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Perceptions of disadvantaged youth on social and economic asymmetry: A case study in Hong Kong's New Territories

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Abstract

Many social issues exist for marginalized youth in the New Territories of Hong Kong, despite Hong Kong's high standard of living. Increasingly, attention is being paid to social mobility of Hong Kong's younger generations. Youth in the New Territories face academic, economic, social and cultural barriers, in part due to tracking into low-ranked Band 3 schools. In order to better understand these barriers, this study took a phenomenological approach to understanding selected youth's perceptions and perspectives on these barriers. This qualitative case study, being both exploratory and descriptive, developed thematic findings across interviews, field observations and document analysis in order to understand disadvantaged youth's personal perceptions and attitudes of youth social mobility. Youth and teacher interview participants also took part, to varying degrees, in the programs provided by Hong Kong-based NGO, Project Share. The study attempts to further our understanding of the lived experiences and perceived social mobility barriers unique to these marginalized youth. Findings illustrate issues that NGOs, practitioners, school officials and policy makers may want to consider when approaching work with disadvantaged youth and attempting to understanding youth issues in Hong Kong from the youth perspective.

PERCEPTIONS OF DISADVANTAGED YOUTH ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASYMMETRY: A CASE STUDY IN HONG KONG'S NEW TERRITORIES

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Introduction

Hong Kong is one of the most hyper-modern post-industrialized global cities and societies in the world. Hong Kong is often associated with its iconic forest of skyscrapers on Hong Kong Island, and the 118 story International Commerce Center building in Kowloon. These highly advanced and modern urban centers contrast drastically with the working class region of Hong Kong known as the New Territories (Wong, 2010), despite development efforts in these areas (Lo, 2005). A significant geographical portion of Hong Kong's land-mass is made up by the New Territories on the peninsula bordering Mainland China. Significant structural social inequality exists in Hong Kong society (Postiglione, 1997), as can be seen when contrasting Hong Kong's elite central district with New Territories communities like Tin Shui Wai. Youth in the New Territories have disproportionately lower academic achievement and social mobility than youth in Hong Kong at-large, reflecting broader social and spatial polarization in Hong Kong (Lo, 2005).

Families in the communities of the New Territories, such as Tin Shui Wai, are largely working class and live in massive public housing estates only a few kilometers from Mainland China. Youth in these communities rarely attend university and social mobility is limited. These youth are more likely impacted by rising social inequality in Hong Kong since the 1997 handover (Lee, Wong & Law, 2007). Limited social mobility and growing social inequality for marginalized youth in Hong Kong are coupled with disintegrating social networks in new town areas such as Tin Shui Wai in the New Territories (Wong, 2010). Little attention has been given to the social and cultural barriers impacting these youth and their families, and much of the work of addressing social and economic asymmetry for New Territories' youth has been conducted by NGOs on a small scale.

Also, little is known about the way that youth perceive the social, economic, cultural and political issues and whether these youth conceptualize the issues in structural or personal terms. This qualitative study examined the issues of social and economic asymmetry through the lenses

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of youth and teacher perceptions of the social issues of youth in the New Territories community of Tin Shui Wai. In order to better understand the issues facing marginalized youth in Hong Kong, the study is based on youth and teacher interviews focusing on barriers impacting youth social mobility. Finally, the study will discuss these youth's perceptions in terms of both perceived structural and personal causes of these barriers.

The study's research subjects were participants in programs provided by Hong Kong-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), Project Share from 2011 to 2014. Project Share works to improve social mobility, social capital (Coleman, 1998), and opportunity for youth from the New Territories in a variety of ways, including workshop-based trainings, and a variety of internship opportunities, with the purpose of removing social barriers and improving access for these youth to improved life chances. The organization attempts to go beyond the academic and technical skills that are a central characteristic of Hong Kong's government school curriculum, and offering workshops and internships to youth that focus on soft-skills, interpersonal relationship skills, communication skills, critical thinking, creative activities and professional work-place confidence building. In addition to acknowledging the structural inequalities in Hong Kong, Project Share works toward improving disadvantaged youth's personal skills that may be advantageous in a professional work setting.

In order to address social and cultural barriers effectively, it is important for community advocates, scholars, policy makers and organizations to understand the insider perspectives of the youth in these communities and the teachers in the schools that educate them. A gap in our understanding of these perspectives has contributed to a disconnection between policy and practice in economic and social development in Hong Kong. In particular, it may be useful to understand whether youth perceive social barriers as structural or personal in order to improve methods of addressing these barriers. The issues that face youth in this New Territories community also share important characteristics with social barriers to geographically marginalized groups world-wide, including geographic marginalization, language barriers, family social status, educational access and quality, discrimination, access to social spaces with high social capital, access to varied social networks, and access to the cultures of affluence and influence. Many of these issues are structural, yet it is unclear as to whether youth perceive them as such.

