Young People’s Transitions: Dimensions, Difficulties and Diversity

A one-day conference for youth researchers, policymakers and practitioners at the University of Edinburgh

Compendium of Briefing Papers

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Understanding Social Disengagement in the Digital Age: ‘Hidden Youth’ in Hong Kong and Scotland

**BRIEFING PAPER**

Mark Tsun On Wong, PhD in Social Policy/Research Assistant, University of Edinburgh

**Executive Summary**

Young people could shut themselves in the bedroom and become attached to online interactions, as they face exclusions in work and school. This paper provides evidence that young people’s high levels of digital engagements are a *reaction* to their experiences of un-fulfilment and precarity. The role of technologies is highlighted as crucial and complex for disengaged young people in the digital age.

**BACKGROUND**

There has been growing interest in youth research about young people who are disengaged and marginalised in society. Issues such as Not in Education, Employment and Training (“NEET”), social exclusion, and rising insecurities in young people’s transitions have become dominant concerns not only in youth studies but also policy communities.

This paper focuses on understanding young people in Scotland and Hong Kong who lock themselves in the bedroom for months and years on end. This emerging phenomenon is commonly referred to as “hidden youth” in East Asia. More than 1 million young people are found to be “hidden” in Japan alone. Latest figures in Hong Kong estimate that >41,000 young people (5% of local youth population) are disengaged and “hiding” in their bedrooms. Research shows that barriers to participate in work and education could lead to young people becoming self-secluded. However, this remains to be a new and under-researched area, especially in western contexts including Scotland.

**RESEARCH DESIGN & RESULTS**

This research attempts to address such gap by conducting an exploratory study in Scotland and Hong Kong. The contexts were chosen due to social disengagements being especially prominent but discussed differently. 12 qualitative interviews with

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“hidden” young people were conducted in Hong Kong. Similarly, 20 took place in Scotland. The participants were aged 15-20 and were constituted by a mix of genders, socio-economic backgrounds, and degrees of disengagements. Majority of participants had been “hiding” in their bedrooms for 3-12 months, but in some cases were up to 2-4 years. The interviews focussed on young people’s own accounts of their lived experience, perceptions towards social interactions and participation, and their everyday lives in the bedroom. The result shows that “hidden” young people:

The participants felt powerless and found work and education meaningless. Being restricted to precarious work, they faced limited opportunities to fulfil their aspirations. This is linked to economic “austerity” in Scotland and competitive culture in Hong Kong. Young people felt hopeless towards their future in society.

The participants showed contrasting levels of connectedness in and outside of the bedroom. Various technological platforms allow “hidden” young people to socialise with large, diverse networks online. They had more digital interactions with peers, friends, and family members compared to face-to-face.

Young people in Hong Kong and Scotland felt more motivated to connect with others through digital media. Their engagements with society were revealed as complex. If I start playing [online games], I will just never get out... PC is so much better than going outside. – Nathan, 16, Scotland

CONCLUSION

While “hidden” young people are largely disengaged from participation in work and education, digital interactions can be especially significant to how they feel connected to society. They are relying on emerging digital networks to find solace and seek alternative forms of social engagements, particularly inside the space of the bedroom. There is a complex interplay of “push” and “pull” factors for young people to become “hidden”, and yet remain interconnected with people through a wide range of technological devices.
Working Class Kids and School Qualifications: An Investigation of Scottish Education Using Longitudinal and Administrative Social Science Data

Chris Playford, Research Fellow in Social Science Research, University of Edinburgh

Key Question
To what extent do educational outcomes vary by different measures of parental occupation?

Briefing

Social class inequalities in educational outcomes have persisted over the latter half of the 20th Century across a range of countries. The majority of sociological analyses on educational outcomes have focused on differences between social classes, typically comparing children from managerial and professional backgrounds with working class children. Differences in educational outcomes between working class youths have largely been ignored. Within the sociology of youth, there has been a recent resurgence in interest in the educational experiences of ‘ordinary’ young people. This paper is an in-depth exploration of school-level educational outcomes among working class children in Scotland.

This study used linked administrative data from the Scottish Longitudinal Study (SLS), a representative sample of records from the Census in Scotland, and Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) data containing information on attainment within Scottish schools. The dataset included young people undertaking Standard Grades in Scottish schools between 2007 and 2011 who were members of the SLS. Parental social class was identified using a range of measures including the National Statistics National Socioeconomic Classification scheme (NS-SEC) aggregated to 8, 5 and 3 classes. This is compared with alternative occupation-based schemes including the Registrar General’s Social Class (RGSC) and the skill level of the occupation (as per Elias and McKnight). Finally, variation in standard grade outcomes by Standard Occupational Classification (SOC2000) within NS-SEC classes was analysed.

