Young people in social withdrawal - an extreme form of social exclusion? Policy agenda and organizational practices

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Abstract

Economically inactive young people who are not pursuing any studies or training are regarded as a socially excluded or non-engaged group. This disadvantaged group is however characterized by heterogeneity and diversity particularly with respect to spatial and relational dimensions. Social withdrawal, arguably as an atypical form of social exclusion, is a term used to refer to youth who seclude themselves at home and reject most forms of contact and relationship with the outside world for an extended period of time. This paper argues that young people entrapped in social withdrawal experience an extreme form of social exclusion not only in terms of being deprived of enjoying a legitimate social status and leading a social life with friends or peers, but also in terms of being invisible to the policy makers and suffering from inclusive measures that are paradoxically inflexible and exclusionary. With the use of empirical data and case studies, this paper discusses this new phenomenon and draws implications for policy and organizational practices that are more flexible and target-sensitive.

Keywords: social withdrawal, social exclusion, non-engaged youth, flexibility, policy inaction

The phenomenon of youth-at-risk who are secluded at home and disengaged from interactions with peers and participation in the community for a protracted period of time has aroused much public and professional concern in Japan first about the turn of the new millennium, and then later in other East-Asian societies like Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, Korea, etc. Even the most casual search of internet materials will show that the same phenomenon is reported in the West. For example, when the BBC documentary on the topic of hikikomori - a Japanese term coined for the phenomenon of home-bound social withdrawal - was broadcast in Britain in 2002, the BBC homepage received numerous messages from viewers that they had personal
experience with hikikomori.

Before examining the policy and organizational responses to the phenomenon of social withdrawal, this paper provides a theoretical and methodological backdrop in the first place, which is to be followed by a study of the differences between non-engaged youth (NEY) and youth in social withdrawal. The latter is deemed important as the paper argues that the NEY discourse promoted by the government in reengaging youth is excluding the emergent problem of social withdrawal from the policy agenda, which can explain for the inadequacy of policy and funding support to youth in social withdrawal.

Searching for a perspective in accounting and addressing social withdrawal

Social withdrawal is not a new term. For example, the discipline of developmental psychology has been witnessing research study in the area of children and adolescents suffering from social withdrawal or social isolation, who are characterized by shyness, unsociability, aloneness and peer avoidance (Rubin and Coplan 2005). Empirical studies informed by this theoretical perspective suggest that socially withdrawn children or students are more likely to lead a negative developmental trajectory, as they are at major risk of failing to develop social and interpersonal skills resulted from interactive experiences with peers. Such studies and theories frame children and youth who are socially disengaged from peers as moving away from the social environment, and thus efforts made in the promotion of a more supportive peer environment and cultivation of pro-social or interactive behavior on the side of individuals are considered important in preventing further moving away from the world from taking place (Gazelle and Rudolph 2004). From a psychopathological perspective, social withdrawal behavior and the negative parenting style are largely the targets of professional intervention (Sroufe and Rutter 1984).

Being alone does not necessarily mean being lonely. Loneliness is conceptualized as negative solitude experience because of its painful and potentially harmful nature (Ernst and Cacioppo 1999), which entails more than social isolation and reflects the sufferings of not connected to and valued by others (West et al 1986). However, solitude or aloneness, if it is planned and preferred may be productive in nature which may enhance one’s knowledge of one’s self and identity and the social environment, and provides relief from the pressures involved interacting with other people and living in the world. If it is the case of involving a greater understanding of oneself and the world and/or leading to a higher level of concentration, it may be a path to greater meaning and more rewards, which is conducive to generating positive benefit (Andre
1991). For example, with a determination to finish their work, young authors of a middle-class background, or with sufficient backup of financial resources, may be able to tune out from social life for a long period of time without being trapped in hardship or poverty. This is of course a personal choice striving for a personal goal which is to be achieved or rewarded sooner or later. Nobody would define this as a social withdrawal problem to be intervened or tackled. In some cases, the benefit of solitude may be considered as ‘negative’ in the sense of retreating from unpleasant situation before or after one is burnt out (Long and Averill 2003). Productive solitude generating either positive or negative benefit in the form of withdrawal from social life may be interpreted as a personal choice of young people in managing the extent to which they want to engage with or disengage from others. No social work professionals can afford to overlook the agency of young people and their meanings attached to the experience of solitude. If not, they may fail to appreciate the productive side of social withdrawal at best, and acknowledge the intention or motivation behind solitude or seclusion at worst.