Social and cultural barriers in the New Territories are associated, at least in part, to social class realities in Hong Kong's rigid education system. Despite efforts to make the government school system more egalitarian, fierce competition through public exams and private tutoring has cemented wealth disparity, class distinctions, and barriers to social mobility for the least advantaged among the Hong Kong population (Cheng, 1997; Lee, 1997; Postiglione, 1997). Hong Kong's government schools are ranked by a three-band ranking system and children from the poorest areas and children with the weakest academic skillsare often limited to the lowest ranked schools and the lowest academic achievement (Education Bureau, 2014; Lee, 1997 ; Postiglione, 1997).

One important contentious and ambiguous issue is whether educational quality is equitable between the lower ranked, and vaguely delineated, band 3 schools and the high ranked band 1 schools, which are often located in more affluent and urban districts (Education Bureau, 2014; Rudowicz & Hui, 2002). For instance, Rudowicz and Hui (2002) found negative correlations between creative development of students and the banding of their schools. Beyond the conditions that the education system imposes on youth in the New Territories, family and community norms may also have a significant impact on social mobility (Wong, 2010). In a

service- and knowledge-based economy like Hong Kong, students from impoverished backgrounds are at a competitive disadvantage. The connection between social marginalization and social mobility in the Hong Kong context will be explored below.

Hong Kong Context

Hong Kong is a unique and dynamic post-colonial society at an idiosyncratic crossroads between Western and Eastern influences. Hong Kong transitioned from British colonial rule to its new status as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China in 1997. The combination of Chinese and European culture and politics, as well as global changes in economics, gives Hong Kong a distinctive set of socio-historical circumstances. A growing number of mainland Chinese migrants (known in Hong Kong as mainlanders) to Hong Kong has increased the Mandarin-speaking population (compared with the Cantonese- and English-speaking Hong Kong natives), expanded the land use of previously undeveloped or underdeveloped regions of Hong Kong, and transformed public services such as education.

New Territories

In the New Territories, the region of Hong Kong connected geographically to mainland China, a growth in migrant laborers and low-skilled workers has transformed the region into a densely populated working class semi-urban area. More than a million of the over three and a half million people in the New Territories live in government subsidized public housing (Census and Statistics Center, 2011). Most are employed in the service sector in low to middle income jobs, and few attain post-secondary education (Census and Statistics Center, 2011). The number of mainland immigrants arriving in Hong Kong on One Way Visas has increased steadily since 1997 and mainlanders now make up 10% of Hong Kong's population (Lau, 2013). Culture in the New Territories has developed somewhat distinctly from both Hong Kong Island and mainland China, with its own idealized Chinese culture and customs established in British policy (Chan, 2014). Unfortunately, mainlanders in the New Territories, as well as elsewhere in Hong Kong have faced negative sentiments and discrimination (Chen, 2014).

Tin Shui Wai is similar to other areas of the New Territories in that it has a significant number of public housing estates, and has a lower income per capita than Kowloon and Hong Kong Island where the centers of international commerce are located. Since 2006, Tin Shui Wai developed the unfortunate nickname that highlights its economic and social issues, *City of Sadness* based on the Taiwanese film of the same name, after a former director of social welfare referred to it as such in a 2006 radio interview (Hou, 1989). Tin Shui Wai's negative image snowballed after a 2004 murder of a woman and her children and suicide of the murderer, and was perpetuated by media and politicians (Cheung, 2009; Yee, 2008). Additional cases of domestic violence and suicide have since been reported with the moniker *City of Sadness* (Hou, 1989). This negative attention has brought more infrastructure, transportation access and social welfare services to the area, but poverty and access are still major issues in this and other New Territories. Tin Shui Wai's negative public image is pervasive (Cheung, 2009), and this reputation has been internalized by the youths working with Project Share.

The influx of mainland Chinese as immigrants and tourists to Hong Kong has inflamed negative sentiment between mainlanders and native Hong Kongers (Chen, 2014). Cultural barriers for mainlanders in mainstream Hong Kong society were established by British colonial policy, creating a social "otherness" (Price & Ho, 2012, p. 237) identity of migrants in the New Territories, and which has continued since the 1999 handover. Native Hong Kongers express

ambivalent and even resistant attitudes toward an increasing Chinese political and cultural influence in Hong Kong (Chan, 2014; Chen, 2014). Resistant attitudes toward the Chinese government governance in Hong Kong manifested profoundly in the 2014 student protests in the streets of Hong Kong (BBC.com, 2014; Chew, 2014; Yan, 2014). With the current social and political circumstances in Hong Kong as this study's context, the specific methodological approach to the exploration of issues and barriers faced by youth in the New Territories will now be described.

