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[Bing-Kwan Chan](#)*, [Simon Tak-Mau Chan](#), [Esther Yin-Nei Cho](#), [Yee-May Chan](#)

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Article

To Overcome or Be Overwhelmed? Contextual Disadvantages in School-To-Work Transition of South and Southeast Asian Youth in Hong Kong-Chinese Context

Bing Kwan Chan ^{1,*}, Simon Tak-Mau Chan ¹, Esther Yin-Nei Cho ¹ and Yee-May Chan ²

¹ Felizberta Lo Padilla Tong School of Social Sciences, Saint Francis University, Tseung Kwan O, Hong Kong

² Independent researcher

* Correspondence: bkchan@sfu.edu.hk

Abstract

Background: While Hong Kong is renowned for being a multicultural city, its South and Southeast Asian population has experienced disadvantages in various aspects of lives, particularly career development. This study adopts the Systems Theory Framework (STF) to investigate the school-to-work transition of Pakistani, Nepalese, Filipino, and Indian youth in the Hong Kong-Chinese context. **Methods:** A qualitative approach using individual and focus group interviews was employed to uncover and critically examine the educational and career aspirations, and the contextual factors in the transition pathways of educational and career advancement experienced by these ethnic groups. **Results:** Findings show that career aspirations among South and Southeast Asian youth undergoing the school-to-work transition are comparatively lower than those of their counterparts who remain in secondary education. This disparity is attributed to a range of contextual factors, particularly shortcomings in education policy and limited cultural competence within Hong Kong-Chinese society, both of which contribute to the erosion of occupational outlook among these underrepresented groups. **Conclusions:** This study demonstrates the critical impact of contextual factors on the ethnic inequality of school-to-work transition, which are more overwhelming than can be overcome by personal and family efforts. Without addressing these issues, racial equality and equal opportunity in school-to-work transition can only remain a persistent challenge.

Keywords: ethnically diverse youth; ethnic inequality; Hong Kong Chinese; South and Southeast Asians; Systems Theory Framework; school-to-work transition

1. Introduction

The school-to-work transition has become one of the important topics in youth studies in the last two decades, especially under the condition of globalization and risk society [1–3]. The problems of transition experienced by young people have been thoroughly examined in different countries including Hong Kong [4–6] which has been acclaimed as a world city, lauded for its openness to the outside world and its diverse culture. This paper critically discusses the struggles experienced by, and contextual barriers confronting, South and Southeast Asian youth in their pathways of school-to-work transition. By ‘South and Southeast Asian youth’ we specifically refer to young people who are ethnic Pakistanis, Nepalese, Filipinos, and Indians. These ethnic groups constitute the largest non-Chinese ethnic population in Hong Kong. This paper is based primarily on the qualitative aspects of a larger research project which seeks to understand the obstacles faced by South and Southeast Asian youth in their school-to-work transition and their struggles in overcoming these barriers.

Similar to other societies with liberal welfare regime, in the social policy context of Hong Kong, poverty and vulnerabilities are often understood as personal and family incompetence and thus

individual responsibilities [7–9]. We found that the disadvantages experienced by South and Southeast Asian youth in the school-to-work transition are heavily socially produced embedded in the Hong Kong-Chinese context, which are more overwhelming than can be overcome by personal and family efforts. We argue that these contextual disadvantages experienced in school-to-work transition are an on-going process that will continue unabated without social intervention, and the result will be social segregation of ethnically diverse groups from society.

In this paper, we shall begin by highlighting the demographic and social backdrop of South and Southeast Asian people in Hong Kong with a specific focus on disadvantages confronting them, followed by the discussion of theories of school-to-work transition, particularly the Systems Theory Framework (STF) which will be adopted to the analysis in this study. The findings will then be discussed in the light of STF, with a critical examination of the contextual barriers experienced by these youth groups and the need to tackle the structure issues in order to bring about genuine racial equality and equal opportunity in all the young people with ethnically diverse backgrounds.

1.1. Theories of School-to-Work Transition

Career development theories have evolved over time. Early theories, such as Parson's Theory of Personality [10], focused on the characteristics of individuals and workplaces, emphasizing the content of career choice. The later developed person-environment fit theories explored the interaction between individuals and their work contexts. For example, Holland's [11] Theory of Vocational Personalities in Work Environment focused on individual occupational choice and the interactive process between the individual and the work environment. Subsequent developmental theories, represented by Super's [12] Self-concept Theory of Career Development, emphasized the sequential and developmental nature of career growth. By the 1980s and 1990s, theorists began integrating both content and process, recognizing the role of cognition and the dynamic nature of career paths. One of the examples is Social Cognitive Career Theory which emphasizes the core roles of three variables, namely self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals in vocational interests, choices, career success and satisfaction [13]. In more recent years, contemporary approaches such as Savickas's [14] career construction theory have incorporated constructivist and social constructionist influences on the roles of individuals and environments in career development.

The Systems Theory Framework (STF), first introduced by McMahon & Patton [15], provides an integrative and flexible approach to acknowledge cultural contexts, personal development, and the evolving macroenvironment. STF is an attempt to present a comprehensive framework of a series of interconnecting systems of influence on career development. At the heart of the framework is the individual system which refers to a series of personal influences such as gender, age, abilities, and ethnicity. The social system refers to the other people systems with which the individual interacts. For example, family, educational institutions and peers. The environmental-societal system refers to the broader system of the society and the environment composed of a series of subsystems such as geographic location, government policy, and values, beliefs, and attitudes of the public [16].

