Bounded Navigations to Work: The Experience of Young People in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative study on the school-to-work transition experience of young people who failed the public examination for Form Five students in Hong Kong. Not only are these school leavers the majority who failed to continue education in Form Six in the mainstream grammar schools, they are also members of the ‘missing middle’ whose experience has been under-represented in youth studies. Underpinned by the notions of risk society, individualization and reflexivity, bounded agency, and opportunity structures, the study aims at explicating the interlocking relationship between agency and structure and formulating new categorizations of transition patterns so as to thicken the understanding of school-to-work transitions.

Purposive sampling was deployed in the study. 24 young people who failed the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination were recruited as informants of the study through the method of snowballing. In-depth interviews, in a semi-structured format, were used as the means of data collection.

Three themes are revealed in the study. Firstly, the hurdles created in the labour market were unevenly distributed among young people and young people’s negotiations were structurally biased in terms of social gradients such as family’s resources and gender. Secondly, in face of the present opportunity structures for school-to-work transitions, the majority of young people were compelled to take decisions amidst uncertainties and risks whereas few were well protected with their family resources and hence uncertainty-and-risk-shielded navigations were identified in these cases. Thirdly, it is found that young people’s navigations in their school-to-work transitions were characterized with attempts to actualize their aspirations and yet such attempts were more enabling to some but more constraining to others. As such, five patterns of aspiration pursuance were categorized with reference to the opportunity structures confronting individuals, their sense of uncertainties and risks, and their reflexivity.

The study attempts to unpack the meanings of agency, structure, and school-to-work transitions in relation to the local context and the young people who were exposed to a disproportioned distribution of uncertainties and risks. It is argued that these young people’s navigations to work were characterized with boundedness which varied across time and space and was constituted by the
interlocking relations between agency and structure as illuminated in stratification, aspirations, individualized responsibility and emotions. It is hoped that the study can shed light on working with young people, policy for young people, and further research on youth and youth transitions.
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