Lost In Transition: Revisiting Youth Training Policy in Hong Kong

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Abstract

With the rapid economic and social transformation, in addition to the dramatic impact of the financial crises, some young people are systematically excluded from the labour market or in a condition of working poor, and lost in the transition from school to work. In response to the severe youth unemployment problem, the Hong Kong Government has introduced a series of employment training programmes aiming to improve their employability. This article explores the experience of those in the youth training schemes, and tries to understand their struggles within the structural context. Social construction and myths in the transition process are reconsidered. And, policy and service implications are also discussed.

Key words: employability; Hong Kong; identity; youth employment

摘要
经济与社会的急剧转型，加之海啸式金融危机的冲击，一些年青人陷入“待业待学”的困境与身份迷失。为回应严峻的青年失业问题，政府推出了系列就业培训政策与服务，但其中隐而未发的社会建构及其带来的迷思值得反思。

关键词：就业能力 青年就业 身份认同 香港
Introduction

The recent crisis in the global economy has had an enormous impact on welfare provision and the labour market. OECD figures for 2011 show a steep increase in world unemployment, from 5.7% in the first quarter of 2008 to a post-war peak of 8.7% in the fourth quarter of 2009 (OECD, 2011). Although the economy might have recovered slightly, there is still a particular weakness in the area of youth unemployment. It is estimated that as many as 17.2% of those aged 15-24 are presently unemployed in the 30 countries of the OECD (Gurría, 2011; Martin, 2012).

Youth unemployment has become a global concern in the last decade (Bonna et al., 2002; Inui, 2003; Lassibille et al., 2001; Smyth, 2008; Stavreska, 2006; Yūji, 2007). Statistics show that, among the OECD countries, an average of 53% of 15 to 19 year-olds are ‘non-engaged’ (OECD, 2012), that is they are neither studying at school nor in employment. The so-called ‘scarring effects’ (O’Higgins, 2002) of their unsuccessful early experience could spread to their later career prospects (Gurría, 2011; Smith, 2012). Those suffering long time non-engagement tend to have a higher risk of poverty, problem behaviour (O’Higgins, 2002), psychological distress (Chen, 2011), and health problems (Hammarstrom & Janlert, 2002; Mitchell et al., 2002; O’Higgins, 2002; Reine et al., 2008).

The present article draws on earlier studies of non-engaged youth to consider the distinctive context of Hong Kong. Inspired by the existing studies, we are interested in the situation of the non-engaged youth in Hong Kong for its distinctive context. Youth unemployment is an increasing concern to the Hong Kong government. A series of training programs have been introduced to re-engage unemployed young school-leavers (Ngai & Cheung, 2004; Ngai & Ngai, 2007). Previous studies in Taiwan suggest that training may not have significant benefits in increasing young people’s employment opportunities, but that they do have a supportive effect on their

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social and emotional needs (Chen, 2011). However, little research has explored in this area in Hong Kong. This article contributes to the literature by exploring the experience of the Hong Kong youth in the training schemes, to understand how their experience may influence their identities and perspective on life. In addition, the efficiency and uncertainty of the training schemes is examined, leading to a reconsideration of the social context and policy assumptions in Hong Kong. Further suggestions for policies and services are discussed.

Economic and social transitions

The social, historical, and economic contexts are important in understanding individuals’ suffering (Mills, 1959). In respect of the issue of youth unemployment, the transition of the economy and society need to be considered. Globalisation, work and welfare, and new social divisions are three major dimensions of the ever-changing world, as stated in the post-war political economy theories (O’Brien & Penna, 1998). The period of globalisation is characterized by worldwide production, consumption and communication. The flow of capital, economic restructuring and financial crisis have their influence all around the world (Chan, 2004). The chase for capital across national boundaries leads to ruthless international competition (Mahler, 2004; O’Brien & Penna, 1998; Ramesh, 2004).

