

Youth Counseling in Transition: Rethinking the Role of the Youth Counselor

Philemon Yuen-Wan Choi

Commission on Youth; Breakthrough

Youth counseling is a dynamic profession undergoing continual metamorphosis with the ever-changing psycho-socio-political context of Hong Kong. Several inter-disciplinary research conducted on juvenile gang, non-engaged youth, and adolescents at risk within the school system provided important evidence-based conceptual framework and models for the paradigm shift in the delivery of youth counseling services. The major breakthroughs include: holistic development for adolescents; early detection and early intervention; the delivery of primary, secondary, and tertiary preventive programs; and cross-disciplinary collaboration. The role of the youth counselor is no longer confined to the personal counseling services in the counseling room; the multiple roles include advocacy and intervention at the systemic and structural level, bringing about changes in the families, schools, and even government policies.

This article is based on an invited keynote address by the author at the 2006 International Conference on Counseling that was held in Hong Kong on May 2006. The theme of the conference was “Counseling Youth in Transition: Innovation in Research and Practice.” Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Philemon Yuen-Wan Choi, Breakthrough, Breakthrough Youth Village, 33 A Kung Kok Shan Road, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong. E-mail: philemon@breakthrough.org.hk

Introduction

The Vocational Journey of the Author

Over the thirty-three years as a professional youth counselor, the author has witnessed the profession going through a gradual transition. In this article, he intends to rethink the role of the youth counselor in the ever-changing context of Hong Kong.

He started his career as a physician, practicing medicine in a private hospital. When he moved into the vocation of youth counseling, the service delivery was still basically a medical model. It was the counselees who took the initiative to seek help, make appointment, and receive individual counseling: by phone or through face-to-face counseling sessions. The focus was on developmental or psychopathological problems that the counselees were experiencing — basically a “disease treatment model.”

Then, he began to serve at Breakthrough, an organization serving young people through media production and delivery of a variety of services for youth. Over the years, the counseling services have shifted from a medical model to a developmental model, with emphasis on holistic health. The counseling teams at Breakthrough began to design programs focused on prevention and education, such as pre-marital counseling, sex education, and vocational education. In the attempts to bring counseling services out of the counseling room, making attempts to design and deliver primary, secondary, and tertiary preventive programs, it became obvious that “prevention is better than cure.”

For the past ten years, he has been appointed by the government to participate in various youth policy advisory committees. In order to propose evidence-based policies, the committees have launched several longitudinal research plus youth services pilot projects as they attempted

to find solutions to issues such as suicide prevention, juvenile gang prevention, youth unemployment, and psycho-tropic substance abuse. Youth policies are addressing social issues related to youth development, tackling the issues at the structural level. As a professional youth counselor, he discovered that front-line youth workers can contribute toward the formulation of youth policies, giving the policies practical implications. In this article, he will draw upon the findings of some of the research and pilot projects, shedding some light on the paradigm shift in the delivery of youth counseling services, and the changing role of the youth counselors.

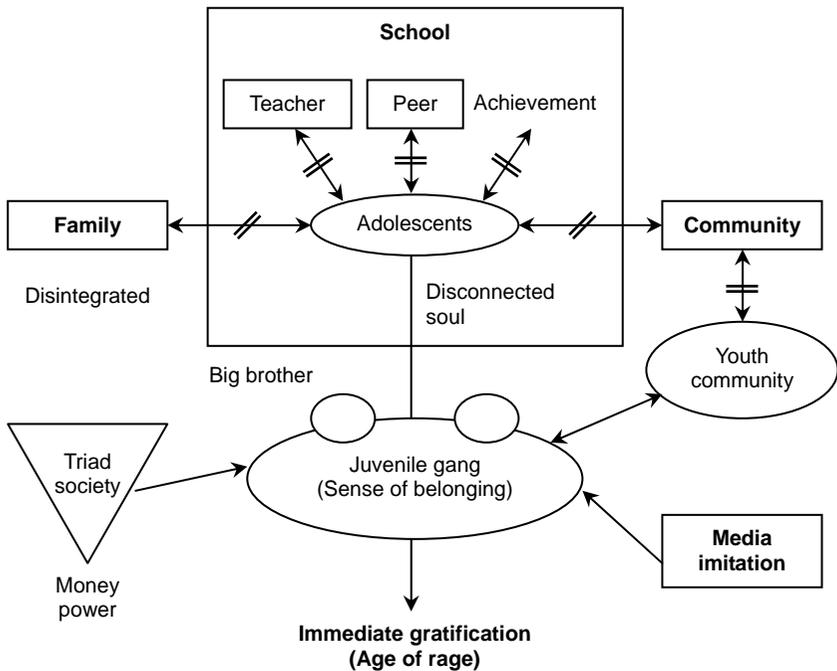
The Revelation of Several Social Issues

Juvenile Gang

Together with a team of researchers, including criminologist, clinical psychologist, social worker, and youth counselor, the committees conducted a thorough research of a juvenile gang who committed serious crimes in the community. This article will not disclose the details of the findings, and only summarizes the results in Figure 1.