The discussion so far illustrates that the moving away of young people from the social environment may be desirable or undesirable. It all depends on which perspective one intends to take into consideration and the impact of the moving away on young people. However, the social environment can be conceptualized as moving away or even against young people who are confronted with increasing challenges not only in developing relations with their peers but also in participating in major social institutions deemed important to achieving the purpose of youth transitions to adulthood. Significant social changes in the West, a characteristic of post-industrialization and increasing globalization, have led to the contemporary problematization of youth transitions and a growing perception of ‘youth-at-risk’ (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Kelly, 1999, 2001; Tait, 2000). Such an understanding goes against the thesis of ‘underclass’ in shaping the ideological ways of thinking about disaffected, dangerous, work-shy young men and irresponsible, promiscuous, immoral young women who, together, threaten ‘the survival of free institutions and a civil society’ (Murray, 1994:127). More structurally-oriented perspectives of youth transitions or stronger forms of social exclusion emphasize the role of policy and organizational efforts in reducing the powers of exclusion against young people (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Byrne, 2006). Those young people who are not in education, employment or training (youth NEET), have personal, emotional, or behavioral problems, and experience discrimination through age alone or combined with other factors like race, ethnicity, disability, single parenthood, homelessness, etc. (Williamson, 1997: Hills et al, 2002). Reaching a thorough understanding of
disaffection experienced by vulnerable youth groups cannot go without deconstructing the social processes and structures leading to social exclusion (Coles, 1997; Helve, 1997; Bauman, 2000; Percy-Smith, 2000).

The term ‘social withdrawal’ was originated from the discipline of developmental psychology, which is obviously more individualist in nature, which places emphasis on assisting socially-withdrawn young people to rebuild self-image and regain self-confidence, and to encourage them to reestablish communication and interactions with their friends and peers in particular. This is precisely the solutions emphasized by the ‘weak’ version of social exclusion, which lie in altering those excluded or isolated individuals’ disabling characteristics so as to enhance their social inclusion or social integration (Veit-Wilson, 1998; Byrne, 2006). The studies on the positive and negative notions of solitude or aloneness can inform youth work practitioners the importance of agency in assigning meanings to withdrawal experience and the policy makers and social welfare organizations alike in designing measures and delivering programmes that are more tailor-made to serving the specific needs of each youth. That is, youth should not be taken as a homogeneous group, and they are in reality characterized by differences and diversity that should not be ironed out both in terms of policy formulation and service intervention. The stronger version of social exclusion can shed light on understanding how social environment at large moves away or against young people experienced with their transition trajectories characterized by ups and downs and fractures. Nevertheless, the emphasis of research in western societies has been placed on examining or tackling the problems of young people who are behaviorally anti-social or aggressive (at least in the eyes of adults and the authority), homeless or of criminal background, etc. (Steer, 2000; Ravenhill, 2000; Golden et al, 2002; Colley, 2003). There has not been any study in the West explicitly using the social exclusion perspective to study the newly emerging yet growing phenomenon of social withdrawal experienced by young people. Before arguing that social withdrawal is an extreme form of social exclusion, the next two sessions discuss the research methodology of the study and then in what way youth in social withdrawal are different from those young people being disconnected, disengaged or excluded from social institutions understood in a conventional sense.

Methodology

This study is based on literature review and empirical data. The interviewing and case data were collected from a project team called Life Engagement Training Scheme (LETS), which is so far the only local social work team in Hong Kong specializing in
outreaching young people in social withdrawal. Because of the expertise of the project team, referrals have been taken from both formal sectors (including government officials, social workers, teachers and pastors) and informal sources (normally friends or family members). As an unpaid consultant to this project and the principal investigator of a number of related research projects, the author has been able to obtain continuing access to relevant data and discuss the cases and service tactics and strategies employed by the social workers of the project team.

In the first two phases of the project between October 2004 and July 2007, the size of the team was in the range of ten to twelve professional social workers. In the current third phase beginning from August 2007, the size is cut to seven only because of inadequate funding support. Up till May 2008, the team has served a total number of 252 cases suffering from the problem of social withdrawal. About 80 per cent of cases are males, and the remaining 20 per cent are females. The age range of the users is largely from 13 to 24 usually characterized with low level of education and working class background.

As the topic is a sensitive one, and as those clients still trapped in social withdrawal would be very unlikely to develop a relationship based on trust with outsiders other than the concerned social workers, data collection in the form of individual or focus group interview with the clients would be neither possible nor ethical. In view of this difficulty, with the consent of the project team a face sheet was designed with two major aims: to explore clients’ experience of disengagement and social workers’ experience of working with this client group. The case sheet, to be completed by the social worker concerned, fulfilled the dual purpose of recording and accountability on the one hand and data collection for the research study on the other hand.