The STF aims to identify two broad components of career development, namely content and process. Content is defined as the intrinsic (individual characteristics) and contextual (the environment) influences on career development. Process refers to recursive interaction of influences within the individual and within the context, and between the individual and the context and change over time [16].

The influence of content on one's career development varies across stages of school-to-transition. Patton & McMahon [16] argue that at the school leaving stage, age, individual ability, family, socioeconomic status, and the employment market are particularly important to career development. Using STF as a guiding framework for analysis of the data derived from the qualitative interviews, Tsui et al. [17] also found that a majority of senior secondary school students in Hong Kong aspired to pursue post-secondary education and that their educational and career aspirations were influenced by their academic performance and personal interests (individual system), their families (social system) and job prospects (environmental-societal system).

The STF is not a theory of career development. Thus, it does not offer a detailed account of particular phenomena and can be perceived as general and abstract. Rather, STF takes a pluralistic view of career theories which provide explanation of specific elements of career development that can be utilized in theory and practice. On a basis of this, practitioners can focus on individuals and their relevant systems and processes. Therefore, practitioner's interventions are more likely to be tailored to the needs of the individual or specific group rather than the theoretical preferences of the practitioner [16]. In the light of this, this study adopts the STF to investigate the school-to-work transition of South and Southeast Asian Youth in the Hong Kong-Chinese context.,

1.2. Population of South and Southeast Asians in Hong Kong

In the academic sector and some Western societies, the term "minority" can carry pejorative connotations, as it is often associated with inferiority, marginalization, or deficiency relative to the majority group [for example 18, 19]. However, the term "ethnic minority" (EM) remains widely used by both the Hong Kong government and broader Hong Kong society. EMs refer to people who reported themselves being of non-Chinese ethnicity in the population census [20,21]. This group is highly diverse, ranging from white people from rich Western economies, to East Asians from Japan and South Korea, to relatively poorer South Asians from Pakistan, Nepal, India, the Philippines, Indonesia and the like. According to the most recent census data, in 2021 a total of 619,568 people of ethnically diverse backgrounds are living in Hong Kong, comprising 8.4% of the total population. After excluding foreign domestic helpers who are not the target of this study, there were 301,344 ethnically diverse people, making up 4.1% of the whole population. Among them, 57.1% were South and Southeast Asians with remainder were whites and ethnic groups. Of those non-Chinese Asians, Indians and Nepalese constituted the largest shares (22.4% and 17.2%, respectively) of the population, followed by Filipinos and Pakistanis who represented 15.2% and 14.1%, respectively [21,22].

1.3. The Socioeconomic Disadvantage

Despite the fact that the overall labour participation rates of South and Southeast Asians are on par with those of the overall population, Pakistani, Nepalese and Filipinos usually hold low-skilled and low-paying jobs. Census data in 2021 shows that 28.8% of Pakistanis and 24.5% of Nepalese worked in elementary occupations, more than double the proportion of the overall population (10.0%) [21]. In addition, far fewer South and Southeast Asians occupied managerial, administrative and professional posts compared to the overall population, with the exception of Indians who, for historical and family reasons, were able to engage in those more stable and high-paying jobs [23].

As far as income is concerned (again with the exception of Indians), Pakistanis, Nepalese and Filipinos all have a median monthly income that is much lower than that of the overall working population. For instance, the median income of Pakistanis was HK\$15,000 (approximately US\$1923), representing only 77% of the median income of the overall Hong Kong population in 2021 (HK\$19,500/US\$2500). The median incomes of Nepalese and Filipinos were HK\$17,000 (US\$2179) and HK\$16,500 (US\$2115), respectively, around 85% of the overall median income. Among Indians, who appear to be doing relatively well in employment, the median income of Indian women (HK\$20,000/US\$2,564) was about 57% as large as their male counterparts [21]. The low incomes of Pakistanis, Nepalese and Filipinos indicate their social disadvantages and the marginalization of the labour market. The ability of South and Southeast Asians to select an occupation appears not to be as equal and free in Hong Kong.

1.4. The Educational Disadvantage

Over the years more people of non-Chinese ethnic origin have been able to get into higher education in Hong Kong. In the academic year 2011/12, one hundred and forty-five ethnically diverse young people were admitted to government funded university degree programmes, versus 253 in 2016/17, representing an increase of 74.5% over five years. The increase of ethnically diverse youth in

self-financed degree programmes is even more remarkable—from 23 to 529 between 2011 and 2016, a 22-times increase [24]. However, the increase in higher education participation does not paint a rosy picture of education equality. For instance, government census statistics show that in 2021 the school attendance rate of ethnically diverse groups aged between 18 and 24 was only 50%, which was 5.8% below the age-specific group of the entire population [21].

Moreover, there are structural barriers which impede South and Southeast Asians from equal educational pursuit. With respect to the learning and teaching of the Chinese language, the lack of supportive policies and learning-appropriate curricula are, amongst other factors, important barriers to educational advancement [25]. Due to the lack of a supportive Chinese language environment within families and ethnic minority communities, many ethnically diverse students encounter difficulties in acquiring Chinese as a second language. As a result, they often struggle to cope with the Chinese Language curriculum of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), which is designed for ethnic Chinese students. To facilitate their progression into further studies or employment, the Hong Kong government allows non-Chinese speaking students to pursue alternative Chinese language qualifications, including the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), General Certificate of Education (GCE), and Applied Learning Chinese (ApL(C)) [26]. While these alternative qualifications are accepted by all higher education institutions, the current curriculum offerings for ethnic minorities do not adequately address the practical language demands of daily vocational tasks and workplace communication.