Irrespective of the social class measure used, the resounding finding is that working class pupils have less favourable outcomes in school qualifications. The effects of social class can be observed net of gender, parental education and household type. Parental education plays an important role in filial (i.e. their child’s) educational outcomes but there is no interaction with parental social class. A more subtle finding is that the outcomes of pupils with parents in lower supervisory and technical occupations share close similarities with children of parents from both semi-routine and routine occupations (based on the NS-SEC scheme). This is important because sociologists have previously theorised parents in lower supervisory and technical occupations as a blue collar intermediate class, but in this analysis their children’s educational outcomes are more similar to pupils from the wage-earning working class. We observe some occupation-level differences within social classes. For example, the children of teachers have good outcomes whereas children with parents in catering and hospitality occupations perform worse than counterparts in the same social class.

Educational inequalities persist across a range of measures but the magnitude of the inequality varies according to the measure used. The analysis of the educational outcomes of young people using different occupation-based measures reveal a high degree of variation in outcomes within occupations classified as working class. These findings raise questions about the role of parental occupation with regard to the educational outcomes of young people from working class backgrounds.
“You Can Spot Them A Mile Off” – Sluts, Shame and Social Class

Helen Williams, Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies, University of Leeds

This paper examines the sexual identities and sexual expression of young people as part of their transformation from child to adulthood. My PhD research focuses on the ability of young people to form and participate in distinct (hetero)sexual cultures and this paper explores the sexual culture of shame specifically.

Sexuality does not take place in a vacuum, but rather, its expression is dependent on variables of race, class, age, gender (and so on) which work to modify what might be considered acceptable. Therefore, while young men are relatively free to explore their sexuality within the paradigm of ‘natural biological urges’, young women are more constrained by regulatory discourses of propriety, respectability and reputation.

Young women’s stories of the circumstances in which sexual contact is permissible illuminate the myriad ways in which the sexual culture of shame pervades young female sexuality. While all my female participants alluded to the dangers of sexual stigma in their stories, young women were not equally at risk of attracting condemnation for their sexual expressions. Thus, for example, girls from higher socio-economic backgrounds operated outside of more conventional notions of feminine propriety, and were able to claim promiscuity and casual sex both as a choice and as an entitlement. In contrast, for working-class young women, sex outside of a relationship could represent the ‘kiss of social death’ and often led to labelling that persisted, sometimes even years later.

Crucially those who were most invested in slut-shaming, the apparently sexually transgressive young women, were girls from similarly classed backgrounds. Sexual stigma became a way to demarcate status and within-class differences and was often based less on actual sexual behaviour and more on clothes, educational achievement and personality traits. Thus, such labelling provided a mechanism by which some working-class girls were denigrated by others, in order to bolster the social capital of those who were keen to reproduce themselves as ideal middle-class subjects – educated, demure and proper. Ironically, the middle-class young women who participated in my research were equally invested in representing themselves as sexually liberated, experienced and unashamed.

This paper involves an exploration of the ways that, for some young women, classed inequalities render some sexual identities inaccessible and others inevitable.
Gender and Socioeconomic Inequality in Scottish Adolescents’ Health: An International Perspective Dr Ross Whitehead, CAHRU, University of St Andrews

1. Trends in psychosomatic health symptoms (1994-2014)

Boys

Girls

2. Relative change in psychosomatic health symptoms (15-year old girls)

Scotland
Ireland
Netherlands
France
Poland
Slovenia
Germany
Belgium (Fl.)
Canada
Russia
Norway
Denmark
Latvia
Wales
Sweden
Italy
Greenland
Czech Rep.
Belgium (Fr.)
Austria
England
Switzerland
Finland
Hungary
Portugal
Macedonia
Croatia
Estonia
Israel
Spain
Lithuania
Greece
Ukraine

Worsening
No change
Improving

Change in symptom burden (2002-2014)

Strongest observed increase in 15-year old girls’ psychosomatic symptoms (2002-2014)

3. Changing association between body image and psychosomatic symptoms

Aged 11
Aged 13
Aged 15

Boys

Girls

Adolescents’ self-perception of body size

Body is ‘about right’
Body is ‘too fat’

Data: Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study. Error bars represent ± 95% CI. Graphs on this page present Scottish and international HBSC data on an index of eight psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., headaches & low mood). Panel 1 presents Scottish trends data by age and gender. This reveals the emergence since 1994 of a stark gender gap in psychosomatic health amongst older adolescents. Panel 2 ranks 33 HBSC countries according to their change in psychosomatic health symptom burden (15-year old girls between 2002 and 2014). Panel 3 explores body image dissatisfaction as one potential explanation of deteriorating mental health. This reveals that recent increases in psychosomatic health symptoms are largely restricted to those feeling their body is “too fat”.