In addition to using the face sheet data, the author conducted four focus group interviews with the project team of about ten social workers between November 2004 and June 2005. The focus group shared their working experience and the typical cases they served, and explored the possibilities for service improvement. It is known that people are more likely to share personal experiences in group than dyadic settings, particularly when they are of the same background (Morgan and Krueger 1993, Kitzinger 1995, Carey 1994, Morgan 2004), and that group discussion dynamics promote more active involvement by encouraging other respondents to echo or extend what they have heard, thereby sharpening the focus of discussion (Fern 2001). Since December 2007, upon getting another research fund, the author has initiated another round of interviews with six social workers on an individual basis, where each of...
them shared three to five cases. Because of more time available, and probably because of the trust of the respondents on the author (who is also the project consultant), they shared more in depth the case nature, the impressive verbatim and events, and those areas that improvement might be made. If the researcher was a stranger to the respondent, conducting an in-depth interview on a dyadic basis may be too challenging to uncover more the details of the cases (Berg, 2007; Willis, 2007).

In addition to collecting qualitative data from the field, the author conducted two territory-wide surveys by means of inviting all secondary schools and youth work service units in Hong Kong to fill in a structured questionnaire designed to report on the number of social withdrawal cases known to them within last 12 months and provide a brief report on the ways to handle the cases. The period for conducting the two surveys was between January 2008 and May 2008. For the youth work service units, 194 questionnaires were sent out and at the end 50 completed questionnaires were returned with a response rate at 25.8%. While for the secondary schools, 503 questionnaires were sent out with a return of 183 completed questionnaires or a return rate at 36.4%. In regards to the respondents of youth work units, 56.0% reported to have social withdrawal cases known to them; and for the school counterparts, the corresponding proportion was 50.3%. In spite of the possibility that those service units and schools with withdrawal cases were prone to complete and return the questionnaires, the figures reported are still worth of the attention of policy makers and youth work practitioners.

Social withdrawal versus social exclusion?

In view of the alarmingly high unemployment rate of youth in Hong Kong at the dawn of the new millennium 2000, the Commission on Youth was asked to come up with a plan to provide young people with pluralistic options in training and employment (Tung, 2003). What has worried the Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government of Hong Kong is an emerging group of non-engaged youth (NEY) aged from 15 to 24, who are economically inactive and who are not pursuing any studies. The definition of NEET status sounds similar except the point that it refers to a narrower age span between 16 and 19 in the UK (Yates and Payne, 2006). The Commission on Poverty (2005) estimated that there were more than 94,100 NEY not in education, employment or training. That is, about one tenth (10.4%) of young people aged 15-24 are NEY or youth NEET. In responding to the needs of this vulnerable group, a series of measures and programmes were recommended to aim at assisting them to take up prevocational or vocational training or studies as the means
to actively engage in the labor market. It is through assuming a legitimate social status as a student, trainee or worker that non-engaged youth can get rid of the undesirable state of disengagement, disconnection or the stigmatizing label of status zero (MacDonald, 1997).

Young people in social withdrawal, a phenomenon uncovered since 2004 in Hong Kong, are those who seclude themselves at home for a protracted period of time and reject entirely most forms of contact and relationship with the outside world (Wong and Ying, 2006). It goes beyond doubt that young people experiencing social withdrawal are NEY themselves, as they enjoy no legitimate social status as a student, trainee or worker as a consequence of social isolation. However, it does not imply that youth in disengagement are necessarily in the state of social withdrawal. Wong (2008) argues that there are four basic defining features of social withdrawal, namely, time, place, social status and social relations. First of all, as far as the local context is concerned, the state of social withdrawal must last for three months or more in order to be given priority for professional intervention (Hong Kong Christian Service, 2006). In the case of Japan, a withdrawal period of six months or above is used as the temporal threshold for defining social withdrawal. However, for the sake of earlier prevention or intervention, the idea of using three months as the threshold in defining the temporal dimension is now under discussion in Japan (Dziesinski 2003).

Secondly, the spatial dimension of social withdrawal is a key to understanding this emerging phenomenon. Young people in social withdrawal largely seclude themselves at their home or room. Sometimes they may take a walk at midnight to avoid neighbors, and may go out, normally alone, for some functional purpose such as buying stuff at a convenience store, usually when few people are around (Hattori, 2005). As reflected from Hong Kong and Japanese research findings, these young people dare not to go out for breakfast or a hair cut for fear of eye contact with others or having to respond to so-called normal greetings (Ogino, 2004; Saito, 2002; Wong and Ying, 2006). Hence hikikomori in Japan are called “family hermits” (Lewis, 2004), or “bedroom hermits” (Ryall, 2003). Research studies in the academic discipline of developmental psychology, however, largely draw samples or cases from children who still enjoy the status as a student, and who are not secluded at home in spatial terms.

Thirdly, just like their NEY counterparts, youth in social withdrawal are also of status zero. But the latter should be understood as a sub-group of NEY. In the case of Japan, young people who are shy and socially withdrawn from social relations and
characterized by having obsessive interest in video games, computers or cartoons are named as otaku (Pena, 2006). The major defining differences between otaku and hikikomori are accounted in spatial and status terms, even though these two groups share the similarity of lacking social relationship or interactions with others.

