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Hong Kong Youth Identity and Self-Presentation in the New Territories: A Qualitative Study on Letters from Youth and Teachers to an NGO Internship Progrm

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Abstract

Hong Kong youth issues have gained increased attention in recent years, particularly in light of youth protests and political involvement. In Hong Kong, NGOs are one avenue of intervention to address youth issues. This study examines the letters of youth from the New Territories, as well as their supporting secondary school teachers, to a Hong Kong NGO in order to gain placement in an NGO internship program. These letters are explored for issues of youth identity using the lens of dialogical self theory to better understand the impact of globalization on youth identity development. How the youth and their teachers present their strengths, weaknesses, personal characteristics and aspirations illuminates the processes of identity development. Further, the work of Slavoj Zizek is applied to the analysis of youth and teacher letters in order to better understand social understandings, anxieties and pressures, including those related to globalization and urbanization. This qualitative study contributes to the literature on youth in Hong Kong, and youth identity development in a variety of urban contexts.

Keywords: Hong Kong, youth, identity, globalization

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Introduction

Hong Kong is in transition. Since the 1997 handover from British colonial control to China, Hong Kong's *golden age* of wealth expansion, and role as intermediary between China and the west, has been largely accepted as having ended. Anxiety among the population centers around the uneasy place Hong Kong occupies as China's economic and political prowess increases. Hong Kong youth are particularly vulnerable to economic shifts, as they prepare to enter a rapidly changing workforce with fewer perceived opportunities than their parents and high living costs. Youth face intense pressure to perform well on school exams, a symptom of social uneasiness about access to jobs, resulting in youth suicide and widespread youth mental health issues. Educators, youth and their parents are scrambling to gain additional advantages for students that improve access to tertiary education and the workplace, which include internships, volunteerism, and extracurricular experiences. These job-related experiences are perceived as advantageous on university applications as well as job applications.

Internships for youth are ubiquitous and vary greatly. Often these opportunities offer some on-the-job training in a work setting and access to internships can vary from organized and equitable application processes to unfair and preferential treatment based on nepotism, power and influence. Therefore, internships can mirror the unequal privilege, opportunity and access of society and the workplace. Disadvantaged youth often live outside the circles of power necessary to obtain more prestigious internships.

With this differential in mind, a Hong Kong-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), Project Share, developed an internship and mentorship program for disadvantaged youth, targeting placements in prestigious professional settings. The program offered selected youth from

impoverished communities in the New Territories areas of Hong Kong, known for dense public housing

estates, internships with a mentor in reputable firms in Hong Kong's central business district during

their summer holiday break from secondary school. Youth were typically referred by low-ranked *Band*

Three schools (the lowest rank for schools in Hong Kong's school ranking system) through partner

teachers, and the youth were invited to write a letter of interest, to procure a letter of

recommendation from a teacher, and to a face-to-face interview with NGO staff. Youth interns were

selected based on their application letters, interviews and the availability of mentors.

The data made possible through the youth and teacher letters to the NGO offers a unique

glimpse into the negotiation process that these youth and their teachers undertake in accessing an

internship considered prestigious due to the notoriety of the firms and the reputation of the NGO.

Both youth and teacher letters offer glimpses into the attempts to traverse the gap between

disadvantaged youth's lives and educational realities, and the idyllic fantasies conjured by the

opportunity and access to prestigious firms through youth internships. These letters also provide a

window into attitudes and perceptions of community values, skills and knowledge needed in

contemporary Hong Kong, and societal expectations of youth in their development.

The following qualitative study will explore the letters of youth and teachers written to the

NGO during the internship application process, keeping in mind the notion of bricolage. As Berry (2004)

noted, bricolage is particularly useful "in contemporary theories of reading and interpreting texts, the

text and the reader are located in cultural, political, historical, and intellectual contexts, which thus

makes reading an act of complexity" (p. 133). Therefore, eclecticism is seen as an advantageous

positioning, acknowledging the complexity of real contexts, yet attempting to integrate varied

perspectives into a more holistic interpretation, while acknowledging the limits of encompassing

complexity. First, the literature on dialogical self theory centering on the work of Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) will be used to clarify the content of the youth and teacher letters and their attempts to reconcile the gaps between the realities of disadvantaged youth and the privilege and access provided through these internships. Then, through the use of Slavoj Žižek's (1989) notions of ideology, the *big Other* and floating signifiers, apparent manifestations and contradictions of social and economic anxieties through the letters are further explored.