Law and Lee [23] argue that Hong Kong is a legacy of white supremacy established in the colonial era, where the use of English was not only necessary but was also a class symbol. Lower educated people and those who occupied low-income and low-skill jobs relied on colloquial Chinese for their job survival. While the class-based embeddedness of language use may have been taken for granted as a natural matter of ordinary life, it has had long-lasting negative impacts on the school-work transition of ethnically diverse youth. One typical example is that the majority of South and Southeast Asians, especially those from Pakistan, Nepal and the Philippines, seek elementary and non-skilled occupations which usually require colloquial Chinese. This problem is both a cause and consequence of labour market marginalization, and it makes job seeking much more difficult [24].

1.5. Limited Cultural Competence

Limited cultural competence within Hong Kong-Chinese society also contributes significantly to the disadvantaged circumstances faced by the ethnically diverse groups. Previous studies commonly suggested that ethnically diverse groups are not well accepted by the majority population, who are generally ethnic Chinese [27]; that child poverty among South and Southeast Asians are relatively more prevalent [28]; and that many of them suffer from racial inequalities in education [29]. In this regard, Law and Lee [30] rightly argued that discriminations against ethnically diverse groups are deeply embedded in both the culture and the socio-political structure of Hong Kong. Faced with low receptivity by the 'host environment', disadvantages may sometimes be accepted as natural by all parties, including the South and Southeast Asians themselves.

In our subsequent discussions, we reveal the disadvantages and obstacles in the transitional pathway of education and career advancement of South and Southeast Asian youth. We argue that social segregation and social exclusion is both a cause and consequence of these disadvantages, which urgently need to be addressed.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach, which has the merit of exploring beliefs, attitudes, and viewpoints, to investigate the school-to-work transition of ethnically diverse groups. Semi-structured individual and focus group interviews were used to tap into their views on their experiences transitioning to careers. The aim of qualitative research is to seek the subjective truth, meanings and experience of the participants in the social, political and cultural contexts in which they

live [31–33]. This is especially important for studies conducted in multicultural settings, as participants' experiences and the meanings they assign to those experiences can easily be buried under mainstream cultural interpretations.

2.1. Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit South and Southeast Asian youth, including Pakistani, Nepalese, Filipino, and Indian, who were at different stages of transition paths, for the study. Four categories of youth were recruited: (1) senior secondary students (secondary 4 to 6, S4-S6) who were preparing for post-secondary planning, (2) students who made the transition to post-secondary education, (3) working youth, and (4) youth who were unsuccessful at different stages of different pathways.

The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, in collaboration with local non-government organizations and secondary schools. While some of them expressed a preference for individual interviews, since that provides flexibility in scheduling, others felt more comfortable talking in a group setting. A total of 53 South and Southeast Asian youth in different transition paths were recruited for the study; 26 took part in individual interviews whilst 27 participated in focus group interviews. The characteristics of the South and Southeast Asian participants are shown in Tables 1 and 2. In order to cross-validate the findings related to schools and employment market, individual interviews were also conducted with eight secondary school teachers and ten employers from companies of different industries and different sizes. The details of employers are listed in Table 3.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants in Individual Interviews.

(a) S4-S6 Students (n=16)				
Ethnicity	Gender	Age	n	
Pakistani	F	18	4	
	F	19	2	
	M	16	1	
Nepalese	F	18	2	
	F	17	1	
	M	18	1	
Filipino	F	17	1	
	M	17	1	
Indian	M	19	1	
	F	18	1	
	F	21	1	

(b) From S6/Post-secondary Education to Work (n=10)				
Current Work Status	Educational Level	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Full-time	Bachelor's degree	M	28	Nepalese
	Bachelor's degree	M	24	Indian
	Advanced diploma	F	26	Nepalese
	Higher diploma	M	23	Nepalese
	Higher diploma	F	27	Filipino
Part-time	S6	M	21	Pakistani
	Higher diploma	M	21	Pakistani
Unemployed	Bachelor's degree	M	25	Pakistani
	Bachelor's degree	M	22	Pakistani
	Foundation diploma	F	23	Indian

Table 2. Characteristics of participants in focus groups.

(a) S6 to Post-secondary Education (n=20)			
Educational Level	Gender	Age	Ethnicity

Associate degree	M	19	Nepalese
	F	20	Filipino
Higher diploma	F	21	Nepalese
	F	20	Nepalese
	M	19	Filipino
	F	19	Indian
Bachelor's degree	M	21	Pakistani
	F	21	Pakistani
	F	20	Pakistani
	M	20	Pakistani
	F	20	Nepalese
	M	22	Filipino
	F	20	Filipino
	F	20	Filipino
	F	19	Filipino
	M	22	Filipino
	M	20	Indian
	F	20	Indian
	M	19	Indian
M	18	Indian	

(b) From S6/Post-secondary Education to Work (n=7)

Current Work Status	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
<i>From S6:</i>			
Full-time	F	20	Filipino
Part-time	F	28	Pakistani
Unemployed	F	20	Filipino
	F	24	Pakistani
Unemployed	F	21	Pakistani
	<i>From Post-secondary:</i>		
Part-time	F	23	Pakistani
Unemployed	M	23	Pakistani

Table 3. Characteristics of Employers in Individual Interviews.