Methods

Qualitative research posits that knowledge is socially constructed and subjective. In particular, the qualitative case study approach lends itself to descriptive exploration of individuals or situations using data from a variety of sources in order to develop a case (Yin, 2002). This qualitative case study triangulated data from interviews with five youth and two teachers, observations conducted in Hong Kong, as well as document analysis and subsequent follow-up communication with the participating organization. Interview participants were selected through focused sampling from all participants in the NGO's programs. Interviews were arranged and coordinated by the NGO, Project Share. Youth participants offered diverse perspectives from the target population of disadvantaged youth in the following ways: age, gender, and schools. Participants were all from the Tin Shui Wai community. These youth ranged in age from 16-20 years old. The youth consisted of two males and three females, and all attended different band 3 secondary schools in the community. These youth had participated in various Project Share programs from 2011-2014. Though not intended to be representative of all youth in Tin Shui Wai, the youth offered a cross section of Project Share participants.

Youth interviews were conducted in two phases: focus group and individual interviews. The focus group was conducted first to elicit major common issues and individual interviews offered opportunities to probe these issues in-depth. In addition to youth interviews, two teachers working at two different low-ranked Band 3 schools in the Tin Shui Wai area were also interviewed in order to triangulate the issues noted by youth. These teachers had limited familiarity with Project Share's work but had been both been responsible for referring students to the organization's programs. Data from interviews and documents were analyzed using constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967).

Data were analyzed in three phases: open coding (Khandkar, n.d.), first focused coding and second focused coding (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Birks & Mills, 2010), and triangulated across interviews and other data sources which included observational field notes and documentation provided by Project Share. Themes were organized using the criterion established by Berg (2008) with five or more instances of particular elements across interviews needed to establish a theme. Thematic findings were further developed using a grounded theory approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) leading to the present collection of thematic issues impacting marginalized youth. Finally, themes were analyzed in terms of structural versus personal attribution of the causes of these barriers.

Findings: Issues with Youth in Tin Shui Wai

The youth in the Tin Shui Wai face a variety of issues: lack of care, limited world view, lack of confidence, lack of opportunity, lack of choice, weak social networks, communication issues, family background issues, unhappiness, lack of hope, negative image, social problems, and issues associated with the low-ranked Band 3 Schools. To begin, the term *care* arose

throughout the data in two specific connotations: *care for youth* and *care about youth*. *Care for youth* refers to caretakers providing basic necessities such as food and shelter. Economically disadvantaged youth in the New Territories were aware of their families' lack of financial resources and use of government subsidies for survival. "They just don't care, maybe they want to care, but they don't have time or enough ability to care" (youth 3). Also noted was a lack of *care about youth* in regards to the parents. As one youth mentioned, "yeah, people don't care about them" (youth 3), referring to disadvantaged youth. Another example being, "Their parents don't care about them. Not really don't care, really they don't have the time, they get used to it" (teacher 2). These youth perceived an emotional deficit. Whether this deficit was brought on by a general lack of care from society-at-large, or from their families, specifically, there was a clear shift away from a structural, in this case economic, cause of this issue and to a more personalized one.

Limited world view refers to a narrow understanding of the world outside the local community. One example, "I think most of my friends, they live in Tin Shui Wai or they live in Tun Moon, and they always don't want to get outside. And they just want an ordinary life. I think it is a problem in this area" (youth 4), insinuated that youth in this area do not have a desire to travel outside the community, or improve their social status, rather than this restriction imposed on them. Although financial realities clearly impact travel and transportation choices of these youth, these youth problematize the worldview as a lack of desire. In addition to limited desire to travel outside the local community, interviewees also noted a limited understanding of life outside the community. As one teacher noted, "some of the student's tell me that they can't imagine how the commercial world is" (teacher 1). Lack of understanding of the mainstream Hong Kong economy impacts students' choices of educational focus in secondary school, post-secondary options, and ability to adapt to the rapidly changing job market. Another youth saw this limitation as imposed by structure factors: "the people that live in Tin Shui Wai, just like they are trapped in this area" (youth 4). Whether economic circumstances dictate worldview or vice versa, interviewees perceived them as co-related, although the connection is diffuse.