It is obvious that there were multiple factors that brought about the formation of a juvenile gang, including factors that have to do with family, school, community, triad culture, the developmental needs and status of youth, and messages from the media (see Figure 1). All the gang members came from disintegrated families with absent fathers. They neither have a sense of achievements, nor a sense of belonging in the schools, and they had track records of truancy and bullying fellow-students. Some members of the juvenile gang were active volunteers in a youth service center, and the social workers at the center were not aware of the fact that those teenagers belonged to the juvenile gang. Some of them had connections with the triad society in the district

Figure 1. Multiple Factors Leading to the Formation of Juvenile Gang



where the juvenile gang committed a serious criminal offense. It was quite obvious that they imitated the violent behavior of youngsters depicted by one of the popular comic magazines. The police officers in the district were aware of some of the activities of the juvenile gangs, but somehow there were no communication between all the stakeholders: parents, teachers, social workers, and police officers.

The conclusions of the research pointed clearly to the need to adopt a more integrated, systemic approach in tackling the issue of juvenile gang. The committees cannot afford to neglect the influences of the family system, the school system, the peers, the media, and the local community on the development of the adolescents. They have to adopt

a cross-discipline collaborative approach, rather than serving the adolescents as isolated professionals, each tackling only a fragment of the total issue at hand. Prevention is vital: they cannot ignore the issue of truancy; family education and support is essential; and social workers need to learn to discern the causes, symptoms, and dynamics of a juvenile gang. Youth counselors cannot sit at the center and wait for the gang members to come and seek professional help.

“Non-engaged Youth” and “Hidden Youth”

Over the past five years, the issues of “non-engaged youth” (NEY) and “hidden youth” have caught the attention of the government and the media. At one time, there were approximately 120,000 adolescents and youth (aged 15–24) who were not engaged in school or work.

The committees are still in the process of conducting a thorough research on the causes of NEY, and are launching pilot projects in an attempt to create career paths for these young people.

The author believes that the underlying causes of the issue of NEY are structural:

1. Education structure — many students cannot survive in grammar schools, and only 18% finally can enter local universities. Many students thrive better with more interactive mode of education with emphasis on multiple intelligences. Vocation counseling and vocational training (including pre-employment vocational training) are helpful in guiding the adolescents to plan their individual career paths.
2. Economic structure — Hong Kong is rapidly migrating toward a “knowledge-based economy,” yet Hong Kong still does not have a “knowledge-based population.” The industrial sector has moved north to the Chinese mainland, and Hong Kong has very little room

for low-skill, low-education jobs. The unemployment problem in Hong Kong is basically structural. Some of the youth in Hong Kong aspire for careers in the creative industries and sports industries, and others would like to attempt to develop their careers in the Chinese mainland or overseas. But Hong Kong needs to rethink its strategies in developing its local economic structure, as well as its economic development beyond the local confine, creating new career opportunities for its next generation.

3. Assessment and screening mechanism — Hong Kong needs to develop a better screening mechanism to help the young people to develop their unique career paths. For the so-called “unmotivated NEY,” the underlying learning disabilities or psycho-social problems need to be screened out in order to offer specialized help. These young people cannot benefit from vocational training programs unless their underlying issues are properly diagnosed and helped.

School Drop-outs

To prevent the social issue of NEY, the committees have to tackle the issue of school drop-outs. They cannot adopt the simplistic labeling approach: “the school drop-out is either lazy or stupid.”

Thanks to the research by Levine (2003), they know that there are underlying causes behind the “myth of laziness,” and that young people could underachieve due to a variety of learning-related difficulties, and dysfunctions in social, family, educational and cultural systems.

In Hong Kong, there are school social workers and counselors in every school. They need to develop the competences to discern, to access, or to make referrals, so that students can be professionally assessed before giving the verdict that they are “lazy.”

A Key Concept That Leads to Paradigm Shift:

Early Detection, Early Intervention

Finally, the author will present the process of the development and implementation of a preventive program “Understanding Adolescent Project” (UAP) over the past ten years. UAP is a program widely utilized in primary schools and secondary schools in Hong Kong for the early detection of adolescents who are developmentally more at risks, for the delivery of early intervention through follow-up activities to build these adolescents’ resilience, and for provision of counseling services.