% experiencing 2+ weekly symptoms

% experiencing 2+ weekly symptoms


Data: Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study 2014. The figures on this page rank HBSC countries according to the difference in health behaviours between the lowest and highest socioeconomic brackets (11, 13 and 15-year olds combined). SES is measured using an internationally-validated index of family material wealth including indicators of house size and condition, family vehicles and holidays.

The figure above reveals that in the vast majority of countries, for both male and female adolescents, those from more affluent families are more likely to engage in at least 60 minutes of exercise per day. Among boys, the magnitude of this effect is larger in Scotland than in all other observed countries. The figure below demonstrates a nearly universal positive association between higher family affluence and daily fruit consumption. Again Scotland is seen to have a larger socioeconomic disparity than in many other European countries, for boys and girls.

A similar pattern is seen for a wide range of health-related behaviours and outcomes. For example, Scotland also shows comparatively high rates of socioeconomic inequality for life satisfaction, self-reported health, psychosomatic health complaints, ease of parental communication, soft drink consumption, eating breakfast, sedentary behaviours, and substance use (alcohol and tobacco).

What practical steps can researchers/practitioners in your field take to address long-standing socioeconomic, and widening gender inequalities in adolescent health?
Raising the Participation Age and educational engagement: choice or coercion?

David Dobraszczyk, University of Kent

Despite participation in post-16 education becoming the norm some time ago (Furlong 2009), there is a continued focus on the educational participation and engagement of young people ‘at risk’ of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) (Maguire 2015). In England, Government concern around the non-participation of this ‘disengaged’ population (Fergusson 2013) has most recently manifested in the implementation of Raising the Participation Age (RPA), requiring participation in education or training until the age of 18. Built on wider concerns around youth unemployment, I suggest the increased attention given to young people’s participation in education poses a particular challenge for post-16 educators.

The question posed by Archer, Mendick and Hollingworth (2010) is to what extent such education policies produce engagement through choice or coercion. The significance of which is highlighted by Russell, Simmons and Thompson (2011) who comment:

Under existing legislation, participation in education or training will become compulsory until the age of 18 by 2015, making even more acute the question of how best to engage those young people for whom schooling has been unrewarding (pp. 478-479).

Implicit within this view is the dilemma post-16 institutions and teachers face. On one hand there is a population of young people, largely characterised by negative learner identities and dispositions towards school (Thompson 2011), who are seen as in need of ‘re-engagement’ with learning (Smyth, Mcinerney and Fish 2013). This view leans towards approaches which aim to build and support young people’s engagement (Russell, Simmons and Thompson 2011). In contrast to this more welfare-orientated view is a position which places responsibility for engagement with the individual students, and tends to promote approaches aimed at regulating or controlling forms of participation.

As part of a PhD project examining the post-16 transitions of ‘disengaged’ learners, data from an 18 month ethnographic study of young people’s experiences across various low-level post-16 programmes (e.g. Travel and Tourism, Health and Social, IT and Remix for Work) reveals the role different constructions of engagement play in limiting or enabling horizons for action (Hodkinson 1996). Both in terms of choice, what is subjectively possible and desireable, but also in terms of agency, what is objectively possible and enactable.

Rapport ('The mentors')
Building engagement

Self-regulation ('The parents')
Developing skills for engagement

Authority ('The trainers')
Regulating/controlling engagement

The fieldwork revealed how teacher practices, based on particular constructions of engagement, shape young people’s choice and agency by producing positions of marginality and forms of self
and material exclusion. On one end of the spectrum, rapport-focused constructions of engagement produced diminished subjective horizons as well as stigmatisation within the college context. Authority-focused constructions of engagement tended to have different effects on young people’s horizons; self and material exclusion emerged as key features of a ‘survival of the fittest’ type approach which led to ‘disposable’ learners (Chadderton and Colley 2012).