Consequently, a new form of social division is emerging. Knowledge and information are assuming more significant roles (Bell, 1973, as cited in O’Brien & Penna, 1998). Production is shifting from labour intensive manufacture to diverse service sectors (O’Brien & Penna, 1998, p.140). Those with a low education suffer insecurity in the ‘flexible’ working space (Smithson & Lewis, 2000; Smyth, 2008), as most of them only have the opportunity to obtain part-time, low-paid jobs with little protection (ILO, 2000; O’Brien & Penna, 1998). This new form of social division also

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excludes disadvantaged groups and intensifies the polarization between the rich and the poor (Frank & Cook, 1996; O’Brien & Penna, 1998). Under neo-liberal ideology, the states are ‘hollowing out’, emphasizing ‘flexibility’, competition, and the family’s responsibility to deal with individuals’ suffering (O’Brien & Penna, 1998; Tulgan, 2000). As a result, the welfare provision becomes fragmented, and social protection is less supportive (Cochrane, 1994; Jessop, 1993), consigning those market-losers and their families into greater poverty (O’Brien & Penna, 1998). The consequences of this process may extend across generations (Smith, 2012; Martin, 2012; Wong, 2006).

The struggle of youth in the Hong Kong Labour Market

The economy of Hong Kong experienced a prosperous period in the 1980s, but with jillions of HK dollars which used to be local capital being transferred to the adjoining Pearl River Delta in the 1990s, it began to suffer from the negative impact of globalisation (Chan, 2004; Feng, 2002; Legislative Council, 1995). These decades were followed by the decline of traditional manufacture and production industries, and a remarkable expansion in the service sector, and managerial and professional occupations (Chan, 2004; OECD, 2000). The open economy makes Hong Kong vulnerable to the fierce competition and cyclical economic changes (Chan, 2004). The coming of the knowledge economy benefits the professional and technical elites, at the expense of unskilled labour and the “grassroots” workers (Chan, 2004; O’Higgins, 2002). Tsang (2006: 99) states, ‘our employment policy aims to develop a well-trained, well-motivated and adaptable workforce’. Those with no particular occupational skill are the ‘primary casualties’, being forced to bear longer working hours and unequal income distribution to keep their livelihood (Chan, 2004; Wong, 2007). Yet the social provision is just a ‘safety net’,

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which cannot result in a positive improvement of the living standard of the working poor (Wong, 2007).

Youth is at a high risk in this transition towards a restructured economy in the context of globalization. Recent statistics have shown that the youth unemployment is deeply influenced by the precarious economic environment. In 1982, the unemployment rate was only 9.2% and 3.9% respectively among the age bands of 15-19 and 20-29; with the impact financial turmoil in Asia, the unemployment rate increased dramatically to 26.8% and 7.5% in 1999; a historic high of 30.2% and 8.7% was reached in 2003, after the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS); during the global financial crisis in 2009-2010, youth unemployment rate reached 20.8% among those aged 15-19, and 6.7% among those aged 20-29. The rate of the former group is almost five times that of the overall (i.e. 15 and over) unemployment rate in Hong Kong (Census & Statistics Department, 2012), which is in turn higher than in other areas (O’Higgins, 2002). Many early school-leavers have experienced a hard blow in their search for a job. As the labour supply largely exceeds the available job opportunities, employers have the privilege to select from those with better education and skills (O’Higgins, 2002), and those with incompatible knowledge and skills required by the labour market are unrelentingly excluded in this competition (Ngai & Ngai, 2007).

Previous studies have explored how the non-engaged youth are ‘being systematically propelled to the edges of conventional pathways to adulthood’ (Ngai & Ngai, 2007). Some have talked about the issues existing in current training programmes, and have formulated policy suggestions to tackle the problem (Ngai & Cheung, 2004). However, little concern has been paid to those unemployed young people who have participated in the training schemes but continue to face great challenges in the labour market,
and how their experiences might impact on their personal identities and future development.

