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## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Addressing social capital for disadvantaged youth: Youth and teacher perceptions of a youth development program in Hong Kong

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**Abstract:** In this qualitative case study, the perceived impacts of workshops and internships provided by a Hong Kong-based non-governmental organization (NGO) working to improve the lives of disadvantaged youth were explored and descriptively presented. Data were derived from a combination of individual youth and teacher interviews, coupled with a youth focus group. Themes within the findings were developed by exploring individual perceptions of the influence that participation in workshops and internships had on reducing social barriers and addressing social issues for the youth. Thematic findings included increased care, expanded world view, increased confidence, improved opportunity, expanded choice, and improved communication. Findings were further analyzed using social capital theory focusing on two broad theoretical features: economic and emotive. The implications of these findings inform Hong Kong NGOs, as well as other Hong Kong and international actors working on youth development issues in general.

**Subjects:** Childhood - Anthropology; Development - Soc Sci; Education & Development; Social Class; Sociology of the Family; Sociology of Work & Industry; Urban Sociology - Urban Studies; Urban Studies

**Keywords:** Hong Kong; social mobility; social capital; youth; disadvantaged youth; NGO

### 1. Introduction

Disadvantaged youth, broadly defined, face a variety of social barriers in Hong Kong, not the least of which include access to quality education, professional mentorship, career advice, opportunities for upward social mobility. Many governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work on youth issues in Hong Kong with the expressed purpose of improving social mobility for marginalized youth. However, despite the widely accepted importance of participant buy-in to programmatic interventions, youth perspectives are often unclear in the literature. This study endeavors to add to the body of knowledge on the social development of disadvantaged youth in Hong Kong by offering the perspectives of youth who have participated in a youth development NGO's programs regarding the perceived benefits of program participation. Project Share is a Hong Kong-based NGO attempting

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This case study examined a youth development NGO in Hong Kong. The study informs NGOs, policy-makers, and readers interested in improving the situation for disadvantaged youth in Hong Kong and elsewhere through targeted programs such as internships and workshops. The study adds to the literature on youth development, non-formal education, and social mobility.

to improve social mobility for disadvantaged youth in Hong Kong in the region known as the New Territories. As illustrated by Postiglione (1997), significant structural inequality exists in Hong Kong, particularly when contrasting the elite central district with New Territories communities like Tin Shui Wai. Youth in the New Territories have disproportionately lower academic achievement and social mobility than youth in Hong Kong at-large, reflecting broader social and spatial polarization in Hong Kong (Lo, 2005). New Territories youth are more likely since the 1997 handover to be impacted by rising social inequality (Kim-ming, Hung, & Kam-yee, 2007). Disintegrating social networks have been documented in new town areas such as Tin Shui Wai in the New Territories, which impacts youth social mobility and marginalization (Wong, 2010).

Project Share targets social and cultural capital, as well as access and opportunity, through workshop-based trainings, and a variety of internship opportunities with the purpose of increasing communication skills, exposure to professional settings and cultures, and improving soft skills. Project Share endeavors to offset social and economic asymmetry by building social networks for these youth outside these New Territories communities in professional settings, and developing raw talent of youths in creative endeavors often neglected or under-represented by school curriculum.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceived impacts and benefits of program participation on youth in the NGO's workshop and internship programs. The key research questions are as follows. (1) How do participating youth perceive the impact of program participation? (2) How do these perceived impacts relate to the NGO's expressed purpose of improving youth social capital and the broader goal of social mobility for disadvantaged youth? This study combines data from semi-structured youth and teacher interviews, a youth focus group, and qualitative field work conducted in 2014 to develop thematic findings on the social issues and barriers perceived to be impacted by youth participation in programs.

### **1.1. Background to the problem**

The issues that disadvantaged youth in the New Territories face share important characteristics with social barriers worldwide, including social mobility (Crawford, Johnson, Machin, & Vignoles, 2011; Pau, 2014; Tak, Tai, & Wong, 1995; Wong, 2011), geography (Hung, 2011), language (Lee, 1997; MoK & Li, 2010), family social status (Kee-Lee, 2013; Saunders, Wong, & Wong, 2014; Shek, 2004), educational access and quality (Curry, 2011), discrimination (Kim-ming & Kam-yee, 2008; Wai-chi, 2012), access to varied social networks (Lewandowski, 2008), and access to the language and culture of affluence (Bourdieu, 1986). Some aspects of marginalization for disadvantaged groups relate to migration (Xu, 2015), language, culture, and colonial history that are unique to the Hong Kong context (Tak et al., 1995), particularly in the New Territories community of Tin Shui Wai, where large government subsidized housing estates form efficiently planned communities that remain economically and socially distinct and isolated from greater Hong Kong society. Tin Shui Wai's high immigrant population also may contribute to its relative social isolation within Hong Kong at-large, and its high poverty rates (Kee-lee, Cheung, Lau, & Sin, 2014; Xu, 2015). Youth in these communities have lower academic achievement and more limited social mobility than their counterparts on the more affluent Hong Kong Island and Kowloon districts. New Territories youth also have limited social connections outside their community and beyond their social class. New immigrants from the mainland make up a significant portion of the youth in the New Territories (Zhang, 2014), and immigrant and single-parent families are considered significant factors on low achievement of disadvantaged students by both youth and teachers interviewed in this study.