Employer	Industry	No. of employees	Experience in hiring South and Southeast Asian staff
1	Security system and multi-media design	< 10	No
2	Catering	300-499	Yes
3	Recruitment agency	300-499	Yes
4	Transportation & storage	< 10	Yes
5	Whole sales & retails	10-49	No
6	Information technology	< 10	No
7	Manufacturing	< 10	No
8	Primary School	100-299	Yes
9	The Police Force	> 500	Yes
10	Social Service	> 500	Yes

2.2. Individual and Focus Group Interviews

Human subject ethical approval for conducting this study was obtained from the university of the authors. Prior to each individual and focus group interview, the purpose and procedures of the study were explained to the participants, including an emphasis on voluntary participation and

confidentiality. They were informed of their right to decline or discontinue the interviews at any time. All participants were provided the informed consent. The interview guide for both individual and focus group interviews primarily covered: 1) the overall experiences in school-to-work transitions of ethnically diverse youth, and 2) the observation on the social barriers encountered by ethnically diverse youth in transitions. All interviews with ethnically diverse youth were conducted in the English language while those with teachers and employers were in Chinese. Each individual interview lasted about one hour whilst focus group interviews were about two hours in length. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis, without revealing details of the participants.

2.3. Thematic Analysis

This study used thematic analysis to analyse the data [34,35] based of STF. This technique searches for themes or patterns and is useful for identifying the key issues of specific individuals or groups in descriptive studies. An analytical search procedure was developed to identify the content and process embedded in the individual, social and environmental-societal systems of STF. The researchers first achieved familiarity with the data by reading the transcripts of each individual and focus group interview several times, to outline the initial findings. Then, the unique features of the data were noted, and preliminary codes generated. The researchers also discussed the codes, defined the relationships between the codes, and marked relevant text from each individual interview. A codebook was used to document potential codes/themes for the theoretical and reflective statements, maintain the audit trails, demonstrate procedural logic, and provide transparency [35,36]. A data-mining method was then used to condense the codes into meta-codes (clusters). Coding divergence and convergence was also addressed [37,38]. The codes were applied, and subsequently a search was carried out for themes and subthemes. The specifics of each subtheme were then analysed and refined into the main themes [36]. A semantic approach was used to match the themes to the basic codes. The researchers also progressed beyond the semantic contents and used a latent approach, which examined the underlying assumptions and interdependent concepts in the interviews.

3. Results

This study found no notable disparities across ethnic or gender groups, except for the gender roles among Pakistani and India participants, which will be discussed in a later session. Guided by the STF, several themes were identified and organized according to the individual, social, and environmental-societal systems that influence the school-to-work transition of the South and Southeast Asian youth in Hong Kong. Details are as follows:

3.1. Individual System

3.1.1. Aspiration

Findings derived from interviews with South and Southeast Asian students, teachers and employers show that educational and career aspirations among youth in post-secondary education or employment are comparatively lower than those of their peers still attending secondary school. In other words, secondary students usually demonstrated stronger educational and career aspirations.

If I can get a good result, I'll surely pursue post-secondary education... I think I can study further if I work harder... [Secondary 6 student, Pakistani, Female]

If you can work inside the governmental departments, if you can have a high status, Hong Kong can belong to you in the future. [Secondary 4 student, Pakistani, Male]

I think non-Chinese students mostly want to further their study, just like other Hong Kong students. . . . They want to continue their study, but they are unable to do it. . . . If there's no way for them to pursue further study, they'll just get a job. [Teacher, Chinese, 50s, Male]

There's no big difference [between ethnically diverse and ethnic Chinese students] in terms of education and career aspirations. [Teacher, Chinese, 30s, Male]

In contrast, ethnically diverse youth in post-secondary education and employment often demonstrate lower career aspirations. Even those with post-secondary qualifications frequently remained in elementary jobs for extended periods and expressed pessimism about their career development.

I have one very close friend . . . we end up going to the same university, then after that we went back to the workforce... my friend, he couldn't find a job.... so he ends up working as a construction worker.... Why is that? So my friend ends up what he is doing now more than 6 or 7 years, so he is always in that field. (Employed youth pursued Bachelor's degree, Nepalese, 20s, Male)

My friends...they did a 2-year degree, and they just stopped.... They said, "because I don't see a career. Because I've seen all other people after university graduates doing the same job. Why should I waste 2 more years and 2 more years' (tuition) fee?"... Like nowadays, [working for] delivery jobs (i.e., courier service), they earn like \$20 (US\$2564), 40k (US\$5128). So (But), a university graduate only earns \$15k (US\$1923). So why should we waste 4 years and get a low salary? Why we just not start working right now, make money and get whatever you want in the future. This is ...because of lack of job opportunities for university graduates...many (South and Southeast Asian) people would instead not to study in universities, even if they have good grades. [Working youth pursued bachelor's degree, Indian, 20s, Male]

Meanwhile, some employers perceived that the non-Chinese speaking staff, including locally and non-locally educated ones, generally showed a lower desire to develop their careers.