An important stage for establishing identity

Adolescence is an important stage to explore personal identity (Erikson, 1959, as cited in Kidwell et al., 1995). Stepping from childhood to adulthood involves multiple transitions in education, training, employment status, and living environment (Coleman & Roker, 1998). In this stage, narrative identities are formulated, and self is vulnerable as it undergoes the challenges of a ‘...split of self images, a loss of center, and a dispersion’ in this vital developing process (Erikson, 1968, 1975, as cited in Kidwell et al., 1995). Having gone through these challenges, the narrative identity is constructed in time and culture, providing hope and a sense of unity, meaning and purpose in life (McAdams & Olson, 2010). The ‘social and technical skills, effective behavioural repertoires, and links with social and occupational networks’ are accumulated as essential capital in youth identity development (Coleman & Roker, 1998: 594). Thus, employment is the cornerstone in establishing their identity by indicating that young people play active roles in society, which is pivotal in their transition to adulthood (Mitchell et al., 2002).

Existing studies have explored the effect of unemployment on young people’s personal identity. Some indicate that the unemployment situation reflects social constraints that can frame the identity and experience of young people (Ball et al., 2000). However, some indicate that unemployment does not necessarily lead to negative self-esteem and adult identity; instead, the adaptation of the individual’s role as unemployed within his or her overall identity and ‘strength of identity formation’ appears to be more important (Patterson, 1997). Some have reported that identity serves as a mediator between unemployment and psychological wellbeing.

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(Meeus et al., 1997). In this perspective, identity is categorized into career identity and relational identity (McArdle et al., 2007; Meeus et al., 1997). Unemployment has more to do with one's work identity, while relational identity can serve as an important ‘buffer against psychological distress’, which means that those with good social support can compensate for unemployment in their youth and their consequent deficiency in work identity, while retaining their psychological wellbeing (Meeus et al., 1997; Wong, 2006). However, as Cote (1996) has shown, after the world entered the 20th century, the social support for youth developing their identity is no longer there, and the establishment of adults’ identities now rely on individuals’ own resources.

Variation in the strength of identity among unemployed youth reminds us to pay more attention to those at high-risk, with low work identity, and living in disadvantaged circumstances and lacking supportive relationship (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Meeus et al., 1997). In addition, studies in this area are mainly focused on the identity differences among the youth with different employment status, but little attention has been paid in the present social and cultural context to identity formation and the confusion that young people may suffer as they move between unemployment and youth training schemes,

Training schemes in tackling youth unemployment
To cope with the problem, the Hong Kong government has launched a series of training schemes for non-engaged youth. Among these various programmes, the core one is YPTP & YWETS (the combined Youth Pre-employment Training Programme and the Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme). Launched separately in 1999 and 2002 by the Labour Department, these two schemes were integrated into the single YPTP & YWETS in 2009. Its objectives are to increase the employability of young

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people by enhancing their self-understanding, work aptitude, and job skills. It aims to provide ‘a comprehensive platform of job search with one-stop and diversified pre-employment and on-the-job training for young school-leavers aged 15 to 24 with educational attainment at sub-degree or below level’. (Labour Department, 2010)

The YPTP & YWETS programme consists of two main sessions. In the pre-employment training session, there are core courses and elective courses. The former one lasts for 48 hours and aims at equipping the trainees with ‘basic knowledge and application skills on career planning, interpersonal skills, job search methods, etc’. It is mainly for those aged 15 to 19 and those who have not joined the programme before. Those who exceed the basic requirements can also be recommended by their case managers after an initial assessment. The latter session includes many training courses on discipline and motivation (80 hours), computer application (48 to 80 hours), and kinds of job-specific skills (the content varies with courses). Trainees can have $30 per day as allowance if they achieve at least 80% attendance. After that, they can take part in one-month’s work attachment training. That is designed to enable them to ‘acquire work experience, develop potential and explore employment opportunities’. Upon completion of the attachment, an allowance of $2000 is paid to them. Within the 6 to 12 months’ on-the-job training, trainees work under the mentorship with experienced staffs. In this stage they can also apply for some vocational training courses and examination. The financial supports include $2000 subsidy per month and a maximum of $4,000 for additional training and examination. Special employment projects are tailor-made for various industries. A case manager is also assigned to during the two year service programme. (Labour Department, 2010)