This then poses the question: how do we best understand the role policy and practice play in constructions of engagement and young people’s horizons for action?
Childhood, Livelihoods and Everyday Choices: An Ethnography of the Lived Experience of the ‘Global Schooling Project’ in Nepal

Katherine Baxter, PhD Candidate in Sociology, University of Edinburgh

This paper presents my current PhD research at the University of Edinburgh that explores the myriad, rippling ways the ‘global schooling project’ shapes and transforms the everyday lives of children and families in Nepal. Based on 6 months of ethnographic fieldwork in central Nepal, I bring attention to young people’s livelihoods and everyday choices, ethnographically describing their work, school and play routines and the creative, intimate ways they navigate the multitude of pressures, expectations and opportunities they face on a daily basis. This research, then, is a kind of ‘ethnography of the everyday’ conducted and written in a way that aims not to lose the complexity, dimensionality and holisticity of the lives I encountered and the time we shared (Stewart 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997). Most of my ethnography centers around one particular street in Nepal where the holistic, work, school and play-filled lives of the young people involved in my research intersect:

“The young people whose daily lives and routines revolve around this street and its many inhabitants construct this space in their own ways, often creatively turning mundane or banal objects or structures into an opportunity for play or fun. The street is their playground, but also where they meet their friends, where their families run their businesses, and where they oscillate between helping out at the café, doing homework, and playing. Though they are constantly being nagged by their elders and honked at by passing traffic to keep off the road, they are relentless in their ability to imaginatively transform this narrow stretch of pavement into a world of intimate, intricate relationships with both the living and non-living features of this space. Sticks are turned into hurdles measuring how far one can jump; rocks are dice; the curb is a launching pad; the stray dogs are constant companions; the leaves are instruments. They create their own rhythms of life on this street—the purpose of things is never taken for granted and the potential uses of objects are continually reinvented to fill the needs of each passing moment.”

Based on my observations, I found that educational landscapes significantly shape the hopes, dreams and aspirations of young people in Nepal, and that this in turn shapes the everyday choices and livelihood strategies of them and their families. My research brings to attention the heavy burden and enormous amount of pressure the global push for formal, English schooling places on children to achieve academically, while also balancing work and livelihood responsibilities, as well as the pressure this places on families and carers to be able to secure the financial means to send their children to a ‘good’ school. I show how this fuels many family’s decisions to move out of rural spaces and give up their subsistence livelihoods to seek income and wage labour in the city or abroad. This movement creates absences and changes in the structure of emotional, intimate life that significantly impact these young people and their families. As one of my key participants, Mahesh, demonstrates when speaking about his father who is away working in Dubai, “I know he had to go away to pay for my schooling. But I miss him everyday. That’s why I work so hard in school and in the shop. I can’t let him down. I hope he will come back soon.”

I further argue that the vision of schooling contained within the ‘global schooling project’ and the Education for All (United Nations 2017) global initiative often marginalizes the non-academic virtues the young people involved in my research possess, concealing and suppressing their diverse talents and unique capabilities by embodying a very narrow, linear conception of success,
knowledge, worth and achievement. Their success or failure in school, therefore, according to standards and criteria they had no hand in designing, had a significant impact on their feelings of self-worth. One day after school Santosh tells me, “There are so many things I like to do and enjoy learning about. I’m really good at skateboarding and drawing. I love astronomy. But I feel like I can’t do them anymore because we have exams coming next month. All I’m ever supposed to do is study. I need to study hard and be better if I want a bright future.”

Question: Though young people have agency in how they negotiate the role of schooling in their lives, to what extent are they in control? And to what extent are their everyday choices and horizons of possibility shaped by the normative educational standards/expectations they are presented with?
Capability to Succeed: who or what is instrumental in supporting young people to make positive post-school choices?

Laurie Anne Campbell, Glasgow Caledonian University

This briefing paper is based on some of the key findings from a wider research project and asks the question: To what extent is the capability approach a useful framework for understanding what skills, qualities and support are required for young people to make positive post-school choices?

Introduction:

Attracting young people from deprived communities into higher education remains an educational policy dilemma. Whilst there has been an overall increase of young people participating in university education over the past fifty years, the number of students from deprived communities remains persistently low. A key problem for policymakers is that widening participation measures have almost exclusively focused on ‘raising aspirations’. However, this ‘poverty of aspirations thesis’, is contested in the growing body of research suggesting that the poverty of aspirations thesis is inherently flawed thus signifying a need to revisit the issue of under-representation (Cumming’s et al., 2012; Kintrea et al., 2011). Drawing on the conceptual framework of Sen (1999), this paper argues that the ‘capability approach’ offers a better way of theorising and understanding the persistent under-representation of young people from deprived communities in universities. The research explores the process of how capabilities are shaped and influenced during secondary school education. It seeks to explain how the capabilities of young people from deprived communities, in terms of higher education participation, are enhanced or constrained by the social arrangements within Scotland.

