

Once 'NEET', Always 'NEET'? Experiences of Employment and
Unemployment of Youth Participating in a Job Training Program in
Taiwan

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Abstract

In response to the increasing 'NEET' phenomenon, the government in Taiwan launched a trial program (the Flying Young Program, FYP) targeting the young 'NEET.' The focus of this study is to interview youth participating in this program, to examine their reasons and experiences of being the 'NEET,' their experiences with and opinions about the FYP, as well as their ideas about work. Data were collected via face to face interviews with 6 previous program participants aged 15 to 20. Results of this study indicated that most young people did not choose to become the 'NEET,' because they could not afford it. With regard to the experiences of being in the program, most respondents agreed that this program helped them; however, it was not much about increasing their chances of being employed, but to help them get social and emotional support and to feel better about self. Many agreed that the allowance offered by the program was a good incentive for participation. Given the above research findings, implications to social policies and programs are suggested. Policy makers should recognize that the 'NEET' group is not necessarily composed by a group of problematic or delinquent youth; these young people wanted to work and enjoyed working. A good job training program should be able to teach them their rights in the work force, raise their sense of self-value and social support, as well as provide apprenticeships and financial support.

INTRODUCTION

Both within Taiwan and in a wider international context (especially in Japan and the United Kingdom), there is an increasing concern with young people who are not in education, employment, or training (the so-called 'NEET generation'). Being 'NEET' means these youth are at a higher risk of being socially excluded and experiencing worse employment prospect in their later life. In Taiwan, where the study was conducted, the unemployment rate among young people 15 to 24 years was increasing recently; it reached 10.65% in 2007(the average unemployment was 3.91%); the highest among all age groups (Executive Yuan, 2008). Among them, 33.5% were looking for jobs, but there were no jobs for them.

In the past, issues related to the transition from school to work did not cause much attention in Taiwan. Young people should transit from school to the work force smoothly, with a very short unemployed period. This situation, however, has changed in recent years. The overall youth unemployment rate was increasing year by year. Even young people with high school or college diplomas could not find adequate jobs. Some might have jobs, but were in part-time or employed temporarily. It is generally believed that for young people not in education, they have to get a fulltime job, because it means a successful transition to adulthood.

Unemployment has been regarded as a serious social problem; which is even so among young people. Persistent unemployment makes these young people's transition to adulthood difficult, increases their chances of being poor in the future and their risk of engaging in problem behaviors, as well as reduces their social and political involvement (Bay & Blekesaune, 2002; Hagquist, 1998; Hammer, 2007; Isengard, 2003). For those who fail to maintain a position in the educational system or the labor market, they cannot accumulate sufficient social and human capitals. As a result, they tend to be poor, lack of social and political participation, and engage in risky or

delinquent behaviors. Youth unemployment did not only cause negative economic effects, but also psychological distress, such as feelings of loneliness, powerlessness, restlessness, anxiety and depression (Creed & Reynolds, 2001; Hagquist & Starrin, 1996; Hammer, 2000). In fact, the negative consequences of youth unemployment affect not only individuals, but also the society, such as the increase of social expenditures in dealing with issues caused by unemployment. Therefore, unemployment should not be dealt with as a personal issue, but a social one.

The issues related to the NEET phenomenon are not just about unemployment, but also about education and job training. Some people might ask: if unemployment is related to the economic condition of the society, being in education or a job training program seems to be a good option, so why doesn't the NEET group choose to be there? Whether these young people 'choose' to or they are 'forced' to be in the NEET status thus becomes a major concern of related studies. In Japan, where the terms of 'NEET' or 'Freeter' (a combined term of 'free lance' and 'albeiter') are now well-known, various studies try to examine this phenomenon, or to propose interventions or policies that can solve this problem (Inui, 2003, 2005; Yuji, 2007). In fact, the NEET represents a heterogeneous group; they can be people who are long-term unemployed, temporarily unemployed, unemployed for illness, child care or family duties, unemployed to prepare for higher education or examinations of all kinds. For those who have parental economic support and with "legitimate" reasons of being unemployed, jobless is not much of an economic problem. The NEET condition is a problem because most people believe when a young person is doing nothing; their adjustment to adult life will be more difficult.