Review of Literature

This qualitative research study is situated within the discourses in the literature on dialogical self theory, framed by the notion of bricolage, and utilizes the work of Slavoj Žižek to add further insight. Bricolage insists that rather than complexity for complexity's sake, the bricolage researcher is "sensitive to a world seething with crisis, wars, conflicts, ecological disasters, hunger and poverty, and with social, cultural, political, historical and economic inequalities, exclusions, injustices, and totalitarianism at the individual, local, and global levels" (Berry, 2004, p. 133). As noted by Kincheloe, McLaren and Steinberg (2011), "The bricolage exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world and the complications of power" (p. 168). Thus, the study sought to integrate the discourse on dialogical self theory with a more nuanced framework that acknowledges the inherent complexity of any real-world data.

The central work in the literature on dialogical self theory on which this literature review is based comes from Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010). Hermans and Hermans-Konopka build on Robertson's (1995) notion of *glocalization* in which the global and the local are not seen as oppositional. Rather, glocalized identities consist of a mixture of global ideas and local values. In Robertson's view, the global and local are inter-penetrable. The global does not exist in a

decontextualized and abstract manner, but permeates local contexts world-wide. Hermans and

Hermans-Konopka (2010) go further to argue that contemporary child, adolescent and adult identity

development reconciles the global and local dialectic through internal and external dialogue in the

formation of self. Hermans and Hermans-Konopka clarified that this dialogue is not only between self

and self, but self and other (which could vary from assumed family members' or friend's positions, to

role models, celebrities and cultural icons), and other and other (including iconic spokespeople from

various social positions, or fantasy embodiments of multiple cultural roles). Therefore, there is a

merging of self and other (or various others).

Rather than a binary or dichotomy, the dialogical approach conceptualizes a multiplicity of

voices in the self as well as a multiplicity of cultural positions extended in both time and space

(Hermans, 2002; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). As we negotiate these global and local forces, our

identity develops at cultural interfaces in a continually adapting dialogue between voices and positions

(Hermans and Kempen, 1993; 1998). It is this dialogic capacity which allows us to merge these voices,

problem solve and adapt to the often contradictory pressures and forces in contemporary life

(Hermans & Kempen, 1998). Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) described the notion of *alterity*,

which is our capacity to understanding the other voice or position in a dialogue, even while engaged in

a fully internal dialogue, and our continual willingness, or lack thereof, to change or adapt our position

throughout the dialogical process.

Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) explained that the varying other persons, groups,

cultures, and voices are part of the extended self, going beyond just the internal self and incorporating

those of others (real or imagined) from the local to global levels into a broader dialogical self including

even social positions and voices outside the individual's own particular social position. The relations of

social dominance are part of the dialogical self's intrinsic dynamics, as awareness of social hierarchies and status are integrated into the dialogical self's developing identity (Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, 1992). Further, emotions are crucial in opening and/or closing of the self to global and local influences. These influences are particularly pertinent in a setting like Hong Kong, where youth develop in a hyper-consumerist, fast-paced metropolitan area, and global economic forces are palpable (Hermans & Kempen, 1998).

Arnett's (2002) research on adolescents' experiences of globalization noted four key characteristics: bicultural identity, identity confusion, self-selected cultures and emerging adulthood. Arnett argued that adolescents in non-western societies were more likely to face identity confusion as aspects of western culture (e.g. individualism and secularism) infiltrate their societies and present contradictory values and norms to those of their own societies. Self-selected cultures form, and are those that then congregate in response to global forces. For instance, there may be groups that embrace unabashedly the secular and consumerist globalized culture, and other groups that resist these forces strongly through, for instance, religious or ideological tenets. Finally, Arnett (2002) describes a new developmental period, called *emerging adulthood*, which is an extended period between adolescence and adulthood where the young adult prolongs identity formation and transition to adult roles, a phenomenon which is occurring worldwide (Arnett, 2002).

Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) expanded upon the notion of uncertainty as result of adolescent's confrontation with contemporary society's complexity, ambiguity, deficit knowledge (or a lack of superordinate knowledge structure to reconcile contradictions) and unpredictability (p. 3). Although not necessarily a negative experience for all adolescents, uncertainty can lead to insecurity and anxiety in adolescent development. For instance, Arnett (2002) noted that despite the traditionally

strict social hierarchy in the workplace and in school in China, economic growth has impacted these norms resulting in more individualism. Hong Kong's uniquely hybrid role between Chinese and Western culture likely means that Hong Kong youth are even more susceptible to the immediacy of these changes. These tensions instigate the continuous development of the dialogical self of adolescents through emerging adulthood and beyond. Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) also described five reactions to these tensions from uncertainty in the age of globalization: reducing the positions or voices in the self, prioritizing one position or voice, sharpening the boundaries between self and other, increasing the positions or voices in the self, coping by going into and through uncertainty (p. 3).