Lastly, as reflected from the empirical data, whilst some young people entrapped in social withdrawal may still talk to their parents and family members; others have not spoken to their families for a long time after their withdrawal commenced. In one case drawn from the author’s study, a mother who was unable to talk to her son face-to-face for months, could only cry outside her son’s bedroom door, pass paper notes under it for his attention. In other cases, individuals unable or unwilling to keep in direct touch with the outside world may chat online with strangers, and may even enjoy extended periods of virtual intimacy with people they have never met offline or in the real world. Their ‘anti-social’ counterparts, however, choose to go out with their friends instead of isolating oneself at home for an incredible long period of time. The most upsetting or worrying cases are those who just idle away the time with an empty mind when waking up from long hours of sleep, say ten to twelve or even more. The lack of social contact and prolonged solitude has profound effect on young people who gradually lose their social skills and social references for relationship building and self-positioning on the one hand, and on the other find it difficult to be reengaged in social interactions and relationships, not to mention enter into the world of education or employment.

According to the users’ profile of the LETS team, about one third (33%) experienced social exclusion in the school setting taken in the form of discrimination, rejection, isolation or bullying which finally led to the piling up of personal frustrations, poor social skills, loneliness, anxiety, etc. Social withdrawal in the form of home seclusion may be taken as the last resort to prevent against any further teasing and bullying from taking place. But chronic social withdrawal would paradoxically reduce the social isolates’ ability to develop social relations with others and even to develop a sense of reality (Csikszentmihalyi 1997).

Unlike their ‘anti-social’ counterparts, who are the targets of outreaching social workers, youth in social withdrawal are usually free of any criminal records. There are just a few cases who are currently cautioned under the Police Superintendents’ Discretion Scheme. When compared with the marginal counterparts who are behaviorally anti-social, young people suffering from social withdrawal are almost invisible to the public. For example, the police would not be able to get in touch with
these invisible cases unless they are called upon by their parents. For example, in a few cases, being unable to encourage their son to resume study or seek a job in the real world outside their home, the parents called the police for help. But unfortunately these actions worked the other way round in arousing heated quarrels or antagonistic silence as a son’s revenge against the parents.

Most of the cases (94%) served by the only one specialized social work team working with youth in social withdrawal in Hong Kong are of working-class or social security background. Because of the lack of financial means, these young people found it difficult to afford any spending involved in transport, eating inside canteens or restaurants, meeting a friend face to face, going to the cinema or for leisure, looking for a job, not to mention joining other youth consumption activities which are all financially consuming. All this is closely related to the material dimension of social exclusion experienced by the disadvantaged (Bhalla and Lapeyre 1997, Barry 2002, Whalen et al 2002). Poverty may well be an important indicator or even a cause of social exclusion and withdrawal. Nevertheless, many disaffected youth, who are much deprived of tangible resources and positive social networks, may choose to ‘hang out’ on the streets rather than taking social withdrawal or self isolation as an option. To withdraw oneself at home for protracted periods of time may be taken as an anomic response to social alienations taking place in the outside world (Furlong, 2008), but they can hardly make a voice or even a noise that the policy makers can hear and respond to in the sense of mobilizing extra resources to engage them meaningfully.

Chronic social withdrawal is arguably an extreme form of social exclusion experienced by young people in two senses, relationally and spatially. That is, on top of enjoying no legitimate social status in society like their NEY counterparts, seclusion at home for a long time has deprived youth’s opportunities for initiating and developing face-to-face communication and interactions with others. As time goes by, they would be further de-skilled in interacting with others. The more they are afraid of seeing friends, neighbours and ex-classmates, the more they would prefer confining themselves at home to going outside the cocoon. It is not difficult to imagine that the parents would use whatever push and pull measures to encourage their son or daughter to reenter into the real outside world for resuming study or seeking a job. To avoid making any further conflicts and quarrels with their parents, they often sleep throughout the day and stay awake at night to play online games or watch television (Tran, 2006; Kaneko, 2006; Wong and Ying, 2006). Youth in social withdrawal are thus deprived of normal interactions with peers and others in the community and even with the significant others like parents and family members in the worst scenario. In
the mindset of the policy makers and advisers, if the NEY are not meaningfully engaged, they may be at risk of associating with delinquents and criminals that could further propelling them to the edge of society (Commission on Youth, 2003). It may be argued that it is better for youth to be isolated if not insulated from undesirable peers and social relations as a consequence of seclusion. Nevertheless, such an argument has underestimated the undesirable consequences of social withdrawal discussed above. And this also rules out the possibility that NEY in the streets may be outreached by social workers who can offer them opportunities to engage in desirable activities and positive social relationships.