Youth, teachers and Project Share staff considered *lack of confidence* to be a major issue with youth in the New Territories. "I always fear, or I always fail to try new things. I didn't have any confidence" (youth 4). Confidence was related to social isolation in the New Territories, as this teacher noted: "I think they don't have a chance to go outside Tin Shui Wai, because they don't think, they think they can't fit in Central or other places" (youth 5). Confidence was also related to positive outlook: "they are thinking negatively all the time" (teacher 2). The most powerful connections to confidence were English skills and motivation. Due to the dual language system in Hong Kong's education system, and the higher status associated with English proficiency in Band 1 schools, poor English was related to youth's overall confidence: "actually language also gives them confidence as well. If they have good ability in English, they will have strong confidence" (teacher 2).

According to one teacher, motivation and English skills were linked: "they are very weak in English. But they are not really interested in learning English, so this is why we have to think of quite a lot of motivation, ways to try to stimulate them to learn, especially language" (teacher 2). Without an opportunity to travel outside the community to places like Hong Kong Island, where spoken English is much more common, these students do not have many opportunities to practice spoken English in social settings, or in Chinese-medium band 3 schools. Without an opportunity to experience Hong Kong society and culture beyond their community, their educational and career aspirations are also limited: "they think that they can't really do this job in

their future. So they want to, maybe they want to, although they think that they will not be able to get into this kind of industry in the future" (teacher 1). As another youth noted, "I don't have much opportunity to practice, to speak" (youth 1). Confidence, as seen in the instances above, has indirect impact on students' academic and career aspirations, and acts as a limiter on youth's understanding of opportunities available to them through their educational institutions, or in the workforce.

The *lack of opportunity* to speak English is interwoven with a perceived limitation on motivation and career aspirations.

> Because their life quality is higher and they always use English. And in New Territories, there is less opportunity to use it. In central you use it all the time. So that's why the English level is…different, from New Territory and Hong Kong Island. So that's why their life is very high quality, because they use it. And why life quality here is very low, because they don't use it. Can't practice (youth 3).

As this participant youth noted, English is seen as a social indicator, a representation of quality of life and access to mainstream Hong Kong culture. Opportunity to use English and other economic and social opportunities are perceived as interconnected. As one youth noted, "they think that they are happy living in here, but actually they lost many opportunities comparing to those who live in Kowloon, they lost the opportunity to work, opportunities to join other activities," (youth 4).

Limited worldview intersects with, and impacts, perceived lack of opportunity in both structural and personal ways, according to one youth: "people living in Tin Shui Wai, they should try, they are living here for so long that they don't even have the awareness of the best opportunities compared to others and they don't even have the interests to it" (youth 4). Lack of awareness of opportunities has a limiting effect on the horizon of opportunities, as well as outlook on the future. When asked what life in the New Territories is like, one youth stated, "Maybe I graduate and start to work. Maybe I start working in shops. And I get married, and have a baby and die" (youth 4). Another youth described Tin Shui Wai as simply, "future very dark" (youth 1). The perception that the New Territories offers limited opportunities and a lackluster future due to a restricted life path is clearly oriented toward a structural interpretation of social barriers.

Choice and opportunity are interconnected, though distinct, in the data. When opportunity is limited, choice is also subsequently limited. Perhaps the most powerful instance of *lack of choice* appeared here:

> It seems like you have no choice. Because there are the things that you need to survive in this society, so, they sacrificing the freedom of the people to get some things that they think are good (focus group).

Lack of choice intersected with powerless in the interviews, which seemed to impact youth's perceived agency: "…you feel powerless. You want to try to change something, but you can't" (youth 3). This sense of powerlessness may be correlated with lack of confidence, lack of opportunity, and lack of care in a number of ways and needs further investigation to differentiate and distinguish these connections.

Interesting contradictory commentary on social networks surfaced in the data. In a negative sense, *weak social network* arose as a perceived lack of connections beyond the local community: "they are just limited the social circle and they can't really go upward beyond that, and they don't even have the awareness because they have the same people around them" (focus

group). Lack of confidence in social settings beyond the New Territories is exacerbated by a lack of social connections outside the community. However, despite social issues in the New Territories, the social network within the community was also contrastingly considered strong: "people in here are very close" (focus group).

Distinct from language issues, *communication issues* manifested in two categories: *parent/child issues* and *parent/school issues*. Difficulties in communication between parents and their children were noted in youth and teacher interviews.One youth pointed out limited communication between parent and child: "I did not share much. Actually, I do not always talk with my parents. My mother works all the time and my father, he has some mental problems, and we do not talk much about this" (youth 4). Another youth drew a connection between parent's work situation and their family relationship: "the parents, they don't have time, enough ability to teach their child because of in this area, the job this area is low. And then they don't have higher educations, they don't have higher qualifications, and that is why they cannot teach them" (youth 3).