Van Meijl (2012) argued that globalization had a particular impact on adolescents, exacerbating identity development issues. Specifically, adolescent identity development is challenged because due to globalization, people are living "on the interfaces between societies, implying intimate contact with different cultural customs" (van Meijl, 2012, p. 47). Van Meijl also argued that this confrontation between global and local forces, as well as a multiplicity of voices is violent and jarring in nature to adolescents.

> Adolescents growing up in multicultural societies are usually among the first who have no option but to deal with the inevitable multiplication of their identifications in the New World: part of their identity remains rooted in the so-called "traditional" culture of their families, but another part is more attuned to the global situation beyond the bounds of their home (van Meijl, 2012, p. 49).

Due to the significance of adolescence as a crucial developmental period, particularly in light of globalization, education becomes a key institutional setting particularly influential on the phenomenon of the dialogical self (Hermans, 2013). Thus, the importance of understanding the processes,

techniques and strategies adolescents, such as those in this study's data, employ to navigate

uncertainty in the formation of self.

Žižek's (1989) approach to the notion of ideology is also useful in further understanding and

interpreting conflicting and contradictory presentation of self in the data. Žižek (1989) outlined the

processes that reinforce ideology in individuals and groups. Žižek traces the apparent development of

contemporary ideologies to the Enlightenment and Kant's acknowledgment of the mutually exclusive

split between Enlightenment thought and practice, summarized by his statement "Reason about

whatever you want and as much as you want- but obey" (p. 87). Žižek claimed that this disconnection

was actually cemented in contemporary society by the Enlightenment paradigm. We understand the

inherent contradictions, as well as the unproductive and detrimental elements imbedded in how things

function; however, we continue participating in and supporting the system that causes these issues.

Hong Kong is a society clearly influenced by the Enlightenment paradigm imported by the British

colonial apparatus and exacerbated by global trade, yet Hong Kong remains with one foot tentatively

planted within traditional Chinese society and culture. These contradictory cultural influences are

reconciled, according to Žižek, through the development and reinforcement of ideology.

Žižek (2006) further developed these ideas, noting that concepts and ideas are often

completely irreconcilable depending on perspective, which in no way undermines the functioning of

the ideologically framed system of beliefs and actions. Rather, these contradictions are integral aspects

of the system. The reconciliation of these contradictions is enacted through the notion of the *big

Other*, a concept that Žižek further extrapolates from the work of Jacques Lacan. The notion of the *big

Other* provides a projected societal image in which people symbolically construct a receptacle for

societal norms, morals, anxieties, authority, knowledge and ways of life subjectively. This *big Other* is

composed of "trans-individual socio-linguistic structures configuring the fields of inter-subjective interactions" (Johnson, 2013, Section 2.3). The *big Other*, combined with dialogical self theory's conceptualization of the various positions between self and other, offer complementary ways of teasing out the conceptions of identity and subjectivity within the data, with particular use regarding understanding teacher and student perceptions of community values as well as global skills and knowledge.

Finally, Žižek (1989) employed the notion of floating signifiers to further elucidate the processes of ideological development and contradiction. Žižek theorizes the preemptive and retroactive moral, ethical, social and political assumptions that all subjects make when applying *floating signifiers,* or symbolic labels through language whose meaning and significance are in flux in relation to what they signify, and how they attempt to appeal to an imagined *big Other*. These signifiers are continually changing or floating, and the subject attempts to affix their meanings within their amorphous ideological and symbolic fields with *points de capiton*, or quilting points. These quilting points are ultimately unsuccessful attempts to pin down our ideological fields in light of continuously shifting symbolic networks of meaning and significance.

Wall and Perrin (2015) made one of the first attempts to apply Žižek's ideas to the field of education (and thus issues pertaining specifically to youth) and the ways that educational ideology entraps educators and students alike. In particular, Wall and Perrin highlighted the ways in which educational actors understand that the ways in which we teach are often disconnected with the needs of society, yet we continue perpetuating these issues due to ideological blinders. Gilbert (2016) also acknowledged the potential benefit of using Žižek's work to break form the trappings of contemporary thinking about youth and education but warns against oversimplification of the nuanced arguments in

Žižek and his predecessors such as Jacques Lacan. Although the above descriptions are simplified summaries of Žižek's complex ideas, the authors sought to offer brief conceptualizations of these theoretical tools (ideological contradiction, the *big Other* and floating signifiers) with the intention of applying these ideas to the analysis of study data.