I feel that they (ethnically diverse youth) do not go beyond their bounds.... they may not proactively strive for opportunities of promotion or showing their performance. They are relatively fatalistic. That means they just fulfil the tasks assigned (by employers).[Employers 2 from a catering group]

It is obvious...They don't have to desire to get promoted. They are satisfied with the status quo.... I feel that compared to the ethnic Chinese staff, they are more satisfied with the status quo. [Employer 8 from a primary school]

3.1.2. Inadequate Chinese Language Proficiency

The other important content is Chinese language. English is also one of the two official languages. The mixture of Cantonese and English in everyday spoken communication is therefore widespread. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, in Hong Kong, the use of Cantonese dialect and written Chinese in everyday life and workplace is common. Most South and Southeast Asian youth indicated that inadequate Chinese language proficiency

Actually one of the difficulties was the language.... I tried to apply for another job as well., for like, in other companies, in IT, and as a customer service officer in other companies. But because of the Chinese languages, totally too difficult to find jobs... [Unemployed youth pursued bachelor's degree, Pakistani, 20s, Male]

I don't know how to speak Chinese. I did seek for jobs [like being an] artist and [a] shopkeeper. I have been finding jobs for 8 months and I applied for so many jobs, and I got 7 interviews. But they asked

me 'do you know how to speak Chinese (i.e., Cantonese)?' I said no. They don't give me a job. I think, nowadays, Chinese is very important in Hong Kong. [8 months unemployed youth without post-secondary education, Pakistani, 20s, Female]

Some employers from the large size organizations with specific missions are able to accommodate ethnically diverse staff with limited Chinese proficiency. For instance, Employer 10 from a social service agency hires ethnically diverse youth to develop services tailored to their ethnic communities. However, most employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that focus on the local market, considered Chinese language proficiency, including reading and writing, a basic job requirement.

We are a SME. Most of our clients come from Hong Kong. Though the email messages of most clients are in English, we need to prepare content in Chinese sometimes. For example, if you cannot read and write Chinese, it is difficult to make a website in Chinese. [Employer 6 from an information technology company]

Most (office documents) are in Chinese...Secondary level (of Chinese language proficiency) is adequate...that means they (job candidates) can read and speak Chinese. [Employer 1 from a security service and multimedia design company]

3.2. Social System: Family

3.2.1. Financial Hardship

As mentioned above, Census data shows that the income of ethnically diverse groups, particularly Pakistanis, Nepalese and Filipinos generally is much lower than that of the overall working population [17]. Our findings show how financial hardship frustrates South and Southeast Asian youth in making educational decisions and limits their aspirations for educational advancement beyond secondary school:

We are a family of six. My dad recently got out of his job. My mum is unemployed. She is a housewife. . . . My brother is going to primary [school] and my other brother going to high school. . . . Right now, we thought if we can handle all the expenses . . . with only one person working in the family and me part-timing. It is not going to be enough for a family of six . . . so it is definitely something to look out for when you try to study again. Because apart from all the bills you have to pay . . . you have to pay for your student loan as well. It is monthly . . . so that is definitely one thing to consider. [Working youth going to pursue a higher diploma, Filipino, 20s, Female]

A teacher observed, some ethnically diverse parents might think that pursuing post-secondary education is too expensive for the family:

They (parents) would think that "oh, don't waste time, don't waste money!" But it may be because they have suffered a lot... that means, they can't even afford the fees, that's the tuition fees for studying. In fact, this is so... nothing that we can do... Recently, in fact, there're three (ethnically diverse) students, Form 6 (equivalent to the Grade 12 in the U.S.) ones. They want to pursue an associate degree, foundation diploma, or higher diploma. They're siblings...that is, they graduate from Form 6 at the same time. And now among the three, maybe only two of them can pursue further study as there's not enough money at home. So, that is very frustrating indeed... [Teacher, Chinese, 30s, Female]

Also, some are caught in a dilemma where they struggle between going to work to support their families and pursuing further studies which they find hard to afford.

I have the chance to study. My supervisor told me that I could study for a teaching assistant or something . . . related to a social worker. They can support me. But... I think maybe I cannot do it because I have some family issues. Since I am the oldest, so I always like independent, and I will care for my family. I need to pay a rent . . . and then I don't want to burden my father for everything. I want to help my father . . . that's what in my mind, I just [need to] keep working. [Working youth without post-secondary education, Pakistani, 20s, Female]

Even though the Hong Kong government offers a non-means-tested loan scheme for full-time tertiary students, some youngsters worried about whether they would be able to repay it in the future.

Even if you get a loan, it's like specifically a recycle of money: you'll get it, and you have to give it back. But what if you are still going on, the loan keeps adding on and on. And what if you are not able to finish up . . . like, for example, you have to stop in the middle, then how are you going to pay up the full loan? So, there can be a setback. [Youth pursuing a diploma, Nepalese, Female]

Due to the financial difficulty, some South and Southeast Asian youth initially wanted to pursue post-secondary education, lost interest in study once they entered the labor market in their gap year. This is one of the examples:

I graduated from F.6 (Secondary 6). But I had a plan in my mind to go for further study, but I would take a gap year. But I found a job...start working for 1 year, and I wanted to continue working there. Therefore, later, I lost my interest in further study. So I didn't go for the study. [Working youth without post-secondary education, Pakistani, 20s, Female]

3.2.2. Insufficient Information

Family and parents have a significant role in the transitions of ethnic diverse youth. A Pakistani post-secondary student shares his view:

At the end of the day, the EM youth would listen to their parents. So, whatever schools are telling their kids in school... okay, there might be a lot of information. Still, then that information would be useless when the discussion (decision) is the parents' discussion (decision), right? If the student is going to the career talks, study talks, whatever, he would use so much time to listening to a talk. In the end, parents' decision... [Working youth pursued a bachelor's degree, Indian, 20s, Male]

However, most South and Southeast Asian youth reported that their family members neither understood the education system in Hong Kong nor had sufficient information about tertiary education. The information poverty led this group of youth to either abandon plans for further education or select subject areas that did not align with their personal interests.