One teacher discussed this communication issue between parent and child: "there is some misunderstanding between the child and parents. And it is a very big problem in the relationship, in the parents relationship" (youth 3). Miscommunication and dysfunctional relationships between parents and children, limited understanding of educational and career options, and limitations on time due to work schedules for parents converge as a mix of structural and personal causes to create and exacerbate communication issues between parents and the youth from the study.

*Communication issue*s also occur between parents and the schools in the New Territories. One teacher discussed the resistance the school felt from families: "even they want to do some home visits, they quite resist the penetration of school to their home, but it seems that there is no linkage between the school life and the home life" (teacher 1). Teachers described the frustration they experienced in connecting with parents: "they are not interested in their school life. Even when I give my own phone number to the parents, the parents seldom take the initiative to call me. Most of the time I reach out to them" (teacher 1). Teachers felt that this disconnection could be explained by parents' lack of care of the student's educational experience; however, other explanations include parents'own cultural disconnection in Hong Kong, the difference between attitudes toward school for mainlanders and Hong Kongers, and language issues between Cantonese speaking Hong Kong natives and Mandarin speaking mainland Chinese.

Teacher's described their attempts made to bridge communication gaps between home and school; however, this approach was also a source of miscommunication between parents and the schools: "Sometimes actually try to share what the children's thinking to the parents. But they are still very focusing on the academic results" (teacher 1). This observation may imply that these parents feel that the school's role does not extend beyond academic results. It also may point toward parent's acknowledgement of their own limited educational backgrounds and their desire for their students to focus on academic achievement despite family issues. These family issues, one of the largest groupings of findings in the data, are discussed next.

Family background issues arose distinctly in the data. These *family background issues* consisted of: immigrant status, broken families, family educational attainment, and poverty. These represent largely structural elements. However, the family background issues were often interpreted as a confusion of structural and personal issues by teachers and youth. One teacher noted,

> A lot of students are from mainland China, immigrant to Hong Kong. And most of them are single parents. They can't have a good family background, and they haven't any family education, so this is our challenge to teach (teacher 1).

Being a new immigrant was perceived as a major issue for the youth, and both being a new immigrant and poverty were closely linked: "because many of the parents are new immigrants and they are not wealthy. So they need to work for long" (teacher 1). As one youth suggested, "most of the people living here are the poor, the immigrant, and most of them are grass roots class family" (focus group). Broken families, as defined by single-parent or dysfunctional traditional familyimpacted such issues as youth self-esteem, feelings of self-worth, academic support and domestic violence. One youth described his family: "Based on my family background, actually my father and mother didn't ever marry. And then I exist as an error actually" (youth 3).

The youth's description of themselves clearly points to issues of low self-esteem and self-worth. Teacher's also explained single-parent household as major contributors to students' school issues: "Some of them, fatherless, maybe some of them motherless. And the family support is very weak, and mostly they depend on school to care their child" (teacher 2). Teachers attributed lack of care for, and about, many of their students to single-parent households. One teacher described other types of broken family issues, stating "family conflicts, you know parents are mostly single parents, and some, even though they have what we call healthy family. You know the man will have another woman in the mainland, in China, go on quite a lot here. Quite a lot of family problems here. They got arguments between them, the children scared" (teacher 2).

Parent's educational background was considered a contributor to youth issues because "the mainlanders, they come to Hong Kong and they live in Hong Kong, and in mainland they don't have enough education. Some of them are, they quit in the secondary school" (youth 3). Parent's education was perceived as a factor impacting their children's education and their children's overall understanding of Hong Kong society.

The parents don't have enough, like, knowledge or education. They may introduce basic picture of Hong Kong, but they can't really elaborate the details, the information, because this kind of information can be just elaborated by those who are in there. So they can't really get a real understanding of what it is like in Hong Kong" (focus group). The youth were aware of the limitations placed on their lives by their parent's educational background. "They don't know how to help them, because the parents do not have enough information" (focus group), illustrating the complication between placing blame on parent's desire versus ability to give academic support and career advice to their children. One student clearly attributed the issue to parents' ability, arguing "of course they do not have enough knowledge and information to do it. That is why they are not successful people and they cannot teach their child to be a successful person" (focus group). In addition to academic ability and educational attainment of parents in the New Territories, one teacher also pointed to the parents' lack of English skills: "In English they got no support. Maybe their family cannot give them enough resources to enhance their ability here" (teacher 2). These family background issues are also often tied to poverty, as was also noted by Wong (2010).