The development of this program began in the mid-1990s when there was an upsurge of teenage suicides in Hong Kong. It was discovered that, like other developed countries, Hong Kong adolescents had certain common psychological problems, including: suicide (or suicidal ideation), depression, conduct disorder, somatization disorder, addictive behavior, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

The Social Welfare Department commissioned a local team of researchers to launch the UAP in 1996. Through literature review, the team identified a list of risk factors and a number of protective factors that affected the development of adolescents (Centre for Epidemiology and Biostatistic, 2006):

1. Risk factors
 - ♦ Chronic illness of parents
 - ♦ Death of parents
 - ♦ Mental illness of parents
 - ♦ Depression of mother
 - ♦ Single parent
 - ♦ Divorce of parents

- ♦ Disintegrated family
- ♦ Parental deficit
- ♦ Crowded residence
- ♦ Low-cost housing estates
- ♦ Low-income family
- ♦ Comprehensive Social Security Assistance
- ♦ Chronic illness
- ♦ Premature birth
- ♦ Low motivation in learning

2. Protective factors

- ♦ Healthy personality
- ♦ Positive attitude, including optimism
- ♦ High IQ
- ♦ Socially competent
- ♦ Stable family
- ♦ Good parent-child communication
- ♦ Good parent-child relation
- ♦ Parental affirmation/support
- ♦ Peer support, belonging

Over a period of five years (1996–2001), the research team finally developed a screening tool — “Hong Kong Student Information Form” (HKSIF) — for the detection of adolescents with developmental risks. The tools were validated through a series of research studies (Social Welfare Department, 2005). Through the UAP program, the initiative was able to serve all the students of participating schools through its preventive interventions, provide resilience-building activities for 18% of students identified by HKSIF as high-risk students, and offer counseling and psychotherapy to the top 10% of students who were identified as having the highest risk based on HKSIF.

With the help of the screening tool, the government was able to deliver primary, secondary, and tertiary preventive programs for students, starting at Primary 4, and follow them up for three years. Some secondary schools utilize the screening tool at Form 1 and follow up the students with a variety of preventive programs for another three years (Social Welfare Department, 2003).

The government provided further funding for the implementation of the UAP program at primary schools and secondary schools, and the research team was able to conduct longitudinal studies which revealed encouraging results (Centre for Epidemiology and Biostatistic, 2006):

1. Predictive value of HKSIF
 - ♦ Less favorable self-esteem, social support, family function
 - ♦ More psycho-social problems: smoking, fighting, school drop-out, low academic expectations
2. Effectiveness of intervention
 - ♦ Anger management, family functioning
 - ♦ Less impact on optimism, self-esteem, help-seeking behaviors (more effective in Primary 4, compared to Form 1 students)

The UAP program is an example of the implementation of the important concept of “early detection, early intervention.” UAP also actualizes the concept of delivering preventive health services for adolescents at three levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary) with programs designed specially for targeted adolescents at each level.

Conclusion

With the above examples, it is obvious that the delivery of counseling services for youth has gone through transition over the past decade. The role of youth counselors has also evolved. They are no longer confined to the counseling room, offering psychological

treatment; their multiple roles also include that of an educator, a public advocate of holistic adolescent health, and an advisor on government policies related to youth.

In order to better serve children and youth, a paradigm shift is needed in our social service systems (Choi, 2004) in at least the following areas:

- ♦ From problem-solving to concern for the holistic development (e.g., need assessment of young children) (Committee on Promoting Holistic Development of Preschool Children, 2005);
- ♦ From reactive, remedial perspective to early detection, early intervention, and holistic care;
- ♦ From facilitating personal growth to structural change (e.g., providing a positive structure for NEY) (Commission on Youth, 2003);
- ♦ From isolated professional intervention and fragmented efforts to cross-disciplinary collaboration and cross-sector convergence (e.g., interventions to reduce juvenile gang).

Youth counseling is a dynamic profession undergoing continual metamorphosis with the ever-changing psycho-socio-political context of Hong Kong. Youth service providers and policy-makers can expect more exciting and ground-breaking evolution in the years to come.

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蛻變中的青少年輔導工作

青少年輔導工作是一項充滿動力的專業，它隨着香港不斷變化的心理、社會和政治處境而持續蛻變。一些以童黨、雙待（待學、待業）青年及校內高危青少年為對象的跨界別研究，為青少年輔導服務的思維更新提供了重要且以實據為本的理念架構和模式。其主要突破包括：青少年全人培育、及早識別和及時預防、三級預防服務，以及跨界別合作。青少年輔導工作者的角色已不再局限於輔導室內的個人輔導，更應包括系統上及結構上的倡議和介入，以期在家庭、學校甚至政府政策方面帶來轉變。