Research Questions

This study was designed to address the following research questions:

Research Question One- How do student letters exemplify aspects of dialogical self-identity development and negotiation between local community values and globalization-influenced Hong Kong society through their attitudes and perceptions?

Research Question Two- How do teacher letters exemplify aspects of specific attitudes and perceptions, community values and societal expectations of youth?

Research questions will be addressed using qualitative findings arranged thematically.

Limitations

Qualitative and interpretive research has inherent limitations. In particular, this study focused on a small data set from a unique and purposefully selected sample and thus generalizability is limited. Rather than attempting to generalize these findings to the entire population of youth in Hong Kong, the study was designed to elucidate the perspectives of an oft ignored and stereotyped subset of youth. These findings provide a more pointed picture, as opposed to a broad and comprehensive illustration, of key issues relating to disadvantaged youth identity development.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

The participants were selected through purposeful sampling because the selected participants "offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest; sampling then is aimed at insight about the phenomenon, not empirical generalization from a sample to a population" (Patton, 2002, p. 40). The participants of this study were secondary school-age youth who wrote letters of interest, and secondary teachers who wrote letters of recommendation, to a Hong Kong-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that provides summer internships for disadvantaged youth. The NGO presented their programs at the schools, either with teachers, administrators and/or students present. Teachers could recommend students. The NGO also placed recruiting posters at the schools and students could approach teachers to express their interest in participating in the program. Youth participants were from the New Territories region of Hong Kong known for dense public housing estates, higher rates of poverty and lower ranked schools. The internships are held in the central business districts of Hong Kong, an area geographically and culturally distant from these youth, and economically more affluent than the New Territories. The letters written by the youth represent a unique glimpse into the preemptive assumptions that these youth have about the characteristics that they believe the NGO is targeting for their internships as well as self-descriptions of their own personal attributes and aspirations. The letters written by the teachers also represent a unique glimpse into the attempts of educators to navigate the gap in privilege and access on behalf of their economically disadvantaged students, despite their own limited views of the potential opportunities these internships may facilitate. Data collection was conducted in conjunction with IRB approval at the researcher's institution.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed and interpreted in phases: in vivo coding (Khandkar, n.d.), first focused coding and second focused coding and development of themes. In vivo (Khandkar, n.d.) coding refers to the use of the participants' words to categorize data and begin developing codes. First focused coding is the phase in which these codes are collected conceptually into clusters of similar codes. Next, code clusters are further refined into succinct themes (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Birks & Mills, 2010). Thematic findings were further developed using a grounded theory approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) into the findings of this study. Strength of themes was determined by both the number of instances that the codes and themes occurred across the entirety of the data as well as assessing the quality of the data in terms of particularly powerful qualitative instances within the data (Berg, 2008; Mason, 2002; Patton, 2002). Data quality and the trustworthiness of data and interpretation was established using the qualitative research notions of dependability and triangulation (Golafshani, 2003; Patton, 2002) which combine to give overall quality. Dependability was established from the outset, as the sources of the data, teachers and students from low-ranked Hong Kong schools in the New Territories, provided voice to an underrepresented segment of the population, and were particularly poised to speak to the perspectives of disadvantaged youth identity and issues. Triangulation was established through the repetition of codes and themes across multiple data sources, (e.g. student letters), as well as data types (e.g. teacher and student letters). To clarify, code repetition is not presented to establish a positivist conceptualization of the power of the code, but to illustrate its breadth and depth across the participants as data is interpreted as well as establish the trustworthiness of the themes. The bricolage approach to theoretical frameworks presented in the review of literature was employed to further analyze the thematic findings, situate the findings within

the literature on dialogical self theory and Žižek's notions of ideology, the *big Other* and floating signifiers, and articulate the contribution these findings offer to those bodies of literature.

Results

Letters from both teachers and students are presented separately below. First, teacher letters offer a glimpse into important social attitudes toward qualities valuable to the community. These values arise as patterns in the teachers' descriptions of youth perceived to be suitable to the NGO program. Further, teacher letters highlight what they consider valuable characteristics of youth in a positive manner, as letters of recommendation to a program, and characteristics that they assume will be desired by the program. Results are presented with both ethnographic quotes, emphasized terms, and the number of repeated terms and phrases will be included parenthetically as well as in-text to illustrate breadth and depth across the data sources.