Poverty issues were emplaced within the family background issues category in several connotations: intergenerational poverty, pressure to work, and costs associated with tutoring and transportation. In terms of intergenerational poverty, one youth explained,

this effect to the next generation, the next generation accept these kind of values, and then they get in a bad cycle. And then want more money and don't studying and don't studying, and no qualifications and no qualifications, and still a poor job. And no money and no money, again, again, again (youth 3)

Youths in the New Territories recognize education as a means to escape the cycle of poverty: "The problem with the intergenerational poverty, because whole family will be stuck in this district. So they rely on the living, and also the earnings from work within this district" (focus group). Another youth perceived the issues of poverty and care as closely linked: "the families are already very low income family. So they need to work, because the government subsidy is not enough. So actually they need to work very hard, and that is why they have no time to take care of their child" (focus group).

The amount of time parents spent at work at low-paying jobs was linked to care in teacher interviews, as well: "Their parents they have no chance, not much time to care, to take care of their children. And some of them even, not at home all the time" (teacher 2). Still another youth attributed these issues to moral or ethical shortcomings of families: "the next generation you will have a poor environment to grow up in. Actually, they are so shallow. Actually, I think the students and the parents, the focus so shallow and they never foresee their futures" (youth 3). The varied interpretations of the causes and effects of poverty in the New Territories point toward the complexity of the issueand perspectives on poverty as perceived by those who live within its social reality.

Poverty certainly impacts the priorities that families place on education versus work, and pressure on the youth to work was noted by teachers and students. As one youth described, "my mother says, told me, don't studying, go out to work now" (youth 3). Teachers pointed to pressure to work as a significant factor in student's success in school: "they have to support the family. And even though their parents go to work, they said that there is not much money" (teacher 2). In addition to working part-time jobs to support their families, impoverished students in the New Territories likely have significant household duties while parents are at work. As one teacher noted, "they will be very late, and children have to do the housework as well. They have to cook" (teacher 2).

Many elements considered essential to successful academic and occupational life in Hong Kong are cost-prohibitive to many families in the New Territories. For instance, most Hong Kong youth attend tutoring services after school to ensure successful scores on national exams; however, impoverished youth cannot access these services and many Band 3 schools offer free after school activities to supplement. Transportation costsfrom the New Territories to the urban center of Hong Kong are also a cost-prohibitive barrier to travel for many youth and their families, as this youth described: "many work opportunities are actually in the urban district, but the transportation fee, the burden of these transportation fees is too high to go from Tin Shui Wai to the urban district" (focus group). The convergence of these poverty related issues has long-lasting effects on the youth, their families and the communities within the New Territories. For instance, in addition to poverty, mental health issues among the youth became apparent.

Mental health issues such as depression, loneliness, frustration and worry were all summarized into the category *unhappiness*. When asked to describe their life in the New Territories, one youth stated bluntly, "my life is not happy" (youth 3), while another stated pointedly, "I'm not very happy living here" (focus group). As one teacher described, "Our students are sometimes lonely" (teacher 1). One youth attributed these issues to their family, asserting "Yeah, so that's why my family makes me feel crushed and make me feel very

frustrated" (youth 3), and attributed these issues to the community declaring, "When I go back to the society, I don't see any hope here" (youth 3). The sense of unhappiness and hopelessness may point to an internalization of the interconnected issues of opportunity, choice, poverty, and the negative image of the community.

The connection between unhappiness and the *negative image* of the New Territories arose in terms of the youth feeling labeled because of living in these areas. As one youth put it, "Sometimes someone is labeling me and then a part of me, I feel very lonely, because sometimes I am in a new place and I really feel lonely," (youth 3) pointing to the difficulty of escaping the negative image of the community. Another youth discussed stereotyping of the youth and their community: "they label you. And just when you say you live in Tin Shui Wai, they say, oh you are some poor guys, and no income, and not much knowledge" (focus group). Stereotyping and labeling is perceived by these youth, and several youth used the term "negative image" (focus group) when describing both Tin Shui Wai and other communities in the New Territories. The perpetuation of the negative image in the media regarding these communities likely has a negative impact on the lives of these youth and they are certainly self-conscious of this image.