According to the statistics, the training schemes have already enjoyed some success (Tsang, 2006). From September 2009 to August 2010, the
number attending pre-employment training was around 6900, and 4600 trainees ‘were placed into training vacancies under the YPTP&YWETS’, in addition, 1100 have obtained jobs in the market with the help of the case managers (Labour Department, 2011). But recent studies, on the other hand, criticize it as a way to keep ‘the young people ‘off the streets’ while keeping unemployment figures down’, and there are doubts about how effectively the training scheme recognises and matches market needs (Ngai & Cheung, 2004; Ngai & Ngai, 2007). In response to such doubts the present study explores the experience of non-engaged youth as they experience the transition from school to work, paying particular attention to the social and economic contexts of their involvement in employment training schemes.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

In order to better understand the experience of the young people in transition, and how it impacts on their identity formation, the theoretical framework should combine ‘political economic analysis with recent theorizations of subjectivity formation and fluid identities’ (Jeffrey, 2008; see also Figure 1 on p. 86).

The present study aims to demonstrate how young people’s training experiences influence their personal choices, and the restructuring of their personal identity and future development. The research focus includes both the benefits that the schemes bring to them, and the various outcomes that result from their different conditions and personal choices. The study also addresses how they cope with the difficulties and uncertainties they face.
Data collection

In order to accurately understand the young people’s difficulties and their experience in the training schemes, triangulation is used in this study. Data was collected via individual interviews, and both the young people and the frontline social workers associated were invited to participate in the research.

As the YPTP & YWETS is the core training scheme for non-engaged youth, aged 15-24, with low-education attainment, we took this as our criteria to select our sample. This part of our data was jointly collected by a group for a class assignment in a course taken in September-December 2011. One of our group members had served as a case manager in the YPTP and YWETS training schemes for more than eight years, and he took an active role in choosing three typical cases that he had previously worked with as research participants.

We also interviewed three frontline social workers who had worked with the youth participating in the YPTP & YWETS programmes. These
interviews were conducted in January-February 2012. Each interview lasted for around one hour, and some were interviewed a second time for clarification. To check whether our understanding of the interview fitted their interpretations, we provided interviewees with transcripts used in the research and a summary of our main findings. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, and we have translated the data into English in this article. The names of the interviewees mentioned are pseudonyms.

Results

*From an unknown to a positive development*

The interviews reveal that most participants in the YPTP & YWETS training schemes may not have clear goals at the beginning. Some of them are introduced by their friends, some join the programmes to kill time and get extra allowances, and some wish to make friends, while still others are asked to do so by their parents. They engage in the programmes with little knowledge and little expectation.

One of our interviewees is called ‘Jim’. He had no interest in traditional studies, and was perceived as a trouble-maker in school. He dropped out, and now had no goals in his life or any plan to find a job. After isolating himself for a year, he was asked to participate in YPTP & YWETS involuntarily. According to his case manager, ‘Noam’, ‘At that time, he was with low education attainment, lack of work experience, lack of confidence, and low working motivation. His situation, in fact, is very common among the young people in the training schemes’.

Most jobs in the labour market require a minimum education to Form 5 of high school, with five passing grades in the final examinations, namely Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). However, in many case the young people on the programmes do not fulfil that requirement. Those with Form 5 education level, has already been treated as

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“special case” as mentioned by Noam. But even for them, the failure in the HKCEE could also be a strike to strive from school to work. Noam shared with us a ‘special case’ who spoke of her despair and uncertainty:

Due to her unsatisfactory result in HKCEE, Florence failed to get the chance to apply for the social work course in the university. She felt that her hope for the future had been lost. She was introduced by her friend to participate in the YPTP & YWETS. We asked her why she was in this training scheme. She said: ‘At the time when I graduated from Form 5, I felt that my world was filled with desperation. I originally wanted to take the social work course; however, my HKCEE result was poor. Later, I found out about the YPTP, which does not require tuition and even provides allowances and a certificate, so I registered in a blind rush.’

According to Florence’s description, the purpose and the benefits of the course is unclear at the outset, she seems to be just attracted by the low entry barrier and the materially benefits, which are more conspicuous at the beginning.

In spite of this initial lack of a clear aim, we found some positive outcomes that have been brought about by the training schemes in the interviews.