Explaining disconnected or disaffected youth’s transitions in poor neighbourhoods is not a new research topic in the West (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). A very large proportion of the cases served by the LETS team also live in disadvantaged communities, but their spatial isolation or exclusion goes beyond this: They are secluded at homes without being visible to the community. The vulnerable group of NEY is characterized by diversity and differences that seem to be, however, overlooked by the policy makers particularly with respect to the recently emergent yet growing phenomenon of social withdrawal that cannot be disassociated from invisibility: Out of sight, out of mind! The term NEY assumes or at least endorses the assumption that all young NEET could be thought of as a homogeneous group facing similar difficulties and risks in actively engaging in social institutions or assuming a social status in society. For this reason, relational and spatial disengagement experienced by youth in social withdrawal has been obscured if not erased in NEY as a policy discourse.

Policy responses to the phenomenon of social withdrawal

The service response to this disadvantaged group of isolated individuals in Hong Kong, which could be dated back as early as November 2004, was the ‘side-product’ of the LETS service scheme primarily targeted to young school leavers and unemployed youths characterized by heterogeneity and diversity. This service scheme is one of the many measures initiated by welfare NGOs in response to the needs of NEY, particularly after the release of the research study on NEY conducted by the Commission on Youth in 2003. It is through the sharing of the participants of the scheme that their ‘isolated’ or ‘withdrawn’ peers were made known or referred to social workers working under the umbrella of LETS, which is up till now the only social work team specialized in outreaching and serving this vulnerable group (Hong Kong Christian Service 2006).
The LETS project is, however, not funded by governmental resources on a regular basis. To serve the vulnerable youth group in social withdrawal, the project leader has to seek funding support from sources other than the Social Welfare Department, which is responsible for funding the bulk of government funded social welfare services in Hong Kong. New initiative funded on a project by project basis has to confront funding inadequacy and uncertainty. The scale of the LETS project had to be drastically cut half about one year ago, as the Community Chest could only provide funding support less than half of the resources available from Education Bureau for a period of two and a half years only. In seeking regular or ongoing funding support, the project leader expressed her frustrations as follows:

I have been making attempts to appeal to the support of the Secretary for Labour and Welfare…Although he is interested to know more about our project and the clients we serve, he doesn’t seem to have any enthusiasm to provide ongoing funding support to address this worrying phenomenon….He gave two reasons: first, they are not sure of the extent of the problem. Without available figures, they said they could hardly set aside resources to tackle this problem. He also believes that IT centres have the resources, network and manpower to serve this vulnerable group. The Secretary also asked us to share our expertise and experience with social workers working in IT centres so that they could take up this challenge.

(Project leader)

Before examining the role expected to be played by IT centres (i.e. integrated children and youth services centres), let us discuss the concern on reaching a scientific estimate of the problem. The Census and Statistics Department (CSD) has started a series of Thematic Household Survey (THS) since 1999 which could help inform policy making. Because of expertise and resources enjoyed by the CSD, a very large number of random samples of households could be interviewed for a specific social topic. However, it is only upon the requests of policy bureaux and government departments that statistical data on selected topics would be pursued. However, so far the topic of social withdrawal has not been picked up by any concerned bureaux and departments for statistical data collection and compilation. Another possible means is to include this problem as one of the sub-topics of the General Household Survey (GHS) periodically conducted by the CSD. About two years ago, the CSD was considered to be invited for a contract out study on the prevalence of the problem, which was operationalized as a few questions in the GHS questionnaire. The author
explored the possibility of the contract-out study with a headquarters’ staff member of
the Department. The staff relayed the request to the Department Head for response.
The reply was negative with the reason of avoiding to overload the GHS already
jammed with so many questions. Without the involvement and support of policy
bureaux and government departments, the LETS project team could only use a simple
questionnaire to collect data from schools and youth service centres. Based on the
data collected, the team projected that some 16,500 young people aged 12-24
suffering from the problem of social withdrawal (Hong Kong Christian Service, 2007).
Such a projection is obviously not without criticism with regards to the sampling
strategy and the low response rate. However, if a so-called scientific estimate is
deemed to important for policy making and distribution of resources, a prevalence
study of the problem can be requested on the CSD by concerned bureaux or
government departments or commissioned by the SWD. Such inaction on the side of
the government implies that this emerging problem has not yet been included in the
agenda of social welfare.

IT centres are established to provide a wide range of services including children and
youth centre services, outreaching social work and school social work services under
one management to meet the multifarious needs of children and youth aged 6-24. So
there is no reason why this emerging vulnerable group could not be outreached by the
IT centres. The findings of the author’s territory-wide study show that 56% of
respondent agency units have had reported cases of social withdrawal, and amongst
these agencies, 28% have had workers assigned to follow up each individual case, and
another 20% made referrals to the LETS team (14%), psychiatrist (4%) or
psychologist (2%) for follow up. In spite of the responsive actions taken by some
youth work agencies, the difficulties encountered could not be underestimated as
reflected in the following sharing of two of the social workers of the LETS team.

