

From School Dropouts to Achievers: Reengagement of Student Learning in Youth College

YEUNG Fu Yiu, Vincent¹, KWONG Lik Hang², Kelvin, LAI Wing Hang, Jack², LEUNG Yuk Ling, Belle², MAK Kit Yi, Vienna³, TAM Wai Yiu, Nelson⁴, WONG Ka Ho, Matt⁵

¹Youth College (Kwai Fong, Kwai Chung & Pokfulam)

²Youth College (Kwai Chung)

³Youth College (Kwai Fong)

⁴Youth College (Tin Shui Wai)

⁵Youth College (Kowloon Bay)

School dropout brings highly undesirable consequences both to the students and the society at large, and the problem is rather pervasive in some developed countries. For the dropouts, many become unemployed, physically unfit, psychologically unhealthy, and they are also associated with crime and delinquency. At the societal level, governments have to spend more on welfare provisions but receive no income tax from dropouts. Efforts have been stepped up to alleviate the extent of the problem.

In Hong Kong, although the official school dropouts statistics are not high, other local evidence indicates that the problem could also be serious (Tam, 2011; The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 2012). In the past few years, there are numerous encouraging stories in the Youth College (YC) which show that many previous dropouts have re-engaged themselves actively in schools with drastic, positive changes in their learning attitudes and behaviour, and become school achievers. It would therefore be both academically interesting and practically significant to recognize what changed the hearts and minds of these youngsters. With this background, this exploratory study intends to understand the mechanisms facilitating these students in transforming themselves from school dropouts into achievers.

This study has adopted engagement theory (National Research Council, 2004; Lyche, 2010; Rumberger, 2011) to explore the mechanism behind students' learning in schools. Literature review indicates that school dropout is more a process of academic, social and psychological disengagement of students from schools, culminating in the final act of leaving rather than an isolated event. To re-engage these students, there is a need to work on their perceptions and experiences of studying and schooling as well as meeting their psychological and social needs.

Qualitative case study has been adopted as the research methodology. Twelve students who had previously dropped-out from secondary schools but have become achievers whilst studying in YC have been identified as subjects. Prior to data collection, a case study protocol has been worked out. All subjects were interviewed individually, and the processes were tape-recorded. Each interview lasted for about two to three hours.

Preliminary results indicate that the students have drastic differences in their learning experiences whilst studying in YC when compared with their previous secondary schools. First, they show greater confidence in their self-competences in meeting study requirements. Second, they begin to see the value of schooling and its relevance to their future. Third, the learning processes are regarded as more enjoyable and the school curricula are more interesting. Fourth, they have more positive social relationships with teachers and fellow schoolmates which have provided further impetus to enhance their learning motivations.

The initial findings confirm the importance of adopting multi-level interventions to re-engage the school dropouts successfully. In this respect, it is suggested that careful design of the syllabi and teaching approaches to suit their interests, cultivation of a caring school culture, development of positive collaborative learning experiences among students and provision of plentiful successful achievement experiences for the students are among some of the important measures that need to be adopted to drive the changes of these students.

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