Jim: I have learnt communication skills! For example, I didn’t know how to talk with others before I entered the scheme, but now I have better skills to communicate with others. The training provided various courses and it did help me find a job. I also learnt the right working attitude.

Florence: Sometimes, the course may just be around one month, and we have to adapt to another new environment and to a different group of students. I was not used to it at the beginning; however, the training improved my interpersonal skills, and allowed me to meet friends from different sectors.

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Social workers also comment on the positive help:

Karla: The courses provide the youth with what seems to be basic pre-employment training sessions, but it could really meet the basic need for those young people. Take typing for example, some of the young people who join the scheme could not type at the beginning of the course. So I don’t agree that the content of the courses is too basic to benefit the youth.

Noam: The training helps improve young people’s confidence and skills. There are a wide range of courses, and they really provide them with more opportunity to participate and practice. In addition, the training is free. It is not affordable for every family to take on the expensive cost of, as the economy of Hong Kong continues to be in a weak state.

Some interviewees also claimed that the training schemes can help the participants find jobs or see their future in a positive way.

Rain: I dropped out in Form 3. After I finished the communication course, I took the training course in Korean-Japanese-style cuisine for twenty days. I found apprentice work in a Japanese restaurant quickly.

Florence: To me, it is like a dream to be a student pursuing a first-year associate degree in social work. If I did not join the YPTP & YWETS, recover my confidence, or have the chance provided by my mentor to be a programme worker, I would not have been able to succeed in life today. The YPTP & YWETS definitely gave me clear goals and direction.

Uncertainty within the schemes

Despite these positive outcomes, there are areas of uncertainty about how well the schemes address the challenges of youth unemployment. The training schemes are provided over a very short period, and so cannot fully http://www.umac.mo/fsh/projections
prepare the non-engaged youth for their future work. The low acceptance of the schemes and lack of confidence amongst employers is still a main concern of the trainees and their case workers:

Noam: The YPTP & YWETS is too short. Young people fail to grasp the necessary knowledge and skills. Take the hair-styling design assistant training and hotel operation and customer service training courses, for example, the twenty-day training includes a wide range of content, thus, it does not allow the young people to master the basic knowledge and skills. The training, unfortunately, hinders their competence in looking for work in the open job market after their completion of the course. Moreover, it reduces the acceptance and confidence of the outside agencies in the training schemes.

The YPTP & YWETS is helpless to assist those non-engaged youth to deal with the social barriers to upward social mobility. Most YPTP & YWETS graduates recognize this reality and find jobs as cheap labour without future career development. They realize that the scheme just aims at helping them to find a job but does not prepare them to improve their career prospects in the long run. Long-term support is also absent.

Noam: Most of the courses provided by YPTP & YWETS are low-education and low-skilled jobs. Young people can learn some vocational skills in the curriculum, but these vocational skills can only let them find a job in the lower strata of the labour market, and hinder upward mobility for young people there. The follow up period is only approximately one year, thus, it is hard for the social workers to provide long-term support after the trainees have entered to the labour market.

What’s more, the interviewees report that the organization of the programme is in need of better coordination, and it is not delivered in

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accordance with the trainees’ aptitude, a fact which also causes confusion and reduces its effectiveness.

Kiki is a social worker serving for the youth at a counseling center. He reported, ‘One of my clients who is now participating in YPTP & YWETS told me, sometimes the special employment projects have few participants, and he was asked to join the project provided by the same company twice. It may increase his chance being employed. But I think the centers holding the projects should have better coordination, and allow more young people in need to have the chance. And also, reduce duplication and confusion.’

Noam: Enrolment of the trainees in YPTP & YWETS follows the principle of first-come-first-served. So the same class may have different ability levels participating in them. The effectiveness of the activities is greatly reduced.

Getting lost in the transition and dropping out

For the interviewees, what the training schemes could bring to them is various. Some find it little help. Facing an uncertain and confusing situation, some of them feel lost, and some drop out of the scheme. Among those drop-outs, some may have assistance from their family and friends, and find jobs, however, some still cannot find jobs, but despondently give up trying.