Geographically, the youth in the peripheral New Territories are at a disadvantage compared to their peers in core urban areas of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. The large distance between the New Territories and the urban center is cost prohibitive in terms of transportation costs. Culturally, the New Territories symbolizes proximity to mainland China, where cultural and social barriers are reinforced by youth's lack of confidence in risk-taking and in speaking English conversationally. Despite the importance of English in professional settings in Hong Kong, youth in the New Territories have limited opportunities to speak English socially.

Youth in the New Territories also have barriers to opportunity and access, because few major Hong Kong corporations operate in the New Territories, favoring the cosmopolitan environment of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. Opportunities to experience professional environments are limited, due in part to physical distance and social connections in these professions. Without access to these environments and thus the professionals in these settings, students are at a disadvantage to youth living in the more centralized urban districts. Family and community norms in these New Territories communities, including low expectations for disadvantaged youth, also have an impact on social mobility (Chen, 2005; Hung, 2011; Kee-Lee, 2013).

Hong Kong's rigid education system which, despite efforts to make the government school system more egalitarian, has contributed to the cementation of wealth disparity, class distinctions, and barriers to social mobility for the least advantaged among the Hong Kong population due in part to fierce competition on public exams (Dongshu & Suet-ling, 2013; Kai, 1997; Lee, 1997; Postiglione, 1997; Yip, 2016). At least partially due to the three band ranking system in Hong Kong's government schools (Chor, 2014; Curry, 2011), children from the poorest areas and children with the weakest academic skills are often limited to the lowest ranked schools (Chor, 2014; Education Bureau, 2014; Lee, 1997; Postiglione, 1997). Whether educational quality is equitable between the low ranked and high ranked schools is unclear (Ang, 2015; Chor, 2014). Higher ranked schools, called Band 1 schools, are more often located in more affluent districts and use English as the medium of instruction. However, low ranked schools, known as Band 3 schools, are more often located in impoverished communities and use Chinese as the medium of instruction (Ang, 2015; Chou, 2012; Education Bureau, 2014; Yeung, 2014).

### **1.2. Project Share's programs**

Project Share has two major programmatic components: workshops and internships. Workshops are daylong activities involving presentations from a variety of professionals in unconventional and creative industries in Hong Kong as well as training in specific professional skills such as interviewing and group collaboration. During workshops, youth participate in group projects incorporating creative self-expression and a focus on soft skills important in a variety of professions, as well exposure to unconventional and creative industries. Individual internships are then coordinated by matching youth and mentors through in-depth interviews. Youth participate in a minimum of a five week-long internship with a professional on Hong Kong Island. These internships range from shadowing partners in major law firms, to architects, magazine editors, graphic designers, bankers, and many others. The internships are designed to allow interns to get one-on-one mentorship from a professional and shadow this professional through their workday in order to see what the career looks like from an insider perspective. Youths are provided a stipend to: purchase professional outfit of clothing, eat meals with the mentor, and travel daily to the internship site. Interns get first-hand experience in a professional setting and are given opportunities to refine their soft-skills, build relationships with other professionals in the workplace, and learn to adapt to the culture of the professional workplace.

## **2. Literature review**

The British colonial legacy continues to influence Hong Kong's unique social and cultural amalgam since the 1997 handover to mainland China. In particular, the New Territories culture developed distinctly from Hong Kong proper due to its connection to mainland Chinese culture, which was preserved and reinforced by British policy (Chan, 1999; Selina, 1999). Western ideals of free market economic mechanisms and hyper-commercialization, combined with traditional Chinese values and the influence of the communist government in Beijing, have all influenced the development of a unique social dichotomy within Hong Kong society (Chui, 2012). The influx of mainland Chinese immigrants in recent decades (Lau, 2013), particularly in the New Territories, although not considered ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, has amplified social, cultural, and economic divisions within Hong Kong society (Kim-ming & Kam-yee, 2008), and an increase in poverty has been seen among mainland immigrant families (Kee-lee et al., 2014). Social mobility is further problematized in Hong Kong as Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong natives compete with Mandarin-speaking mainland youth for

limited spots in Hong Kong universities (Xu, 2015). Language also creates social mobility issues for Cantonese-speaking youth due to the growth of importance of Mandarin in Hong Kong and international business.