Though, being in education, employment, or training seems to be a free choice of young people, findings of previous studies did not support it. Yuji (2007) found that young, less-educated males from poor families were more likely to become 'NEETs.'

This was not explained by their lack of work ethic, but by the disadvantaged social background they were brought up. Other research also found that intergenerational or educational factors were associated with the NEET status (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Pemberton, 2008). Due to the lack of financial and educational resources, young people from poor families usually didn't get much investment in education by their parents. Therefore, they tended to find low-paid jobs in poor working condition, which ended up reducing their desire to work. Early failure in the job market might discourage young people; prevent them from experiencing the value of work. As a result, they would become permanently disengaged from employment. As for education, it is an investment that needs financial support; poor youth just cannot afford to stay in education too long. It seems that being in a job training program will be a better choice for these young people, they can accumulate some assets for future jobs. On the basis of such beliefs, policy makers in Taiwan thus designed a special job training program, the Flying Young Program, to young people from disadvantaged families and were ever being 'NEET' before participating in this program.

THE FLYING YOUNG PROGRAM IN TAIWAN

In response to the increasing 'NEET' phenomenon among young people in Taiwan, the government launched a vocational training and career development program, called 'The Flying Young Program' (FYP) since 2005. This program aims to teach participants vocational and interpersonal skills, to increase their occupational competencies, so they can become more employable. It was conducted yearly, funded by the Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training, Council of Labor Affairs. Participants of this program were aged 14 to 19, with an educational degree lower than senior high school (no more than 12 years of education), had no intention to pursue higher education, and were not employed fulltime at the time of enrollment to the program. This program gave priority to young people from poor and dysfunctional

families. According to the Council of Labor Affairs (2008), 171 young people participated in this program, and 70 of them completed the whole program in 2007.

The FYP was decentralized, with 7 training sites run by the local employment services centers. These centers then contracted out their programs to local non-profit organizations. The FYP offered each participant up to \$5,000 NT dollars (about \$ 150 US dollars) allowance for full participation of the program, and a \$10,000 NT dollars monthly allowance for their apprenticeship. Enterprises that offered apprenticeships to program participants could receive \$5,000 dollars award a month, up to three months. It was hoped that with monetary rewards, young people were more willing to stay and complete the program.

Though the Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training provided funding and set the general outlines of the FYP, it left local training centers to develop their own training courses and activities based on the needs of their participants. It was generally composed of two phases: the first was called the occupational exploratory phase and the second was an apprenticeship. In the first phase, educational courses were offered to teach youth occupational skills. The courses lasted for 4 months, 20 hours per week. Participants had to learn occupational social skills, to change or improve personal qualities, such as responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, integrity or honesty, and self-management. Instructions about writing resumes and interviewing skills were also taught. Casework or group work could be offered by program social worker as needed. It was hoped that after the first phase of training courses, program participants could develop some basic work attitudes and skills. The second part of this program was to do apprenticeship for three months. During their apprenticeship, program staff (usually social workers) should supervise them on a regularly basis.

PURPOSES OF THIS STUDY

This study interviewed previous participants of the FYP, with the purposes to

understand the following issues:

1. Their experiences of being NEET, how they perceived such experiences, and what they felt about being NEET.
2. Their experiences with and opinions about the FYP, what were helpful and not helpful? What needed be done differently to make the program better?
3. Their ideas about work, including attitudes, meanings, working conditions, and expectations.

METHOD

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of young people's experiences, this study used the qualitative methodology to explore above research questions. It did not intend to generalize findings to the general youth, but it could provide a picture of issues faced by an under-studied group of young people.

Participants

The sample of this study was selected purposively. To recruit participants, the researcher first contacted two non-profit organizations received funding from the Bureau of Employment and Vocational Training to run the "Flying Young Program" in Taipei city. Directors of these agencies agreed to help recruit their previous program participants to take part in the study. Current program participants were not included, because their experiences with this program were not yet complete. Participants should sometime in their life have experienced the NEET status, and might be employed or unemployed at the time of interview.