Youth also described *social issues* with Band 3 school students: "the New Territory student is more naughty, always have the violence in the school, always happening" (youth 3), and "The New Territories, they always just want some fun. And they do not realize the consequence, and that is why they always do something bad" (youth 3). Even teachers described the students in their schools as "of course the students are supposed to be problematic, in terms of the behavior" (teacher 2). Beyond poor behavior, teachers also described labeling of students within their schools, as opposed to the labeling of people within the community. Teachers described many of their students in terms of low ability: "Actually, this school is so-called Band 3 School. So bottom, and their ability is quite low" (teacher 1). The connection between the school ranking and the students' ability was evident to the teachers: "We just always in the bottom, because our school, our students is really low, really low ability to learn" (teacher 1).

Band 3 students were described as low-ability, as well as lazy, both by youth and teachers in interviews. The concept of laziness was interestingly contradictory to other descriptions of these same students as hard working in other ways, specifically in terms of helping their families with money, and helping to run households. For instance, "You know for the junior form students, they are supposed to be very lazy, all the time, I don't know why. Very lazy" (teacher 2) clearly describes the students as lazy. However, other quotes from the same teacher contradicted the previous statement.

> On the whole they are willing to work; they are willing to work in a sense that even though the job is either not a very good working environment. As far as if they have money, they will go to work. They are not lazy, really they work very hard for money, I don't know why. Some of them they work on Saturday, they work on Sunday, or Monday. They feel very sleepy. They are not very attentive in class (teacher 2).

Lazy in terms of academic performance and lazy in terms of work ethic are mutually exclusive according to this teacher, and it is the students' work ethic outside of school which the teacher considers the cause of their academic laziness. The student's work ethic was even viewed in paternalistic terms: "they all behave like a very good housewife. Really they do all of the housework as well, even though they are outside. They are willing to do so" (teacher 2).

Labeling students as low ability and lazy may perpetuate low expectations that both families and teachers had for these students.

> Our students quite understand themselves as far as academic achievement is concerned. They will not think of some professional jobs, like to be a doctor, no, no chance, they understand themselves quite thoroughly. To be an accountant, no, no chance, no chance at all.Because you have to get in the university (teacher 2).

Low expectations, whether accurate to student's real abilityor reflective of social norms, are internalized by both students and teachers: "They are not really confident enough, and our students sometimes a little bit realistic, so are the teachers as well" (teacher 2). Realistic, in this sense, is a value laden term and quite subjectively employed. This realistic set of expectations plays out in terms of real results for students. When asked about the number of students at a particular Band 3 school were accepted into university, a teacher responded, "not many, not many every year. So when we looked at the data last year, we had 10, more than 10, around 10 students got into university" (teacher 2). This teacher attributed this issue, at least in part, to economic issues: "They are subsidized by the government, more than 70 percent or so of the students at this school. They are receiving subsidies from the government, and of course quite a lot are new immigrant from the mainland" (teacher 2).

The teacher also attributed the achievement issue to student motivation: "some of the students, they have no interests at all" (teacher 2). Finally, the teacher partly attributed this issue to the bigger role teachers in Band 3 schools play in students' lives:

> we are supposed to be father, mother, whatever, grandfather, grandmother, whatever. So, they really say the students in this school they will expect our teachers to not only teaching, right. Caring, and sometimes we have to teach them table manners, whatever. Right. All these. So maybe as parents more than teacher. (teacher 2)

The convening effect of the low motivation of students, low expectations from students, parents and teachers, and the larger roles that teachers play, have powerful negative impacts on real academic achievement for students in the Band 3 Schools, and the social, emotional and economic issues discussed earlier play a role as well.

Discussion

Many negative issues were perceived by youth and teachers as a result of living in Tin Shui Wai, the New Territories in general, as well as attending low-ranked Band 3 Schools. The adverse effects of Hong Kong's student tracking and school banding policies are apparent (Crawford, Hui & Heung, 2000). Despite a shift from a five-band school ranking to a three-band ranking of government schools, the harmful implications remain obvious to interview participants. Although participants see a structural nature to the differences between schools in wealth versus poor communities, they also rationalize some of these differences due to the family characteristics and personal attributes. Youth adopt the positionality imposed by the public perception of their community and schools, and internalize negative attitudes toward their community. Rather than seeing these school issues as being purely structural, they also situate the issues within student behavior, home life and personal lack of confidence.

Economic issues undergird many of the problems facing these marginalized youth. The shift of the Hong Kong economy from a manufacturing center a few decades ago, to a more service- and knowledge- based economy in recent years has polarized the population. Low-skilled workers no longer have an industrial sector to look to for employment. The service sector has not replaced its predecessor in terms of comparable wages or stability for those with limited

educations. Communities like Tin Shui Wai are disproportionately impacted by these structural shifts because large numbers of unskilled residents congregate in these communities due to the low-cost housing. Yet, the larger number of unskilled workers moving into the community means increased competition for low wage jobs, forcing most to travel far in Hong Kong, or even into Mainland China for work.