The manpower resources used are intensive and it takes on average nine
home visits to establish rapport with an individual client…Social workers
working in IT centres may not take these ‘invisible’ clients as their working
priority, as these cases are taxing of time and efforts…and they are also
under pressure to deliver enough service output that can satisfy the
requirements of the Social Welfare Department. (Social worker 7)

We got quite a number of referrals from social workers in IT centres and
school social workers. Actually about 30% of our clients are referrals from
social workers…These workers just said that they don’t have the time and
expertise to follow up these cases on their own…(Social worker 2)

It can be seen from these two quotes that there are two major concerns why an integrated approach to working with children and youth in crisis or problem currently adopted in the social welfare sector of Hong Kong may not be applicable to the case of working with youth in social withdrawal: the first of which is about the pressure to produce more with less, and the other is the lack of expertise. With the implementation of lump sum grant policy starting from the beginning of this decade, the funder/provider relationship has replaced the previous partnership relationship between the SWD and welfare NGOs. The funder/provider relationship is formalized by the introduction of the Funding and Service Agreement (FSA) and the system of quality standards, which are taken as the means of defining the areas in which the SWD and NGOs are accountable for performance. Welfare NGOs worry that the new relationship has further justified the government’s increased legitimacy to exercise control, and that this may result in a further loss of creativity and initiative in the provision of welfare services (Cheung, 2002; ). On top of this, welfare NGOs have also witnessed over the years welfare cut on the one hand, and on the other, demands from the SWD to deliver an increasing level of service output with the same amount of resources by the introduction of Enhanced Productivity Programme. All this could help explain why social workers working in IT centre’s setting are more biased for rushing for figures and programmes with visible results. Developing expertise to work with such a vulnerable group is a challenge to all concerned helping professionals in the social welfare and educational fields. Without any extra resources provided by the government, it could hardly be imagined how the current welfare provision framework and incentive structure can be reshaped to serve the hardest-to-be-reached.

It does not imply that establishing specialized teams to outreach youth in social withdrawal beyond the integrated framework is the only or best way out. The key point is to recognize the different if not difficult nature of the clientele group and the unavoidable resource implications. For example, in regards to the problem of young night-drifters (YND), a study commissioned by SWD to Lee and Tang (1999) on YND in the territory estimated that there were more than 10,000 YND who are drifting in open space locations at night are at-risk of undesirable influence of various kinds. With reference to the report, a total of 18 night-shift outreaching social work teams run by 13 NGOs under IT centre or outreaching settings, with the subvention of the SWD, have been set up in Hong Kong. With SWD subvention since July 2002, an overnight centre run by an NGO – The Hangout – for YNDs has been in place.
As far as social welfare policy for youth is concerned, the effort of the state is to ensure that youth-at-risk in particular would not turn out to be disruptive if not destructive forces for the economy (Hong Kong Government, 1991). The policy discourses of youth-at-risk and marginal youth seem to have set its focus on the person rather than on the problems that young people are facing in Hong Kong characterized by new and structural risks (Chiu, 2005). Besides, youth-at-risk in Hong Kong are most often explicitly associated with youth gangs, young substance abusers, school bullies, and delinquents (Lee, 2005), who share a common characteristic of showing anti-social behavior visible and noisy enough to the community in general and the state in particular. Informed by the individualist notion and weak version of youth-at-risk, youth workers are being called upon to play a social control role to ensure youth’s conformity (White, 1990; Ericsson, 2000). However such a perspective has overlooked the possibility that youth workers may adopt specific strategies and tactics to resist the social control demands imposed on them. The paradox is that with the use of state subvention, youth work agencies and youth workers can try out youth work that is emancipation-, empowerment- or advocacy-oriented (Ngai, 2006).

Without being incorporated under the ‘conventional’ notion of at-risk or marginal youth, youth in social withdrawal may manage to escape from state discipline exercised through its soft arms of control, yet they are also hidden away from the attention of critical social workers who can use state subvention in a more empowering way, personally and structurally. When compared with youth-at-risk defined in the notion of social control, youth in social withdrawal receive less service attention either owing to time and resource constraints or biased targeting. Arguably, the logic of inverse care law and policy inaction applicable to the vulnerable yet invisible and noiseless group of social withdrawals cannot be critically deconstructed if one fails to examine the role played by the state in shaping the management and incentive structures of youth work agencies and in reproducing the individualist notion of youth risks underpinned by the social control thesis.

Organizational responses and practices

As it is tremendously difficult for youth in social withdrawal to leave their home to have any interaction with others particularly after a long period of seclusion life, it is not difficult to understand why outreaching service offered by the LETS team in the early phases of intervention is largely in the form of home visits and home-based intervention. As this paper does not aim at critically discussing the skills and tactics of social workers in building up rapport with home-bound youth, weight is given to
examining the notions of organizational flexibility versus inflexibility if the goal of youth reengagement in society is to be realized.