Teacher Letters

Compliance was a construct that appeared prominently in teacher letters. A term that appeared most often was 'amicable' to describe youth which appeared 5 times in the data. Teachers also described compliance through students' 'good conduct' which appeared 5 times, illustrating the valuing of compliant behavior as crucial to both school and the workplace. One teacher noted that a female student 'conducts herself appropriately' and another teacher described a male student as 'submissive'. The term 'pleasant' was used four times in the data to describe students, as well as 'humble' (3), 'quiet' (2), 'polite' (2), and 'sense of belonging' (2). The phrase 'sense of belonging' implies a *fitting in* or conforming of the student to the larger culture of students. The characterization of these compliance-related descriptors illustrates a general attitude toward conformity and norming of student behavior as highly sought after and worthy of mention. This attitude of conformity starkly

contrasts with the highly individualistic and competitive nature of the contemporary Hong Kong's globally-oriented industries like finance, design and marketing. The teachers see conformity and compliance - values prioritized in traditional Chinese society - as student characteristics to be praised, potentially illustrating the valuing of traditional culture, or illustrating teachers' gaps in understanding of the values and desired characteristics in the globally competitive job market in Hong Kong.

Work ethic was a major theme in the teacher letter data, with terms describing students as hard workers appearing ten times in the data. The term 'diligent' appeared 12 times in teacher letters and 'responsible' appeared 22 times. Other terms implying work ethic that arose included 'attentive' (5), 'self-discipline' (4), 'industrious' (4), 'persistent' (3), 'Organized' (3), and 'initiative' (3). Social characteristics were noted in many teacher's letters describing students. The term "friendly' appeared eight times and 'cheerful' appeared six times. Teachers drew attention to students' 'communication' skills four times as well as mentioning how a student gets along with others (3) and builds relationships (3), all of which would be valued in the contemporary workplace. Within social characteristics, teachers described some students' personality traits as outgoing, which included 'enthusiasm' ten times, and initiative two times. More prominently, however, were teachers' descriptions of students as willing to 'help' (20) and 'care' (4) about others.

Personal cognitive traits were categorized as intelligence, creative ability and specific skills. Intelligence was largely associated with performance in school, with the term 'academic' used to describe their intelligence seven times. Teachers described students as 'willing to learn' three times and 'independent' three times. The term 'looks for solutions' appeared three times, implying the teachers' understanding of the importance of problem solving in the contemporary workplace. The term 'creative' was used five times but overall, creativity-related terms were not prominent in the

data. English skills were noted twice, as well as one student's musical ability. Overall, intelligence was generally categorized as related to school performance, rather than inherent ability, perhaps related to the limited interaction teachers have to students outside the classroom.

Leadership was a theme that arose, with 'leader' (14) appearing in the teacher letters as well as 'mature' (4). Some generally positive descriptors were used including mention of participation appearing eight times, including 'active participant' and 'keen participation'. Also, the term 'positive' appeared three times. Some of the generally positive descriptors implied rank or hierarchy, for instance, terms like 'top student', 'superior', 'best', and 'well qualified'. Although most descriptors were positive, a few were indirectly negative. One teacher suggested that program participation would 'build his self-confidence' while another suggested that the student was 'willing to learn with guidance'.

Student Letters

Student letters offered a glimpse into student attitudes and perceptions about several interesting topics. First, students attempted to describe the NGO program in a positive manner, both attempting to flatter the organization, and describe what program would mean to them in general terms. Second, the students attempted to predict or describe the desired outcomes that program participation would bring in their futures. These descriptions included discussion of issues that the students hoped to overcome through program participation. Third, the students described themselves in both positive and negative ways.

Students described the NGO program to which they were applying as an opportunity, as an experience, and as idealized. Because the students were basing their understanding of the program on what their teachers and their fellow students had told them, twelve students described the program as

an opportunity, which included terminology such as 'precious opportunity' and 'treasure this opportunity'. Students also pointed out understanding of their need for the experiences that the program offered, which included describing the program as both 'valuable work experience' and 'valuable chances to work with professionals'. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, students provided idealized descriptions of the NGO program which included characterizing it as a 'dream', broadening 'horizons', and general hyperbole. Thirteen students used the term 'dream' and discussed the connection between program participation and achieving their dreams. For instance, three students stated that participating in the program would help them 'realize my dream'. Others noted the program helping to 'fulfill my dream', 'chase my dream' or 'moving one step forward towards my dream'. Twenty students described program participation as either widening or broadening their 'horizons', implying their understanding of the need to expand their experiences. Finally, students used some exaggerated or hyperbolic descriptions of program participation, which included 'very rare chance', 'achieve the unachievable after', 'face any problem in the future', 'golden chance', 'golden opportunity', and 'rare and brilliant opportunity'.