Political divisions in Hong Kong since the 1997 handover have manifested in the public sphere between groups supporting and protesting the influence of mainland China on Hong Kong politics and society (Cheng, 2014; Chew, 2014; Tse, 2014). The younger generation in Hong Kong has grown disenchanted with Hong Kong's narrative of prosperity in part to underemployment, lower wages, rising living costs, and perceived political marginalization due to China's influence and Hong Kong's economic dependence on China (Economist, 2015; Erni, 2001; Wai-Keung, 2012; Xu, 2015). Income gaps have widened between income levels, and inter- and intra-generational social mobility has decreased in the past two decades (LegCo, 2015; Wai-Keung, 2012; S. Yan, 2014; Yin, 2015). Income gaps have also widened between immigrant and native Hong Kongers despite policies and efforts in Hong Kong to ease transition of mainland immigrants to Hong Kong society (Kee-lee, 2013). These gaps may be due to a labor shortage of low paying workers but a surplus of university degree holders from Hong Kong, mainland China and elsewhere (Suet-ling & Wing, 2009; Zhang & Wu, 2011) and contribute to conflict between these groups.

As Suet-ling and Wing explained, "Parents of children who arrived in Hong Kong from the mainland since 1991 are overrepresented in the lowest quarter of income distribution" (2009, pp. 6–7). Immigrants arriving in Hong Kong within the past seven years were overrepresented in both poverty and deprivation indexes and geographically concentrated (Saunders et al., 2014; Kee-lee, 2013). Despite comparatively high academic achievement of mainland immigrant students when contrasted with immigrant groups abroad, one significant barrier is English, a skill necessary for acceptance into the higher ranked English-medium schools and universities in Hong Kong (Po, 2003; Shek, Shum, Wing, & Yiu, 2007; Suet-ling & Wing, 2009; Tse, Shum, Ki, & Chan, 2007). Mainland immigrant youth are often perceived as not "fitting in" (Wai-chi, 2012, p. 90) in Hong Kong schools by teachers and society at-large (Wai-chi, 2010). Negative stereotypes of mainlanders in Hong Kong have been explored and documented in the literature (Chan, 2014; Koo, Ming, & Tsang, 2014; Price & Ho, 2012; Siu, 2012; Suet-ling & Wing, 2009; Te-ping, 2014) and popular media (Te-ping, 2014). Negative stereotypes toward the New Territories, particularly Tin Shui Wai, have also been documented (Cheung, 2009; Hou, 1989; Rochelle, 2014).

English-medium schools in Hong Kong have become more competitive and housing prices even increase in proximity to these schools (MoK & Li, 2010). Although the Hong Kong Government has acknowledged the issues associated with tracking students by ability into low band schools, and the need to offer more balanced support to students with academic weaknesses, beyond clustering into segregated schools, these issues have not been fully addressed (Chor, 2014; LegCo, 2014). Entrance to higher ranked schools is highly competitive in Hong Kong (C. Yan, 2014), and many Hong Kong youth participate in after-school tutoring to improve achievement on national exams which is problematic for the majority of students who do not achieve acceptance to publicly funded tertiary education (Yip, 2016). This highly popular *shadow education* (Bray, 1999) often acts as an additional educational barrier to disadvantaged youth in Hong Kong and may contribute to other social mobility issues (Bray, 2009, 2014).

The Hong Kong population overwhelmingly supports social welfare measures for the economically disadvantaged (Wong, Wan, & Law, 2009a, 2009b), but poverty alleviation efforts by the Hong Kong Government have had mixed results (Hung, 2007). Kim-ming and Hung (2004) described a marginality trap facing low skilled laborers in Hong Kong as the society has deindustrialized and progressed into a postindustrial era dependent on larger numbers of highly trained professionals in the service industry (Shen & Dai, 2006). This transition may also be problematized by a mismatch between labor shortages and tertiary education holders surpluses in rapidly changing industries (Wai-Keung, 2012). As with other global cities worldwide, Hong Kong is experiencing a growing polarization between rich

and poor, and lower classes are experiencing less social mobility (Kim-ming et al., 2007; LegCo, 2015; Pau, 2014), and more innovative programs to address these issues are needed.