I have friends that after Form (Secondary) 5 they didn't do anything. They just went directly to the workforce. Coz they didn't have any choice. They didn't have anyone say (to advise them): oh you can do this, or you can do that... [Working youth pursued bachelor's degree, Nepalese, 20s, Male]

I had no idea, no concept . . . nobody guides me . . . If I had pursued social sciences, maybe that was the correct route for me to be a social worker. But uh . . . nobody guided me at that time, and my parents were not educated, and then I had no one to ask. My dad was in the hospitality industry, so I thought I would get in the hospitality industry. . . . Nobody guided me. So that's why I wasted one year [to study hospitality]. [Working youth pursued advanced diploma, Nepalese, 20s, Female]

3.2.3. Cultural Practice

Concerning the family support to ethnically diverse students, the overall mindset of their parents and their gender role perception or practice, in particular, may influence the education and career paths of female youth, especially among some Indian and Pakistani females. They are more likely to be required to get married and/or stop studying after Secondary education.

I would definitely say that culture influence does affect your choice...I mean even if you want to study a lot of times (longer time), you wouldn't be able to. One of my friends was a really good student in school... like she used to get a lot of good grades and stuff like that. But then in Form 5, she found out, she's getting married next year. She wouldn't be able to get DSE. So, she stopped studying after that... She knew that she couldn't pursue further. So I think culture does affect as well. [Youth pursuing bachelor's degree, Pakistani, Female]

3.3. Social System: Schools with Limited Opportunities for Career Exposure

Both teachers and youngsters perceived limited opportunities for South and Southeast Asian students to gain career exposure. However, this issue is attributed by numerous factors. Some ethnically diverse youth reported that class teachers provided insufficient guidance on career planning:

I feel that schools also have the responsibility to inform their ethnic minority students about how they can [have a] better [chance to] enter university, [or] the different options that they can take. . . . I feel that schools that admit ethnic minorities should have the responsibility to basically give the students a different pathway to university. . . . Let them know the different options that they can take. [Youth pursuing bachelor's degree, Filipino, Male]

Meanwhile, some teachers reported that language barriers, particularly limited Cantonese proficiency, hinder students' access to career information and internship opportunities. For example, some career event staff may have limited oral English skills or readiness to communicate in English. A teachers also shared her experience:

Career counselling doesn't focus on this group of Non-Chinese speaking students... actually, the chances for internship for them are minimal... Some agencies provide internship for students... that is, at the summer of F.4 and F.5 (equivalent to Grades 10 and 11 in the U.S.) ... when they learn that the students are Non-Chinese speaking, they then refuse to take them...or because there is no one being able to speak English in working site or place. Still, the Non-Chinese speaking students can only speak English... then they won't provide the internship for these students. So this again limits their chances to have the exposure. [Teacher, Chinese, 30s, Female]

In some cases, students' limited career exposure may also stem from a lack of awareness about the importance of participating in such activities. One teacher shared his experience to illustrate this point.

If you organize the activities on Saturday, the attendance rate is only 40 to 50% ...that means you would worry a lot, even I organise the activities during weekdays. The highest attendance rate is only 80%... 80%!! ...every time going out (for these activities), I usually have to say sorry to the organisations ... to tell them how many students who are not able to come... to tell them that the students said they were sick... so many reasons...not attending school on that day, have to take care of siblings after school...so many reasons. [Teacher, Chinese, aged 40s, Male]

Considering the perspectives of various stakeholders, it appears that some career-related programmes may not adequately accommodate the needs of ethnically diverse students. Schools may also fall short in enhancing awareness among this group about available opportunities.

3.4. Environmental-Societal System

3.4.1. Education Policy: Shortcomings of Chinese Language Curriculum

Chinese language proficiency varies among ethnically diverse youth from different backgrounds. Some can read, write, and speak Chinese well. However, a majority of students can barely speak Cantonese while some are neither good at Chinese nor English. Teachers and students generally agreed that the disparity was partly caused by the variations of education pathways.

I was in a Chinese kindergarten, so like my Chinese is really good... in kindergarten, we learn early how to write sentences, so (but) later, the difference is bigger. And, I also feel like mixing the classes with locals is a really good thing... so, like we can communicate with them and try to exchange our languages...' [Youth pursuing an associate degree, Nepalese, Male]

I have been sent back to India, so I don't... the basic thing is Chinese... I was just given four years, four years yea, to learn like Chinese... how can I learn Chinese in these four years? It's not enough, right? [Secondary 6 student, Indian, Female]

Some maybe... in Pakistan, Nepal, Philippines... maybe come to Hong Kong after finishing Form 3 or Form 4 (roughly equivalent to U.S. Grade 9 or 10) there. When you come to Hong Kong, you may start at Form 4 or Form 3...but then, you may know nothing about Chinese... Turns out, there may be a great discrepancy regarding the [language] level... that means in a class of students, there can be some students that know nothing about Chinese, maybe some have been in Hong Kong for several years, but then, there may be some were born and raised in Hong Kong, so, in fact, there are different types of students...' [Teacher, Chinese, 30s, Male]

However, even the locally born and educated students indicated difficulties in employment. Most of the participants were unable to cope with the mainstream HKDSE Chinese curriculum and had to opt for alternative Chinese courses, including the GCE, GCSE, and ApL(C). Even though the Hong Kong government has implemented the Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework in local primary/secondary schools to support non-Chinese speaking students master the language since 2014, and has provided additional funding to primary and secondary schools to enabling schools to adopt various intensive teaching modes for these students [39], youngsters, teachers and employers all criticized the shortcomings of these alternative courses, which ultimately failed to meet workplace requirements.