Next, students' predictions or descriptions of desired outcomes from participating in the NGO programs represented the largest set of data within the student letters. Overall students surmised that they would gain more experience, which included relevant work experience, and real-world experience, gain more confidence, become more self-aware, improve their status, improve various skills including English skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, thinking skills and other practical skills. Students also described how program participation would help them address problems or barriers in their lives, including limiting effects of school and barriers.

Experience was one of the most important themes that arose in the data on desired outcomes and included general experience (31), real-world experience (14) and relevant work experience (7). Students described themselves as generally lacking confidence ('I know that I [have a] lack of confidence in my ability') as well as the NGO program as an opportunity to build confidence (11). Although students did not describe themselves as lacking communication skills, per se, they believed that they would improve their communication skills through program participation (38). Student letters exhibited participants understanding of the connection between communication and other elements such as confidence. For instance, one student noted, 'I want to improve my communication skills, because I will feel shy and nervous in the presence of strangers'. Another student noted, 'I can improve my communication skills which not only enable me to build good relationships with others, but also help me get a job easier'. A third student described their desire to '...improve my problem-solving, communication and interpersonal skills', illustrating the youth's understanding of the interconnectivity between communication skills and many other job-related skills.

Interpersonal skills arose in the data as distinct (24), and in relation to social networking (15). Students illustrated their understanding of the connection between interpersonal skills and the workplace. For instance, one student stated, 'interpersonal relationship is important in all jobs. Talking and doing with experiencing people as a lesson'. Another noted, 'Getting along with others are essential skills'. Students also connected interpersonal skills with expanding their social network, for instance, a student pointed out their desire to 'expand my circle of friends', while another stated, 'I also want to meet different people from different strata of the society'. This example illustrates the student's understanding of social hierarchy and the awareness of the need to connect with those outside their social class. Another example also illustrates this notion, as one student stated that

program participation would '...provide me a good platform to meet people from different walks of life'. These examples counter a common narrative about disadvantaged youth as often these marginalized youth are characterized as not being aware of their need to expand their social network or the role that social networking has on improving one's social mobility. Other students noted the importance of social networking in the learning process, for instance, 'I would like to have more interaction with intelligent people from different fields', and 'I can know more about their life experiences and benefit from their personal sharing'. Another student pointed to their desire for 'learning from the professionals'. These examples illustrate students' understanding of the importance of informal and workplace-based learning.

Another important sub-theme within the desired outcomes theme was that of self-development, which included looking to the future, self-improvement, maturity and adaptation. In general, students discussed self-development (14) in terms of setting goals and pursuing those goals, as well as learning about themselves. However, clearly defined goals were often missing from descriptions. Students also noted their future-oriented outlook with statements like, 'important for my future', 'helpful for my future work', and 'pave the way for my career in the future'. Also, one student clarified their need to '...decide which career path is suitable for me. Having the right path allows me to be more focused on my future planning.' The notion of growth arose within the self-development subtheme (19), with students expressing their desire to 'improve myself', 'challenge myself', and 'equip myself'. Finally, students described their desires to develop themselves in relation to maturity (2), i.e. 'I can be more mature' and adaptation (2), i.e. 'adapting to a completely new environment'.

English skills were of particular note in student letter data (5) with some students claiming that the opportunity to practice English in internships were of particular interest, for instance, 'One thing attracting me is "English"', and 'English is important to our future work needs. I want to improve my English skill through this program'. Problem-solving skills also arose in the data (10), particularly in relation to being independent. For instance, one student noted, 'Nobody may not help you when they are busy. So, I need to learn how to solve the problem', and another noted, 'I need to deal with the problem from myself'. General thinking skills also appeared in student letter data (4), which included students desire to improve 'Creative-thinking skills', 'logical thinking skills', and 'learning skills'.

Student letters exemplified their understanding of issues impacting their social mobility as well. These issues were categorized as the limiting effect of school, and barriers. These students understood a disconnection between success in school in Hong Kong and success in the workplace. As one student astutely described below-

> What I learn is typically from our textbooks or past papers. We maybe perform well in [an]
>
> academic aspect, but I do think that it isn't enough. Sometimes, I think I am short-sighted (as
>
> [are] many Hong Kong students), thanks to spoon-feeding education.

Students identified the limitations in Hong Kong schooling ("I cannot acquire in the normal curriculum'), the disconnection between school-based learning and real-world learning ('learn a lot from textbooks, but I cannot apply what I have learnt in my daily life'), the importance of experiential learning ('I believe that the best way to learn is to learn by doing'), and the lack of work-based learning in school ('There are not enough opportunities for me to gain some working experience in my school'). Students indicated barriers to social mobility in the data. For instance, one student stated, "I believe, everyone has their dreams. Yet, the sad but true fact is that there are variations in lives which deter us

from pursuing'. Another student combined several factors that impacted their success at work: 'It is hard for me to find my first job on my own because I [was] a little bit scared that I was useless in the working environment and was fired quickly. I seem not [to have] enough skills to work'.