### 2.1. Social capital as conceptual lens

Social capital theory has become an increasingly popular means of analysis among social scientists and economists over the last three decades (Andriani, 2013; Kwon & Adler, 2014; Mahmood, 2015). Interestingly, in all that time there has not emerged a single way of defining or applying it. *Social Capital* is a term that lends itself to a multifaceted perspective on human social interaction, and can be conceptualized and theorized along multiple threads (Andriani, 2013; Grootaert, Narayan, Jones, & Woolcock, 2004; Lewandowski, 2008).

What nearly everyone concerned or interested can agree on, however, is that social capital, at bottom, is about the relationships we have with others and the ways in which we both individually and collectively benefit from those relationships. Benefits can come in the form of increased access to physical and human capital (Coleman, 1988), but they can also come in the form of emotive payouts, those non-material good feelings that help us bond with others and experience a sense of identity, belonging, and social purpose (Alfred, 2009; Putnam, 2000). The economic and emotive dimensions to social capital are difficult to pull apart, as they often manifest in concert. Mary Alfred writes that social capital falls principally upon one overriding assumption, “that a person’s family, friends, and associates constitute an important asset that can be capitalized in times of need, leveraged for capital gain, or enjoyed purely for the human interaction it affords” (p. 5). The economic and ideological lenses through which we observe any given social phenomenon, together with our purposes for conducting such observations, will help decide which dimension of social capital (economic or emotive) we lean on most for our analysis.

The names most frequently associated with *social capital theory* are Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000). Each of these represents a slightly divergent take on the meaning and function of social capital. Pierre Bourdieu envisioned social capital as something exercised by society’s rich and elite in order to promote and protect their individual and class interests. In this way, his perspective was materialist, critical, and Marxist. James Coleman did not see social capital as limited to exercise by the rich, nor did he define it as individualistic and devoid of social organization, though he did see it principally as both rational and economic (Lewandowski, pp. 30–31). Robert Putnam was more interested in how social capital serves the interests of democracy and how people can (and must) work together for the common good. For Putnam, too much focus on individual self-interest results in less social capital and thereby a less cohesive and productive society.

Two other features of social capital theory that are helpful in understanding its applicability to human social relationships and the ways in which these relationships help support individual and collective needs, both economic and emotive, are *bridging and bonding*, together with what Lewandowski (2008) calls *horizontal and vertical social capital*. Bridging and bonding define, respectively, the relationships between groups and within groups. Members of the same social circle, for example, are likely to share similar kinds of histories, information, and values. The shared experience results in strong ties among group members (bonding). Links which are established between members of different groups or social circles (bridging), enable members of one group to have access to the information that is owned by another group, thus widening an individual’s “social endowment” (Andriani, p. 6). Similarly, Lewandowski (2008) defines *horizontal social capital* in terms of the “resources (networks of social trust and connections) that are accessible and appropriate *within a specific socioeconomic or cultural stratum*” (p. 32). *Vertical social capital*, on the other hand, is the “resources (networks of social trust and connections) that are accessible and appropriate *between and among various socioeconomic and cultural strata*” (p. 32).

Taken together, these concepts of *bridging and bonding* and *horizontal and vertical social capital* enable one to see how individuals experience their relationships both within their respective social circles and without, and how exposure to the information and opportunities afforded by other

groups, especially those who command greater access to physical and human capital, is necessary in order for any kind of upward mobility to take place. According to Lewandowski, it is the non-existence or small supply of vertical social capital that characterizes social poverty: “It is a lack or scarcity of the kinds of social trust and connections that link individuals and groups in ways that foster mobility, associations, and shared cooperative actions up and down the socioeconomic and cultural ladder” (p. 32).

Social capital, then, is defined essentially in terms of the relationships and interactions that take place between people, both within and among various groups, whether these are conceived in terms of class, familial ties, or common interests. Social capital has both an economic and emotive dimension. Where one is able to utilize relationships in order to benefit materially and advance one’s overall monetary success and well-being, this activity clearly falls under the umbrella of economy. Likewise, where one is able to enjoy the solidarity and emotional support rendered through his or her interactions with others, together with the sense of belonging and social identity that often accompany it, this comprises the emotive dimension of social capital. For the purposes of our analysis, it is also useful to conceptualize the economic dimension of social capital into two facets, direct and indirect, to allow for the various contingencies and chronologies that define the way an individual experiences economic benefits vis-à-vis his or her contact, interaction, and relationship to others.

As we shall see, the young men and women who participate in Project Share are principally the beneficiaries of emotive social capital. However, there are participants in this study who felt that their access to vertical and economic social capital has been increased, if only indirectly. While it is certainly plausible that connections made through Project Share’s programs can open future economic opportunities for its participants, the feelings of support and solidarity these young people experience through the program are of great benefit to themselves and their families, and it is these benefits that they can enjoy in the present circumstances.