You know it’s not easy to encourage our clients to take a step forward to participate in training or activities offered to them in the centre. I could still vividly remember that two clients of mine were invited to join a pre-vocational training course open to non-engaged youth…Some participants there, however, called their names as ‘hidden youth’ or ‘withdrawn guys’ in a testing-out if not teasing manner…This turned out to be a traumatic experience to them, who accordingly withdraw again into their own private worlds. (Social worker 3)

The discourse of hidden youth is very labeling…In running a group or a course for youth of diverse background, we have to make sure that youth of other background [not in the trouble of social withdrawal] have to be briefed in advance so as to prevent them from frightening away youth who are shy of interacting with others. (Social worker 1)

A group of social work students who wanted to know more about this new phenomenon were invited to witness the experience of my three clients in overcoming the preliminary hurdles of social withdrawal they had to jump over…The students were reminded before the group session not to call their names or stigmatize them as failures but to be attentive to their sharing and efforts made in confronting social withdrawal. (Social worker 5)

Young people who name-call and tease typically view their comments as mild, but their victims’ perceptions differ. Name-calling and teasing are common social interactions, and can be used in a playful manner with friends. NEY is but a heterogeneous group, and youth may tend to compare down others who are in a more troublesome situation. As shown from the sharing of social worker 3, the hurtful way that name-calling was used turned out to discourage youth clients to make efforts to re-engage with community. In this case, the practice of inclusion by putting NEY of diverse and different background together but without doing any pre-group preparation had paradoxically generated an exclusionary effect on youth who were more disadvantaged at the level of interacting with others. NEY as a term and discourse commonly used in the policy and practice arenas has to be critically deconstructed. Simply, social workers and youth participants should join hands
together to contain the spillover effect of non-engagement or disengagement with social institutions into the world of informality. This is particularly relevant to youth in social withdrawal who do not find reengagement in social interaction an easy task to be achieved. Through self-reflection and experience consolidation, the team members have come to be mindful of the stigmatizing label of hidden youth and the importance of promoting an organizational atmosphere that is more empathetic and supportive to young people who try to rebuild a sense of trust with the outside world. Social workers of the team have been conscious of not using the adjective ‘socially withdrawn’ which may have the unintended consequences of totalizing the identity of their clients who are believed to have the potentials and ability to fight against the phenomenon of social withdrawal and its undesirable and unintended consequences. So instead of describing clients as ‘hidden youth’ or ‘socially withdrawn youth’, the team prefers to use the phrases like ‘youth in social withdrawal’ or ‘youth in action against social withdrawal’ so as to create a gap between youth and social withdrawal. This could help to externalize the problem of social withdrawal but not to the extent of dwarfing the role played by individual agency in confronting social withdrawal. The creative use of alternative discourses has served to inform and inspire both professional and organizational practices. The lesson drawn from this counter-labeling strategy is that the processes of social inclusion have to take into account both formal and informal dimensions. In the eyes of the policy makers, the policy goal of social inclusion of youth in social institutions is perhaps to reduce the number of NEY as far as possible. However, the formal task aimed at helping youth to be socially reengaged must not overlook the relational or process dimension, which is particularly relevant to youth in social withdrawal. With the use of an organizational practice that is flexible and sensitive enough, the inclusion of different types of NEY can prove to be a win-win scenario like the one shared by a social worker below.

The group experience is empowering…Those group members who don’t understand social withdrawal have come to appreciate more the struggles of those who are in the trouble of social withdrawal…The group process turned out to be more interactive and positive… (Social worker 8)

Inflexible organizational practice can undesirably lead to traumatic experience. For example, many clients in the study found it difficult to cope with school life again after a lengthy withdrawal. Happily some school principals and teachers are sufficiently enlightened to permit readmission on a trial basis. This does not always happen, however, as shown in the tragic experience shared by one of the social workers of the team.
In one sad case a client was not allowed to wear a hat and long-sleeved school shirt. The client had skin problems. This happened probably because he did not have any sun exposure when he was confined at home… The principal was afraid that other students might model themselves on him with a resultant problem for the principal in exercising discipline. But the client’s motivation had nothing to do with authority and discipline and everything to do with preventing others from seeing his skin troubles. (Social worker 5)

In this case, organizational inflexibility contributed to social exclusion, and achieving a legitimate social status as a student turned out to be an insurmountable hurdle for the boy concerned.