What grade I... um...(Grade) A (in GCSE)...(but) I still don't know how to write a sentence in Cantonese (Chinese)! [Secondary 6 student, Filipino, Male]

In terms of language... because there is a big difference between GCE and (HK)DSE, so there's no middle point... if you can't do this DSE, which most of us cannot, you have to go for GCE which is way lower than (HK)DSE...I feel there should be something which is in between... which is suitable for EMs (ethnic minorities) who want to study in Hong Kong. Because (HK)DSE is a little too hard but GCE is very easy for us... [Youth pursuing bachelor's degree, Pakistani, Female]

When entering the labour market, you then find that their Chinese language proficiency is not sufficient... that is insufficient for them to survive in society. This problem, in fact, needs...well, not only to be handled by the schools... that is... to do it on our own in schools. There should be a consensus in society... the society that is the government to take action, or EDB [Education Bureau] needs to take action...i.e., to coordinate these works... that is the pedagogy... that is to design the overall syllabus...[including] the teaching materials. [Teacher, Chinese, 30s, Female]

I think the biggest issue is whether they (ethnically diverse job applicants) can read Chinese...Those (job applicants) come to our job interviews can speak (Cantonese)...They usually say that they can

read (Chinese). Then I will (show them a magazine in Chinese and ask) "Can you read?" They cannot read...Chinese and English reading and speaking skills which are usually listed in our job requirements [Employer 3 from a recruitment agency]

3.5. Environmental-Societal System: Employment Market with Limited Cultural Competence

Our findings show that when the South and Southeast Asians are rejected in job applications, the reasons often include that their cultural practices and the public image were not accepted by ethnic Chinese employers, colleagues and the broader public. Some employers claimed that the public image of South and Southeast Asians is shaped by the negative news coverage of refugees, illegal laborers and criminal gangs. These findings suggest that limited competence exist not only within workplaces but also across the broader employment market of the Hong Kong-Chinese context.

I wore this [long] headscarf to the interview [in a private learning centre], and the interviewer asked me if I could take it off. I said the headscarf is for my religion. They said it was not safe, the students might be scared. They asked if it was clean. I said I can change to a shorter version; I change the scarf every day. It made feel . . . like I wasn't accepted. (Youth pursued bachelor's degree, Pakistani, 20s, Female)

I believe that my company's image will be influenced. . . My clients will believe that I underpay them (ethnically diverse staff) or that I hire illegal laborers. [Employer 1 from a security service and multimedia design company]

My company previously located in an industrial building. They (ethnic Chinese colleagues) always talked about the odor of some non-Chinese security guards. . . I did not know if they (ethnic Chinese colleagues) minded (working with ethnic diverse colleagues). However, they talked about that much. . . I do not worry about how they (ethnically diverse staff) work but I worry about how they work with my colleagues. [Employer 7 from a manufacturing company]

3.6. Social Segregation

The final theme identified in the interview data is social segregation which is not a subsystem in the STF. Rather, social segregation is considered the result led by the all the aforementioned influences. Our findings indicate that, as mentioned above, South and Southeast Asian students and their families often encounter difficulties in access information about further education and employment. The information poverty indicates the segregate between these ethnic group and the Hong Kong Chinese society. The social segregation is also reflected in the job-seeking channels used by these groups. Even those with post-secondary qualifications often rely on their networks to seek job. As shared by our participants:

Mostly I try to find the job through my own network, or on my own contacts, for the places, they know me, and I know (them). [Unemployed youth pursued bachelor's degree, Pakistani, 20s, Male]

It is just that sometimes when you are looking for a job. . . you have to have someone you know. So, for example, if you don't know anybody who can tell you what. . . for example, like how I get my first job? [It is] because of my friend [who can help]. . . so I think the platform is my friend. . . it is hard for you to find a job. . . [it] would be nice to know that something can help you look for it. [Working youth without post secondary education, Filipino, 20s, Female]

They (ethnically diverse workers) are mainly referred by acquaintances. . . or may ask the foremen. . . (who are the acquaintances?) Our colleagues' networks or friends. We offer bonus to them if the staff they referred work for a certain period. [Employer 4 from a transportation company]

Although some employers reported that they welcomed non-Chinese applicants, they did not receive application from these groups. As shared by some employers:

I have been responsible for recruitment for a certain period of time.... I got applications from Italy and France but I did not receive a lot from those (ethnically diverse applicants) in local society. As an employer, I think it is strange. [Employer 5 from a wholesale and retail company]

Recently, I recruited an accounting clerk. There was no application from EMs. This is an open recruitment published in English only through JobsDB.... I got applications from Canada...but there was no local EM applicant. [Employer 2 from a catering group]

4. Discussion

The school-to-work transition pathway of youth can be influenced by a wide range of factors. Although this study does not cover all of them, we identified six key factors based on the STF. The influence of these six factors are summarized in Table 4. We argue these six factors are interrelated and can largely explain the disadvantages faced by South and Southeast Asian youth during their transition from school to work.

Table 4. Factors affecting School-to-work transition of South and South Asian youth.

System	Content	Influence
Individual system	Decline in education and career aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Losing motivation for education and career advancement
	Inadequate Chinese language proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hindering access to education and employment information • Failure in meeting the language requirements of the labor market
Social system	Family with financial difficulty, information poverty and gender role (in some ethnic groups)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in support the further education • Insufficient information about education and employment • Limiting development of females
	School with improper career related programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited opportunities for career exposure
Environmental-societal system	Shortcoming of education policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate Chinese proficiency • Shortcomings of Chinese language • Improper career-related programs which accommodate the needs of ethnically diverse youth
	Employment market with limited cultural competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unequal access to the job market • Preventing the older generation from improving their employment and financial, thereby limiting their capacity to support the educational development of the next generation

4.1. Individual System

Within the individual system, we found that the aspirations of South and Southeast Asian youth in tertiary education and employment are noticeably lower than those of their counterparts still in secondary education. This suggests that their aspirations may be undermined by certain factors

during the transition from secondary education to higher education or employment, leading to a loss of motivation for further study or career development.