### 3. Methods

Qualitative research posits that knowledge is socially constructed and subjective. In particular, the qualitative case study approach lends itself to descriptive exploration of individuals or situations using data from a variety of sources in order to develop a case (Yin, 2002). This qualitative study triangulated data from interviews with five youth and two teachers, a youth focus group, observations conducted in Hong Kong, as well as subsequent follow-up communication with the participating organization. The two participating teachers included one male and one female teacher from two different secondary schools in Tin Shui Wai. Youth interview participants were selected through focused sampling from all participants in the NGO’s programs. Interviews were arranged and coordinated by the NGO, Project Share. Youth participants offered diverse perspectives from the target population of disadvantaged youth in the following ways: age, gender, and schools. Participants were all from the Tin Shui Wai community. These youth ranged in age from 16 to 20 years old. The youth consisted of two males and three females, and all attended different secondary schools in the community. These youth had participated in various Project Share programs from 2011 to 2014. Though not intended to be representative of all youth in Tin Shui Wai, the youth offered a cross section of Project Share participants. First, youth participants were interviewed together in a focus group which was designed to develop an overview of the issues. Then individual interviews were designed to delve deeper into the issues discussed in the focus group and to probe specific topics further.

Data for this study were analyzed using constant comparative method through a grounded theory approach (Birks & Mills, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview protocols which allowed for research participants to direct the topics to more in-depth discussion of pertinent issues. Data were analyzed in three phases: open coding (Khandkar, n.d.), first focused coding and second focused coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to develop thematic findings. Respondents are not individually identified during the focus group discussion and are identified only as *focus group* in the findings. Individual students and teachers are identified using a

pseudonym to protect confidentiality. Findings were organized thematically using the criterion established by Berg (2008) with five or more instances of particular elements across interviews needed to establish a theme. Themes were further analyzed using the social capital conceptual framework below based on key schools of thought in social capital theory.

#### 4. Findings

The youth and teachers included in this study perceived several positive impacts from the Project Share programs including: *increased care, expanded world view, increased confidence, improved opportunity, expanded choice, expanded social network, and improved communication*. Understanding these issues, and how participants perceive the effect of participation in these programs, is crucial to addressing social mobility issues in Hong Kong. The issues perceived as being effected illustrate the social deficits impeding social mobility and reducing economic integration of disadvantaged youth into Hong Kong society.

##### 4.1. Increased care

Youth identified the concept, *care*, as a result of participation in Project Share's programs, and pointed to Project Share as a source of this form of care in their lives. For example, one youth noted: "That's why I'm always, seems like, the world doesn't have anyone cares about me, except Project Share" (youth 3). Another youth made the connection between this manifestation of care and its impact on their sense of hope: "I knew that the society still has someone cares about us" (youth 3). In addition to the sense of care from Project Share staff, their internship mentors also cared about: "When we have public exam she still cares about us. Something like that, and we still keep in contact" (youth 3), and "we always talk about and she always care about me" (youth 3). One youth discussed the hopefulness associated with this sense of care about the youth that began at Project Share and how it could expand to the broader community or even societal level: "People can share the experience, and then to raise the awareness. And the compassion within the society so that actually, much more, many people can care" (youth 2). Elements of self-worth and feelings of acceptance and belonging were important emotional underpinnings to the concept of care.

##### 4.2. Expanded worldview

Youth and teachers associated participation in Project Share's workshops and internships with an *expanded worldview*. The youth made connections between their sense of care about themselves and their sense of care about the world-at-large and the shift toward an active role in society. For instance, "I think, maybe I will change, maybe the society, will change for the better. This is my hope, and if the society need me" (youth 3). One youth associated their experience at Project Share with their desire to have an impact on the world: "Maybe I changed the world a little bit, and maybe the future people will see that I have done, leave some footprints in history" (focus group). Another youth discussed the powerful impact that the Project Share internship at a law firm had on their outlook and understanding of how society functions: "Actually I get interested in anything about the law. Yeah because it is a kind of rule, every law is relevant to your life and you know more about law, and you know more about this society, and how it is running. What is going on, in the society..." (youth 3). Finally, one youth saw their experiences with Project Share as a means to connect with the world beyond Hong Kong: "I think that Project Share can not only link Tin Shui Wai to Central, actually we can link to the world, like Instagram. We could have information about the art gallery or some artists from some foreign countries. So if there is some ways to connect, not only to central but to the world. Hong Kong is a very small city" (youth 4). Despite the variation in the descriptions that the youth gave about the impact of Project Share on their worldview beyond their community and even beyond Hong Kong, these anecdotes show powerful perceived benefits for youth's expanded outlook.