Kiki: Some of them just want to pass the time, the training schemes may not help them find jobs, and they may drop out halfway through. And even though they want to find a job, it is still hard to evaluate how many people the YPTP & YWETS have helped to find the jobs, since some trainees sometimes cannot finish the course or they have been introduced by their friends for new jobs before the training is finished, then they quit.
Susan (a social worker): Some of the young people do not know what they want. In that case, what YPTP & YWETS can bring to them is very limited.

Noam: The training experience is not always pleasant. The training allowance is too low to satisfy their living costs in Hong Kong. It seems like they are being treated as cheap labour. Long-term development is not taken into consideration.

Although some of them did find their jobs through the training schemes, their situation in the labour market remains precarious. It is still easy for them to drop out and return to being non-engaged.

After taking the YPTP & YWETS training schemes, Rain has changed several jobs. The longest job he has taken lasted for half a year, while the shortest one was just one week. In his words, the work is too toilsome, and the working-hours are too long. He could not adapt to the working environment, and he could not get along with his colleagues. Eventually, he resigned.

Overall, the young people may have obtained some basic job-searching skills, and the elective courses may provide them an opportunity to improve specific knowledge and skills helpful for them to find jobs. However, the main function of YPTP & YWETS is just basic skill training, and the needs for their long term career development have not been met. Work identity and relational identity are two main items constructing youth self-understanding and well-being. If young people spend a long time in training schemes without finding a stable job, thereby forming a positive work identity, and if no further support is available, then the fact that they are still at high risk cannot be overlooked.
Discussion

*Rethinking the ‘disease’ concept and social barriers in transition*

The YPTP & YWETS aims to serve non-engaged young people with low education and skills; the very concept of ‘non-engagement’ categorizes those not at work, education or training as a special groups who are in some way abnormal or ‘diseased’. Services based on this assumption aim at modifying their behaviour to social norms, and so reducing the unemployment rate (Ngai & Ngai, 2007). It is believed that unemployed youth lack of job-searching skills, communication skills, and vocational skills, and that by improving their employability through these schemes, they can make differences in their lives (Labour Department, 2010, 2012). This social construction in one way can have advantages in making more services available for them, but it can also lead to lowering expectations and indicating that their situation is hopeless (Benard, 1997). We find that the training schemes can just serve as ‘a kind of lubricant’ (Ngai & Ngai, 2007) to smooth them in finding jobs in short-term, but that they are unable to equip them to cope with their career in the long run. The jobs they could find through the schemes are still those with low-education and low-skilled requirements, which means that they can be replaced by other competitors easily. They remain in the same market, and the condition of working poor is still one of their embarrassments (Wong, 2007). Consistent with previous studies, it is also observed that, although completing the training, young people still need to compete with the non-trainees in seeking jobs, and since working experience is an important form of social capital, the training experience alone is not recognized to have sufficient qualification to lift the young people to a higher level (Ngai & Cheung, 2004). Feeling that the schemes are ‘a waste of time’ (Ngai & Cheung, 2004), many trainees are lost.

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In addition, in a period of great economic and social transition, the problem of youth unemployment is embedded in a broader social and economic context (Fergusson et al., 2001). The ‘knowledge economy’ crudely excludes those who leave the school early and have not achieved what the labour market expected. Our findings indicate that the unsatisfactory education background sets up social barriers to obtaining work. However, the ‘fire-fighting’ route in training schemes hides the socioeconomic context contributing to the problem (Sugarman, 1986; Ngai & Ngai, 2007), and neglects various difficulties among young people, by merely focusing on improving their employability (Yates & Payne, 2006). What the training schemes can provide is no more than basic skills, which is surely not enough in fierce competition. The failures in the previous education experience make them feel powerless. And even though they may recognize the need to pursue further study, there is a lack of real opportunities. This situation leaves many feeling hopeless and disempowered.