In response to the diverse background of NEY, the Vocational Training Council (VTC) has attempted to offer a wide range of training programmes for young people. These are short taster courses at entry-level to arouse the youth participants’ interest and motivation to take a step further into the world of study or work (Commission on poverty, 2005). The project leader made a positive remark as follows:

When compared with other training programmes, these ‘Talent Projects’ are shorter and class-size is smaller. Under this umbrella, there are quite a number of choices, say on computer and information technology, hairdressing, clerical work, cartoons drawing, photography, motor car repair and maintenance, etc…Our clients prefer these shorter courses that they find it easier to cope with. (Project leader)

However, these starter courses are not without criticism as shared by the project leader below:

They [VTC] don’t offer these courses so often. Our clients have to wait a long time for those courses which are of interest to them. Sometimes when a suitable course is available, they may not yet be ready to take it, as they are still trapped in social withdrawal…So timing is a key concern. Another problem is something tangible. Even though the courses are free of charge, some of our clients could not even afford the transport cost… (Project leader)
The project leader was appreciative of the efforts made the VTC in offering starter courses which are more interest-oriented. In addition to the inadequate number of courses offered, enhancing the flexibility in course delivery and course contents does not match with other measures to support the basic consumption expenses that youth have to bear with their reengagement attempts. How to thoroughly address the course accessibility problem confronted by youth in poverty is an issue that policy makers have to pay special attention to particularly if the purpose of youth learning is to be achieved. This suggestion is particularly relevant to the local scenario, as more than 90 per cent of withdrawal cases are in poverty. Once the clients are more ready to be reengaged in community, poverty is no doubt a hurdle that needs to be tackled.

The purpose of reengagement is both relational and institutional: it is relational because promoting peer and social relations is likely to lead to a diminution of withdrawal and isolation; it is institutional because achieving a social status as a student, trainee or worker requires a sound policy infrastructure and positive and inclusive organizational practice. Individual young persons have to learn for inclusion, but it will not be effective if the environment is imbued with the practices of social exclusion and organizational inflexibility. The process of re-entering the community involves clearing many hurdles and is often non-linear and reversible just as is the yo-yo process experienced by so many ‘normal’ youth on their transitions to adulthood (Coles 1995, Walther et al 1999, 2002). If young people are deprived of choices and support on organizational and policy levels, they will not be able to learn for inclusion.

**Conclusion**

NEY as a policy label or discourse is unhelpful to deconstruct the heterogeneity of youth’s disengagement experience. The evidence in this paper indicates that the notion of NEY formulated by the government is restricted to identifying youth’s disengagement from either one of the three major social institutions - education, employment or training - or from assuming a legitimate social status resulting from this specific kind of institutional disengagement. The bias is that the government’s projection of the NEY population fails to estimate the size of youth in social withdrawal as a subgroup and make a difference between the whole NEY group and the subgroup of withdrawals. The paper argues that the phenomenon of social withdrawal among youth and the specific needs of this subgroup have not yet been included in the policy agenda. The notion of relational and spatial disengagement is almost, if not entirely, excluded from the NEY discourse. By taking the policy bias of
targeting attention and resources on youth with ‘anti-social’ behavior as the policy and practice backdrop, it is therefore not difficult to see why youth in social withdrawal, subsumed under the NEY discourse, have received much less policy attention in terms of conducting relevant official or commissioned study and the mobilization of extra resources to fund projects tailored-made to the needs of this vulnerable group. Arguably, when compared with NEY in general and behaviorally anti-social youth like YND in specific, this vulnerable group has suffered much more as a result of their low level of visibility and noise-making, if not invisibility and voicelessness, in the eyes of the policy makers in particular.

In a world characterized by increasing level of globalization and causalisation and flexibilization of work, youth and adults alike are asked to adopt a more flexible attitude and mindset; if not, they would not be able to ride out the storm with renewed vitality and flexibility. Such a logic characterized by structural conservativism entailing the risk of policy measures and programs drawn from the discourse of ‘normality’, which is intended to lead to social integration or social inclusion, might fail and paradoxically increase risks of social exclusion instead (Piper and Piper 2000, Walther et al 2002). In spite of receiving training, prevocational or vocational, youth marginalized by society are likely to remain the less competitive candidates (Roberts, 1997). Mainstream discourses generated to explain the failures of unmotivated or poorly motivated youth in making the most of training schemes are in danger of hiding the socioeconomic problems beneath non-engagement or disengagement (Sugarman, 1986). What is worrying is that the thesis of exercising or adopting flexibility is placed more on the side of individuals but much less on the side of policy-making and organizational practices. Being insensitive to the social withdrawal experiences of youth, the training or reengagement schemes aimed at social inclusion would paradoxically function to stigmatize the victims, obscure the specific needs of individuals and make the vulnerable youth group divisive. Unless and until policy makers, school principals, employers, training institutions and social workers can offer more supportive measures and a wider and more flexible range of initiatives, the voice of youth in social withdrawal would end up unheard, and their needs unattended to.

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