Teachers also discussed the impact of participation in Project Share programs on expanded worldview of youth. For instance, one teacher stated, "I think that they will think themselves to be more literate. More civilized I suppose" (teacher 2). Whereas, another teacher saw the benefit of Project Share in more economic terms: "So they want to join Project Share because they want to know the

real commercial world” (teacher 1). Finally, one teacher drew connections between youth’s experience outside the community and expanded worldview: “More chance for students to explore outside” (teacher 1).

#### **4.3. Increased confidence**

*Confidence* is a broad concept with multiple connotations in this study, including that of confidence in functioning in unfamiliar settings such as professional contexts or outside the New Territories. Several youth described their reluctance to meet new people at their Project Share internship, eventually gaining confidence over time: “I took the initiative to introduce myself” (youth 4).

A second connotation was that of confidence in communicating with others specifically in English. Several youth associated Project Share with helping to build their confidence in English. As youth pointed out, “I can speak, I know my English is not very good, but I can keep on speaking.” (youth 4). The youth also stated, “I keep on practicing and I find out, Well, I can do it. So I got more and more confidence” (youth 4).

A third connotation of confidence in the study was that of confidence in taking risks. One of the most powerful perceived impacts on confidence for youth was associated with taking risks. One youth stated, “...I don’t know what job I should do, or what path I have. I don’t try at all. But after the [Project Share] activities, I start to try different things” (youth 4). The youth continued, “I don’t know if I have talent, or what aspect, but I try, so if I fail, it’s ok. I try the next thing. Maybe I can find the next thing that I can get interested in” (youth 4). The perceived impact on youth’s confidence in unfamiliar settings, speaking English, and taking risks were clearly important to participating youth. Confidence, and the related concept of self-efficacy, needs to be further explored in these contexts.

#### **4.4. Improved opportunity**

Youth noted Project Share’s impact on their *opportunity for experience*, particularly in access to experiences that typically only the affluent in Hong Kong get to experience, such as life as a professional. The youth saw it as a glimpse into a possible future, as this youth described:

If you have an experience like this, that you know what is successful, and what is high class, how to be rich and you know all the standard definitions. How to step by step and get there, but if you never experience it, you never know what is success” (youth 3).

Another youth explained, “I feel that I and these other students are very lucky to have this opportunity to experience something that is unexpected” (youth 2). This unexpected experience described is related to youths’ expanded understanding of career and educational opportunity. A teacher described this opportunity for experience in a different way: “We would like them to experience more relevant job market, so when they, in fact they do not know whether they would like legal services or marketing or not. Really they don’t know” (teacher 2).

*Opportunity for access* in terms of youth’s expanded opportunities to access those social contexts typically reserved for the elite arose only in the teacher data. This may be explained by this teacher’s acute understanding of social hierarchy and community barriers, or their ability to articulate these ideas more clearly than the youth: “...But in Project Share, really it is a symbol, hierarchy of society, jobs are supposed to be highest status in the society, like law firm, accounting department” (teacher 2). Project Share’s programs allow youths access to a new perspective on new social hierarchy and social status positions that they may not have been privy to otherwise: “I suppose they have more chances to access, what we call, jobs have higher status in the society” (teacher 2). Project Share also represented access to respect in society: “Jobs offered by Project Share mainly give them an idea that if you want to be a person, respected by many other people, you have to work hard, study hard” (teacher 2). Finally, Project Share was also perceived as an opportunity to access a new career perspective: “...It looks more formal, more serious. They have a rare opportunity to look around the

job market” (teacher 2). The lack of opportunity to experience and access higher status elements of Hong Kong society prevalent with youth in the New Territories acts as an ambiguous barrier to social mobility, which also limits choice for youth.

#### **4.5. Expanded choice**

Choice for youth is limited in relation to understanding of the opportunities available in society. For example, during one of Project Share’s workshops, one youth described, “different kinds of people sharing, some of them architecture, some graphic design. Share their story, so we can know more about different kinds of things, so then we can have choice” (youth 4). This youth also explained the link between choice, opportunity and understanding through the Project Share workshops: “They invite many different kinds of people from different industries. It’s about trying because if I don’t try anything, I don’t know if I’m really interested” (youth 4). Finally, one youth explained how participating in Project Share’s programs expanded choice through expanded opportunity and worldview: “Yeah because I think that the world has a lot of opportunity because how you choose the options. There are a lot more options here that you can choose” (youth 3). Without a more comprehensive understanding of the options available within the larger society, disadvantaged youth are limited *de facto* regarding social mobility partly due to a lack of information.