The economically precarious situation for most in Tin Shui Wai has dire implications for the youth. As parents spend more time working and travelling to work, often multiple jobs, youth spend much of their free time in their government subsidized flats with limited academic help, or attention, from parents. Social isolation from Hong Kong at-large is exacerbated by the physical isolation in small apartments in the public housing estate high rises. The work of Bourdieu helps to illustrate the negative implications of these social disconnections in terms of social capital (Field, 2008). The social capital that would otherwise be transferred through family and community connections is undermined by the economic situation of the family and the lack of a sense of care. Here, a shift occurs in youth perceptions, from situating the causes of these issues in structural terms, to a personalization of the causes.

Social inequities within Hong Kong, as exemplified in Tin Shui Wai, mask the economic inequities that form the basis of Hong Kong social hierarchies. It is through the perceptions of the youth regarding their lack of opportunity, lack of world-view and lack of choice that we see social capital, or lack thereof, most profoundly. Without the social connections and advice from parents about how to successfully navigate the changing economic and social realities of contemporary Hong Kong, these marginalized youth are likely to remain marginalized in much the same way that their parents were. Therefore, the parent becomes the personalized face of a lack of care, rather than the economic forces behind the parent's work situation.

Social disconnection, between parent and youth, and between family and school, is a symptom of larger social disconnection between the family and society, which is exacerbated by the economic situation. This disconnection manifests in communication issues that are tied both to the family's economic struggles and to the parents' perceived lack of ability to effectively advise their children in educational and career directions. Thus, both teachers and youth situated these issues in parent attributes, rather than structural conditions. Social disconnection of marginalized youth is aggravated by the issues discussed under the category of *family background issues.* Mainland immigrants in the community are doubly disadvantaged in understanding contemporary Hong Kong society.

Single-parent households likely have expectations of youth to contribute significantly to household chores and other time-consuming activities. Depression likely helps to disintegrate family communication, and concerns brought on by poverty likely increase household anxiety, all of which reduces the support families can offer to marginalized youth. Without strong support from the family such as communication and connections, marginalized youth will be more susceptible continued marginalization through adulthood (Kao, 2004). Yet, family economic situations greatly reduce parents' time and ability to offer these benefits to youth. Social mobility has historically been limited for low-income native Hong Kongers (Chan, Lui & Wong, 1995) but current public perception is such that many youth feel that opportunities for upward mobility are even more restricted than previous generations (LegCo, 2015). As can be seen in the above findings, the youth perceptions of their economic opportunities coincide with these negative public perceptions (Pau, 2014).

Conclusion

To conclude, youth do perceive social barriers in both structural and personal terms. However, many of the structural causes of these barriers are masked by an internalization of society's message that the causes are personal and familial. Some of these issues, including lack of opportunity and choice as well as limited worldview, are exacerbated by geographical factors, such as proximity to Mainland China, and distance to Hong Kong Island and Kowloon (Wong, 2010). Factors such as poverty and language are amplified by the negative image projected on the community and internalized by New Territories' youth. The homogeneity of the population in Tin Shui Wai in terms of skills, educational attainment, income and class reinforces the competition for low-wage work, an issue that is in large part due to planning of Tin Shui Wai as a community for the working class (Wong, 2010). Yet, despite these overwhelming structural barriers, youth continue to attribute barriers to their own lack of skills, confidence, care and connections.

A more formal correlation between youth confidence and these aforementioned social barriers needs to be established through further investigation. Youth in the New Territories face substantial cultural barriers due to the immigrant status of their families, and the youth's lack of skill and confidence with English. More attention is needed on the social and cultural barriers of students attending low-performing Band 3 schools in Hong Kong in order to prioritize resources, programs and school curriculum targeting these barriers in order to improve social mobility. Programs to improve and increase conversational English skills and confidence would likely positively impact other social barriers, despite the persistent structural nature of many of these barriers. Resources dedicated to a more comprehensive integration of New Territories' families into mainstream Hong Kong society will also likely help to alleviate the social and geographical alienation of youth. The curriculum of Band 3 schools needs to be oriented toward the needs of these communities, including an emphasis on conversational English, field trips to Hong Kong Island and Kowloon, attention to student self-efficacy and confidence-building, and exposure to a variety of educational and career options available in the broader Hong Kong society. However, this curriculum cannot ignore the structural inequalities inherent in Hong Kong society, and must be mindful not to shift the blame of structural inequality onto the youth's personal attributes.

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