From the interviews, we found that Chinese language proficiency within the individual system may be one of the factors affecting their aspirations. Although these young people may gain admission to post-secondary programmes through alternative Chinese qualifications such as GCSE and GCE, when exploring employment opportunities, they often realize that their Chinese language ability remains inadequate for meeting the basic requirements of the most jobs. Employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises focused on the local market, usually refuse to hire these young people due to their limited Chinese proficiency.

4.2. Social System

Within the social system, both families and schools contain factors that can erode those young people's aspirations. The most prominent among these is financial hardship of family. As many South and Southeast Asian families tend to be in low-income situations, they are often unable to support their children in pursuing post-secondary education. Instead, they may expect their children to enter the workforce early to help relieve the family's financial burden. Even though the government offers loans and financial aid, these parents often lack access to relevant information and are unfamiliar with the opportunities for higher education for their children. As a result, many South and Southeast Asian students are required to abandon further education and take up low-paid, unskilled jobs. Additionally, some Pakistani and Indian families, due to gender roles in their culture, expect their daughters to marry upon completing secondary school or even earlier, leading them to discontinue their education.

Schools are meant to be key sources of information about further education and employment for students. However, our interview data revealed that many career-related activities fail to accommodate the needs of non-Chinese-speaking students. Schools also fall short in effectively raising awareness among these students about available career information, ultimately preventing them from accessing such resources in a timely manner.

4.3. Environmental-Societal System

How have these various factors come to exist? Two contents within the environmental-societal system help explain their formation. The first one is the inadequacy of education policy. For many years, non-Chinese-speaking students who are unable to cope with the HKDSE Chinese curriculum have had no choice but to pursue alternative qualifications such as the GCSE and ApL(C). However, as mentioned earlier, these programs do not equip students with the Chinese language proficiency required by the job market. Even those who complete post-secondary education may find their employment opportunities limited due to insufficient Chinese proficiency. Moreover, current policies do not support schools in offering tailored career guidance or employment-related activities for non-Chinese-speaking students.

The second factor is the limited cultural competence within Hong Kong-Chinese employment market. Some young participants reported experiencing rejection based on their ethnic attire during job applications. Some employers admitted concerns that hiring South and Southeast Asians might influence the image of the companies, or that it could disrupt workplace cohesion. These responses reflect cultural stereotyping and exclusion of South and Southeast Asians within Hong Kong-Chinese society. This may explain why many South and Southeast Asians, including older generations, have faced unequal treatment in employment and other aspects of daily life, often being forced into low-income jobs that contribute to ongoing financial hardship.

4.4. Social Segregation

The lack of cultural competence within the society has left South and Southeast Asians feeling socially excluded. Combined with the long-standing failure of Chinese language education policies,

generations of these underrepresented groups have been left with inadequate Chinese proficiency, hindering their ability to integrate into the Hong Kong-Chinese society. The result is persistent social segregation between Chinese society and ethnically diverse communities. One of the examples is that South and Southeast Asian parents often lack understanding of educational resources, and their children, despite holding post-secondary qualifications, tend to rely on ethnic networks to seek jobs. Even when job advertisements are posted in English, employers report receiving no applications from local ethnically diverse individuals.

5. Conclusions

In this paper we focused on the social genre of the four largest ethnically diverse groups, namely the Pakistanis, Nepalese, Filipinos and Indians, and illuminated the fact that they have been disadvantaged in Hong Kong, which proclaims itself a world city with rich and diverse cultures. Through the lens of STF, we uncovered and critically examined the contextual barriers faced by the youth of these ethnic groups in the pathways of school advancement and school-to-work transition. We found that despite the high aspiration in the period of secondary education, the educational and career aspirations of South and Southeast Asian youth are eroded by numerous interrelated obstacles which are not the natural consequences of being from different ethnic origins or individual incompetence. Rather, we found that most of these barriers are largely attributed by two factors embedded in the Hong Kong-Chinese context, namely the education policy and cultural competence. Deficiencies in education policy led to ethnically diverse students' inadequate Chinese language proficiency, which in turn hinder their access to further education and employment information, and restricted their capacity to meet the language requirements of the labor market. The limited cultural competence within Hong Kong-Chinese society not only hinders equal access to the job market for ethnically diverse youth, but also keeps the older generation of these ethnic groups in low-paid, elementary jobs, reducing their financial capacity to support their children's pursuit of higher education. These two contents in the environmental-society system led to social segregation between the disadvantaged ethnic diverse groups and the ethnic Chinese population, and the problem has further reinforced social disadvantages of these groups of young people. This creates a vicious cycle whose impact is too overwhelming to overcome. Piecemealed services are no longer adequate to address these problems and their perpetuation. Without a fundamental policy reconsideration with an aim to bring about genuine racial equality to help create transitional pathways for these ethnically diverse youth, equal opportunity in youth transition will remain only a myth.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ApL(C)	Applied Learning Chinese
EM	Ethnic minority
GCE	General Certificate of Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
IGCSE	International General Certificate of Secondary Education
HKDSE	Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education
STF	Systems Theory Framework

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