The final theme were a set of positive and negative descriptions of themselves. Students described themselves using terms that fit several key categories: hard work, responsibility, energy, social, analytical, learner, mature, attitude, resilience, passion and altruistic. The term work was used four times throughout the data along with several other terms insinuating hard work, for instance 'Try my best' and 'make every effort'. The term 'responsible' was used to describe themselves three times while other terms used implied responsibility, such as 'devote fully'. Students described themselves as energetic as well as used similar terms such as 'lively', 'full of fun', 'active', 'enthusiastic' and 'cheerful'. Some students described themselves as social using a variety of terms: 'sociable', 'like to make friends and 'I love to share all about myself to everyone'. Much like the descriptions of cognitive traits in teacher letters, students also described themselves in cognitive terms. For instance, students described themselves as analytical using the term, 'analytical' twice but also used phrases such as 'I am good at solving problems', and 'solve them quickly and properly'. In addition to analytical thinking, students described themselves as learners in multiple ways: 'willing to learn', 'eager to learn' and 'learn from every situation'.

Students also insinuated some of the leadership and related qualities noted by teachers. The term 'mature' appeared four times, for instance, 'I am mature enough to face challenges'. Two instances of describing themselves as having a positive attitude, and two instances of describing themselves as having passion, also appeared. Three instances of students self-describing as resilient included 'courage to face different difficulties', 'ready to face challenges' and 'I would not give up

when facing difficulties'. The final category of self-description was altruism, with two students describing themselves in the following ways: 'Always ready to give a helping hand to people in need', and 'helping those in need to fight against inequalities'.

Although a much smaller set of descriptions, students also described themselves negatively. Three students described themselves as shy, particularly related to communication with people they do not know: 'Being shy, I seldom take the initiative in communication with strangers', and 'I will feel shy and nervous in the presence of strangers I know that I lack confidence in my ability'.

Discussion

Teachers and students share some themes while others diverge. Teachers focused on four major conceptual themes in their letters on behalf of young people: compliance, work ethic, cognitive traits and leadership. These four categories of important traits possessed by, or needed by, youth in order to be successful, can be further critiqued as technocratic and traditional in nature. Despite living in a global city fraught with elitism, dramatic wealth inequality, dependence on a service and information economy, and international global financial sectors, teachers still conceptualize the linkage between society's needs and students' abilities through an outdated and traditional framework in many aspects, as well as in somewhat contradictory terms. For instance, compliance and leadership are largely contradictory, if not competing, notions, with compliance being an attribute suited more for rote factory and agricultural work of a developing economy, and leadership being characterized by notions of flexibility, problem solving, critical thinking and teamwork. However, when considering the concept of floating signifiers, these apparent contradictions are not necessarily contradictory in light of the converging factors in Hong Kong society. The pressure on young Hong Kongers to both fit in with traditional norms and mores overlays the simultaneous pressure to be an intelligent and flexible leader

who can adapt to the rapidly changing global economy. Here we can see the implied acknowledgement of the uncertainty noted by dialogical self theorists on the part of the teachers. Traditional traits like compliance remain crucial cultural components of community interconnection while simultaneously emphasizing the demands being placed on young people by the modern economy and job market.

The *big Other* notion is a particularly useful analytical tool to further explore these themes. Teachers' attempt to orient the description of these students toward their conception of the *big Other*, and what they think the *big Other* wants from Hong Kong's younger generation. Compliance connotes an understanding of the Hong Kong way of life in the youth, and that these recommended youth will not cause the teacher or the organization to save face. However, the teachers must also acknowledge the traits in students that the preemptively assume the big Other also desires in contemporary society tied to global economics, advanced technology and service industry.

Student letters imply the multiplicities of self theorized in the work on dialogical self theory. For instance, students acknowledged their need for specific skills, knowledge and characteristics that the contemporary workplace values. These included interpersonal communication, work ethic and proactiveness. They also acknowledge their own lacks in terms of social skills, experience, maturity and English.

Student identity projections also offered glimpses into the ideological character of the *big Other* through their idealized descriptions of the NGO and its programs. Hyperbolic imagery, such as *precious*, *treasure*, *golden*, *dream*, *horizon*, *rare* and *brilliant* exemplify the projection of a value-laden conceptualization of an idealized future self as well as an incorporation of varied social positions into the extended self. Further, this imagery implies the extension in time and space for a multiplicity of cultural positions.