#### **4.6. Expanded social network**

Project Share’s work expanded the social network of its youth in two distinct ways: connections to mentors and others during internships and connections to other youth during workshops. Youth discussed their continued contact with internship mentors beyond the internship period: “...Actually we will always have lunch or dinner together, maybe monthly” (youth 3), “...yes we stay in contact, yeah” (youth 3), “...he encourage me that if I work hard and I study hard, this will be the life that I will get” (youth 3), “She called me and have dinner, and when we have dinner and see a film, I am still learning” (youth 3), “Understand what situation we have and give me some advice, how to be a better guy” (youth 3). Youth also described the continued connection with other youth in Project Share: “...You get more knowledge and the friendship and the friendship with the others” (youth 3), “...and with these friends, we are always having gatherings” (youth 3). These longer term relationships may serve to improve the youth’s social capital, yet further investigation is needed to understand whether youth are capitalizing on these relationships to improve their social mobility.

#### **4.7. Improved communication**

Lastly, youth and teachers perceived an improvement in interpersonal communication skills and communication in English. One youth noted that they “...learned how to communicate with the lawyer, and partner with others in the team” (youth 5). Another youth described their growth more generally, pointing out their improved ability to “...really communicate with the others” (youth 5). One teacher pointed out Project Share’s role in improving the youth’s interpersonal skills: “How to organize themselves, it will function how to communicate with others. Interpersonal relationship with others, all these elements it does not matter what kind of job you are doing” (teacher 2).

Finally, in addition to cultivating interpersonal skills, improving English communication skills was an apparent aspect of participation in Project Share programs. As distinct from the English speaking issue in the previous section on confidence, communicating in English is a social reality in many professional settings in Hong Kong, due in part to Hong Kong’s British colonial legacy, and to English’s growth as the global language of business. Youth associated improvement in English communication skills with participation in Project Share Programs. For instance, one youth stated that they “...learned a lot of vocabulary from there” (youth 5). Teachers also noted the importance of communicating in English in Hong Kong: “English is supposed to be the major element they have to overcome” (teacher 2). English communication skills and effective communication in professional settings were perceived as crucial to career success by the teacher: “One more thing is that they realize themselves, when you go out to work in a law firm, mostly you have to communicate in English with other

people. They will realize the importance of language when you go out to work, whatever situation” (teacher 2). The power of English proficiency as a means to social mobility is a clear barrier to many youth in the New Territories, and one that youth perceive some improvement through participation in internships.

Based on the perceptions of youth and teachers, participation in Project Share’s programs has increased the sense of care for and about youth, expanded the youths’ world view, increased confidence, improved opportunity, expanded choice, and improved communication. What follows is a discussion of the broad implications of the impacts of the Project Share programs, as well as an exploration on the issues not perceived to be impacted by Project Share’s programs.

### 5. Analysis of findings

Social capital theory is useful in analyzing the findings through two broad theoretical dimensions: economic and emotive. These dimensions of social capital represent distinct lenses through which to view the facilitation of social capital development based on the perceptions of program participants. The features also offer a means of critical analysis in order to better evaluate the perceived benefits of program participation, and the potential for improving social capital development.

One dimension of social capital theory useful for analyzing findings is what we term the *economic* social capital lens, and relates largely with the work of Coleman (1988). We will discuss the economic lens through the two facets we conceptualized: direct and indirect economic social capital. Direct economic social capital refers to concrete economic benefits tied specifically and directly to the social connections. An example would be a job opportunity directly linked to one’s social connections. Indirect economic social capital refers to the potentially economic benefits that may come as an indirect result of one’s social connections. An example would be the improvement of job skills gained through one’s social connections that will likely benefit a person economically in the future, but do not have specific and concrete economic benefits which are apparent immediately. Though the work of Project Share focuses on improving the economic situation of disadvantaged youth, it is difficult to find direct economic social capital being developed in participating youth. Also, the scope of this study, including the age of the sample population, limits the ability to measure the real economic benefits of increased social capital gained from program participation. No real improvement of economic situation was evident; however, findings indicated that participants perceived indirect economic benefits. The sense of *increased confidence* was perceived as being beneficial in job access and performance. Shyness among participating youth is often noted by organization staff. Coupled with *improved communication*, the indirect economic benefits of confidence may lie in the long-term improvement of on-the-job performance, conveying confidence in a job interview, or being proactive in the work setting; however, with limited direct economic social capital these benefits may not be fully enjoyed. *Opportunity for experience* and *opportunity for access* were elements that illustrated a perceived indirect economic benefit because the program gave youth access to previously inaccessible job experience and social settings (Kwon & Adler, 2014). *Expanded choice* is another potentially economic, albeit indirect, element because exposure to new, previously unfamiliar professional fields may lead to increased likelihood of youth to enter these professions in the long term. Real economic benefits remain to be seen and must be examined through longitudinal study of the youth and their occupational trajectory in the future. The economic social capital lens is best used to illustrate the need for more targeted program features that link the experiences of program youth to more direct economic social capital development, meaning concrete and specific economic benefits for these youth in the future.