*The ‘strengths perspective’ and long-term development*

The ‘strengths perspective’ reminds us to see individuals’ ‘capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions and hopes’ (Saleebey, 1996). Personal resilience in difficulties is valuable internal assets that should be treasured (Benard, 2004; Saleebey, 2009). Our findings suggest that some of the non-engaged youth are willing to learn specific vocational skills, and that they have their own longings for their future, but cannot reach their desires due to inadequate education. However, they find jobs from the bottom of the ladder in related vocations, and keep working hard despite the harsh working conditions. They eventually obtain success. Although the labour market is unequal to the working-poor with harsh conditions, but the young
people's hard-working, courage and perseverance should also be recognized as valuable assets.

At the same time, the insufficiency of long-term planning for the development of young people in the schemes should also be noticed. Making the vocational training schemes accessible to young people is not enough to guarantee their future working life (Ngai & Ngai, 2007). At the macro level, matching is not necessary to access to the broad base of low-skill jobs in today's restructured and post-industrial economy (Ngai & Cheung, 2004). At the individual level, the schemes should aim at empowering the youth to overcome wider constraints that they may encounter in the labour market (Ngai & Ngai, 2007). Without continued follow-up and care, they might remain on the edge of the labour market. The effect of social support and family support is significant in helping the youth in transition (Kieselbach, 2003). We suggest that social resources should be relocated to those disadvantaged families so that they can provide emotional support to their children (Ngai et al., 2008). We also propose that government should provide a kind of 'social guarantee' to support young people in their early transition from school to work (Kieselbach, 2003). Mentorship is attracting increasing attention, and it has been shown that the adult models can have the influence of socializing young people, and provide education and training which could facilitate their transition (Bonnal et al., 2002; Ngai et al., 2008; Chen, 2011). Last but not least, diversity should also be appreciated (Ngai & Cheung, 2004).

*Issues within the schemes*

Our findings also suggest that, the coordination among sectors is not operating effectively in the training schemes. Better cooperation and communication is advocated to facilitate more young people to have relevant and equal opportunities to pursue their careers.

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The training should be more accessible and user-friendly, especially in information provision. Making the information of the training schemes accessible is necessary in order to better match opportunities to young people’s needs. Further guidance in job searching and adapting to changing circumstances is also suggested so as to help the youth to have better understanding of the labour market and formulate a positive working identity.

Taking into consideration the fact that trainees have different reasons for attending the schemes and that there is generally insufficient guidance given to them for longer-term career planning and personal development, the benefits that the trainees could get from the schemes are extremely limited. In fact, the training schemes work better for those who already have the motivation to find jobs. However, there are still lots of non-engaged young people who have no expectation for their future, in which case the scheme seems to be of little help. Attention should be drawn to issues and to ways of tackling this challenge.

Conclusion

This article has explored the experience of young people in employment training schemes. It suggests that the youth training schemes do offer young people specific opportunities to obtain vocational skills that are useful in searching for jobs. However, owing to the limitation of time spent on the training schemes, the programme can only be considered as an opportunity to gain access to certain kinds of work, and it offers little help in adapting to the working environment, or in making participants more competitive if they wish to move upward towards a more advanced labour market. The lack of coordination of the training schemes also calls for a better arrangement to optimize the allocation of resources. The efforts and courage of young people who face an unfavourable situation should be appreciated.

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Equally, we should be develop means of empowering young people to formulate a positive identity and develop the personal resources to cope with the fierce competition in a fast-changing world where powerful social and economic factors put pressure on how members of society construct themselves. Supportive care and guidance to facilitate youth long-term whole-development is an issue that requires the collaboration of government, NGOs, employers, and families.

There are limitations to this study. First of all, the interviews with the young people were originally conducted for a course assignment, which covered a small group of people, although with follow-up interviews with social workers to enrich the data. Secondly, only partial, transcripts are given, as some of the interviews were conducted via telephone instead of face-to-face interview, which limited our ability to record the detail of the interactions. Further study might include a broader range of different young people, and face-to-face in-depth interviews.

Despite these shortcomings, the study serves as a work-in-progress that investigates the varied experiences and myths that arise from young people’s transition from school to work via the training schemes. We hope that it provides some insight into the issues, and helps us better to understand the challenges of addressing youth unemployment in the region.

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