Student descriptions of what they hoped to gain from NGO programs were intimately bound to the *big Other* and exemplified the multiplicity of selves within their identity. Students acknowledged the limits of traditional schooling. They clearly valued interpersonal skills and real-world experience. However, they also grappled with their own personal shyness, social anxiety and lack of confidence, in a somewhat self-deprecating manner. Students make it clear that they know that society does not value shyness, despite its prevalence among Hong Kong youth, and point to a desire for a future self that is not shy. Some of the vague imagery noted in the self-development theme implied an acknowledged personal lack at the present and a desire for improved personal characteristics desired by society. These characteristics, which the individuals in this study largely do not think that they currently possess, imply a future orientation where the students' identity is goal-focused, although without clear goals. Goals for goals sake, so to speak. Descriptions of the desire to be goal oriented without the actual goals illustrates the generally fuzzy and contradictory nature of the developing adolescent identity, as they navigate the varied demands, however unclear, perceived to be expected of them by the *big Other*. Coping with these perceived pressures, the youth adopt varied culturally positioned selves in dialogue with each other, bringing forth those selves as deemed appropriate for the situation despite only vague understanding of the culturally symbolic context (in this case, an application to an NGO program). These iterations cannot be explained away as an attempt to communicate to the NGO what they think the NGO wants to hear. Rather, the iterations are attempts to think what the NGO thinks, and embody what they think the NGO wants them to be in a complex dialogical process between a multiplicity of identities and a projection of the *big Other* built on floating signifiers, a challenging endeavor indeed.

One element that needs further investigation is the altruistic notion of care expressed in the data. The altruistic teacher comments expressing an interest in caring for others provides insight into teacher values of related to community and social relations. Care and concern for the community tie back to traditional orientations toward community, despite the general sense that community connectedness is disintegrating in Hong Kong, and care relationships have been radically impacted by urbanization (Huang, 2015). Debate continues on social cohesion in Hong Kong, but some have found negative correlations between social cohesion and social class (Chan, 2015), as well as factors such as living in specific New Territories communities and diversity in these communities (Rochelle, 2014). The expressions of care imply combined sentiments of resistance to this increasingly disconnected nature of social life in Hong Kong, but also may represent attempts to model the interests of an NGO, which has an implied altruistic purpose. Contrary to the teachers' insistence that many of these youth were helpful and caring individuals, facets that may be characterized as more traditional facets of a tight knit community, student self-descriptions related to social relations were more oriented toward a so-called modern and neoliberal conception of networking for career advancement and gaining experience in the workplace. Rather than a community-orientation which only two student letters illustrated, most of the student letters framed social relations in terms of career-oriented interpersonal skills, rather than community-minded collectivism. More investigation is needed to further explore these attitudinal trajectories and their implications for social cohesion over time.

Conclusion

The ideologies of youth and teachers in the New Territories are ambiguous phenomena to outline. Dialogical self theory helps to normalize this ambiguity, pointing us to a clearer understanding of the complex ways that youth identity develops in the face of social pressures of urbanization, as well

as the pressures from competing community and societal values and world-views. These letters offer a preliminary glimpse into some of the aspects of the ideologies at play. It is overly simplistic, for instance, to see the ideological orientations of the teachers toward traditional values as outdated, and dialogical self theory helps us understand that hybrid youth identities develop in the era of intense globalization and urbanization through internal dialogical processes of negotiation. Youth must navigate the push and pull of global and local forces as they develop their identities, and formulate their own ideological orientations while holding in relief the varied characteristics of the *big Other.*

The ideological mix of traditional values like hard work, helping others, being shy, humble, patient, and deferential to authority combines with a struggle to embrace contemporary and neo-liberally oriented values like being socially outgoing, individualistic, and competitive. The teachers project a image of the students as being suited for these internships because of a mix of the facets of the big Other that encapsulate community and the school's values. Further investigation is needed in terms of whether the teachers believe that they are highlighting the values that the school reinforces (so-called traditional), and the characteristics that the students have despite this (so-called neoliberal). Or whether teachers, through the values reinforced by the schools, believe a mixed identity is necessary and value the so-called neoliberal values in spite of community values. Teachers may also be keenly aware of the need for hybridity, and see the value of both in order for youth to successfully navigate Hong Kong society. Therefore, it not be as useful to cast these two as oppositional or dichotomous in further exploration, and rather as integrated aspects of a more complex matrix.

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