The lens within social capital theory that is the most useful in analyzing the findings of this study is what we term *emotive* social capital and stems from the work of Alfred (2009) and Putnam (2000). Rather than concrete economic benefits of increased access to physical and human capital, the emotive lens allows us to look for the non-material affective benefits related to social bonding, sense of belonging, personal identity, and sense of purpose. Emotive social capital was clearly evident in the findings, although the link between emotive and economic was not apparent. The

*increased care* theme illustrated a strong case for the program's improvement of youth social bonding. Gaining an increased sense of self-worth, belonging and acceptance through the interaction with mentors and program staff also demonstrated emotive social capital development.

Putnam's (2000) conceptualization of social capital in terms of a sense of community was evident in the *expanded worldview* findings. Evidence illustrated youth's improved understanding of their community and its relation to broader social contexts, and their desire to work for the common good. Findings also demonstrated a perceived link between program participation and the desire in youth to participate more actively in society. Further investigation is needed regarding whether youth are able to capitalize on this expanded worldview to improve their social mobility over time. We also argue that *expanded social network* exemplifies emotive social capital, with evidence that youth gained continued encouragement from, and connection to, mentors during and after program participation. The connections to mentors represent both vertical social capital development because mentors are members of high status social groups, and bridging social capital development because the connections cross social group boundaries making affluent professionals more accessible to marginalized youth. While secondary students would not likely be able to turn these connections directly or immediately into jobs in a professional setting, such as a legal or design firm, without the appropriate tertiary credentials, these connections can lead to more informed decision-making regarding tertiary education choices, motivation toward educational achievement, and access to a professional information network. Expanded social networks also facilitate the flow of cultural knowledge from affluent social circles toward these youth. *Improved communication* offers evidence that emotive social capital is being developed, in particular because of the connection between improved interpersonal skills and relationships for program youth. The youth who participate in Project Share's programs often note their own shyness, a lack of communication skills, and their desire to improve interpersonal communication, which leads to the perceived importance that they place on improving their communication. Much of the findings in this study are best categorized as evidence of emotive social capital development and perceived by study participants as beneficial in affective terms. Less evident, but still apparent are the findings categorized as indirect economic social capital development, which may lead indirectly to economic benefits in the future. Finally, findings from this study do not reveal direct economic social capital development as a result of program participation.

In order to understand the value of these findings, we must also highlight the limitations of the study. Without systematic longitudinal study of the program participants, it is difficult to definitively claim any real long-term impacts of program participation on these youth. Making any such claims is not within the scope and purpose of this study. However, youth perceptions of the benefits and impacts of these programs are useful in understanding marginalization and social barriers from the insider perspective. These perceptions also add nuance to the types of metrics commonly used by NGOs to measure program effectiveness.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Project Share's programs are having a positive perceived impact on a variety of social issues facing the disadvantaged youth who participate in these programs. In particular, youth perceive an improvement of emotive social capital and indirect economic social capital which likely improve well-being and may offer social advantages in the future. Direct economic social capital development is not an apparent result of program participation. Organizations looking to improve the situation of marginalized youth in Hong Kong, need to target more comprehensively and concretely, the development of direct economic social capital without neglecting the elements of affective value in the emotive social capital that youth perceived as positive impacts. Suggestion for improving direct economic social capital include: facilitation of future work opportunities and the development of a more comprehensive professional community of mentors and mentees, ongoing opportunities for participants to use their improved communication skills. Further, organizations need to develop concrete measures for evaluating their impact on the direct economic social capital of participants. Indirect social capital and emotive social capital development resulting from

program participation will likely have positive impacts on reducing social barriers for disadvantaged youth in the long run, but exactly how and what is still somewhat unclear. These positive impacts to indirect economic and emotive social capital illustrate the importance of program participation to the lives of these youth, but highlight the need for further programmatic changes to address the economic elements discussed above. Further study is needed to understand more comprehensively the real benefits enjoyed by youth, particularly youth's real long-term educational and career attainment, in order to elucidate more tangible results of program participation.

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