career educators to be involved in designing the lessons; infusing career knowledge into the content of academic courses; organizing more career practice activities for students; and also teaching parents about the appropriate guidance on children's career planning. Future research could investigate the current status of career education provision in elementary schools in China or other countries, and analyze whether it is a good starting point for providing career guidance to children to facilitate their career development in later years.

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