Scope and Methods:

The focus of my study is young people age 12-15 from two schools serving deprived communities in different localities in Scotland. A comparative case study approach is used, wherein mixed methods (i.e in-depth interviews and questionnaires) are employed to explore how social networks, communities, and educational institutions affect aspirations.

Key Findings:

Young people have high aspirations. A focus on ‘raising aspirations’ has been seen as key to raising educational achievement and bringing about improved social mobility. It was, and still is, a central focus of education, youth and community policy. In terms of agency, the initial results suggest that young people from both S2 and S4 possess high aspirations in terms of pursuing university as a post-school choice.

Young people are confident of the skills and qualities they are developing but may lack confidence. Previous research suggests that self-efficacy, confidence levels, motivation, and perception of learning are key to improving positive destinations. The dataset highlights the trend that young people are confident in some areas such engagement, participation and aspirations yet continue to lack confidence and self-efficacy.

Social Arrangements are instrumental in supporting capability development. A positive trend has been identified in terms of young people gaining knowledge and insights about the various aspects of university life through specific intervention activities; however, parents and family members remain the greatest influence on a young person’s post-school choices.

Conclusion:

The capability approach offers an interesting lens through which to examine the low participation of young people from deprived communities in higher education, and may be helpful to policymakers in identifying where and how resources to address this issue should be distributed.
Using pragmatic rationalism to explore young people’s higher education decision-making

Sarah Minty, ESRC PhD Candidate in Education, University of Edinburgh

This paper draws upon emerging findings from my mixed methods PhD which explores how young people’s higher education decisions about where and what to study, where to live, and how to fund living costs are negotiated within the context of the family. Using both descriptive analysis of HESA data on patterns of university participation in Scotland and family case studies, I consider how the attitudes of young people and their families to higher education are influenced by social class. While tuition is free in Scotland, students must still fund living costs. They may do so through a combination of bursaries, student loans, part-time work and/or financial support from families. The extent to which families are able and willing to do so varies greatly. Nonetheless, parents play a key role in young people’s HE decisions (West et al. 2015; Christie et al. 2001; Minty 2015), and in funding living costs, yet their role remains under-researched in Scotland, and indeed more generally (Ahier 2000). Similarly, it has long been recognised that students in Scotland, and particularly the West of Scotland, are more likely to live at home during term-time (Forsyth and Furlong 2003), yet there has been little research undertaken since free tuition was introduced and bursaries were reduced.

Focusing on type of term-time accommodation and whether a student attends a local university or one further afield, findings from my descriptive analysis of 2014/15 HESA student records data on young (under 21) Scottish domiciled first year university entrants illustrate the classed dimensions of young people’s HE decisions. My analysis shows that despite free tuition, social class and region of domicile are strongly associated with whether a student lives at home or elsewhere, and whether they attend a local university. Parental occupation, parental education, type of school attended, SIMD, ethnic status, age, region of domicile, prior attainment and subject studied at university are all significant factors. The lower a student’s social class background, the higher the proportion of students living in the parental home. There are also stark differences by university attended: 85% of students at UWS live at home, compared with 4% of students at the Universities of St Andrews and Aberdeen.

The bulk of my PhD is based on longitudinal family case studies with students and their parents to explore the reasons for these classed patterns of participation. The first round of in-depth qualitative interviews is ongoing. So far, 27 sixth year students from two schools and 10 parents have been interviewed. Early findings point to significant contrasts in how students from different social class backgrounds make decisions about HE destinations and the extent to which their families are involved in these decisions. While financial costs were little barrier to the HE destinations of largely middle class students from Edinburgh (the majority planned to study at universities far from home, while two planned to study in England), decisions among more working-class students in Ayrshire were heavily limited by financial considerations (nearly all planned to study at Glasgow institutions to avoid accommodation costs and reduce debt). Such contrasts demonstrate how finance may influence young people’s horizon for action, but also point to effects of other more invisible cultural barriers relating to parents’ own educational experiences and their attitudes to HE.

My research is framed by Hodkinson’s concept of pragmatic rationalism which is situated in the centre of the structure-agency spectrum (Hodkinson 2008). Incorporating elements of both rational decision-making and Bourdieu’s habitus, it recognises that rationality and individual agency are bounded by the classed effects of a young person’s horizons for action. Differences in patterns of movement among those from different social class backgrounds highlighted by the
HESA data may imply that such differences are entirely the result of structural forces. However, the qualitative interviews illustrate how individuals demonstrate agency in the ways they make pragmatically rational decisions within the context of their family circumstances. I will explore with the audience how best to build on the descriptive analysis of the HESA data with future statistical modelling.