A total of six young people were interviewed. They ranged in age from 15 to 20. Two were males, 4 were females. Only one young person was employed fulltime at the time of interview. Four were in education; one was applying for an apprenticeship. Some basic information of the participants was listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants.

Name	Age	Gender	Current status	Age first employed	Number of jobs fulltime
Sara	20	Female	In full-time employment	15	5
Dong-dong	19	Female	In education (evening division), not employed	15	6
Hsiao-hwa	15	Female	In education (evening division), not employed	14	3
Candy	19	Female	Applying for apprenticeship	13	3
Hsiao-Ki	17	Male	In education (evening division), not employed	15	5
David	17	Male	In education (evening division), not employed	15	4

Data Collection and Procedure

Individual in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Questions regarding their experiences of participating in the FYP, their experiences of being NEET, their attitudes toward work, and their expectations for the future were asked. Rather than keeping to a rigid interview schedule, flexibility was allowed to let participants bring out information important to them. With consents from participants, each interview was audio taped and transcribed into text by two graduate students. Each participant was interviewed once by the researcher, and it took about 1 1/2 to 2 hours in length.

Data Analysis

Self-report data were transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms were assigned to the participants to assure confidentiality. All transcribed interview content was checked

for accuracy first. Then interview transcripts were read several times to capture the main ideas from participants' narratives. A line-by-line review of the transcript was done for identifying meaningful units and recurrent themes. As text was categorized, themes merged, and they were presented according to the purposes of this study. Analyses and categorizations were done recursively, with some revision of themes, in order to incorporate additional information into the finalized version of analyses.

RESULTS

The Profile of Interviewees

The following is some sketch of research participants. It included information provided by them that were related to their families and previous working experiences, as well as some observation from the researcher.

Sara: Sara is a sweet and sunny girl. She lives with her mother and one sister. She just turned 20 and regarded herself as 'old' enough to be responsible for her life. After she graduated from the junior high school, she had been working sporadically. Now she works fulltime as an administrative assistant at a travel agency which is owned by her aunt's mother. She earns \$22,000 a month, about \$5,000 dollars more than the minimum wage (\$17,280). She thinks the salary is not bad, enough for her to cover her living expenses. She gives her mother \$5,000 dollars a month. As for school, she once attended a private vocational senior high school, but was expelled for skipping too many classes. She is now preparing for the Senior High School Diploma Equivalent Examination, with the hope that she can pass the exam and have a senior high school degree.

Dong-dong: Dong-dong is from a single-parent family, living with her mother and three sisters. She had contact with her social worker since she was in the sixth grade. *'I just didn't like to go to school or stay at home. I went out with friends a lot, and then I got into trouble. So I had a social worker since then.'* Dong-dong also worked

infrequently, most were temporary jobs. Her shortest employment record was one day. She quitted that job because the pay was low (only \$20 dollars an hour), and the working condition was terrible (greasy and hot). She just quitted another job last month. She currently attends a private vocational senior high school at night time. She does not intend to work now, because she said she wanted to take a break. Since she had some savings, she would start working when she uses up her savings.

Hsiao-hwa: Hsiao-hwa is a soft-spoken and shy girl. She just turned to 15 this year. She currently attends the evening division of a private vocational senior high school. She does not work now. Her classes start at 6:30 p.m. till 10:30 p.m. She usually sleeps through the day time, only eats one meal a day. Therefore, she thinks she does not need much money. She lives in her boyfriend's home, but her living expenses are offered by her mother, who gives her \$100 NT dollars a day. Her previous working experiences were mostly unpleasant, so her intention to work was not high. She was actually the only one who thought being NEET was not much of an issue to her.

Candy: Candy is 19, and is the oldest in the Flying Young Program she just finished early this month. She is going to have an apprenticeship interview the following day. The position she applied for was a delivery clerk. She thinks it is an important job because she can deliver organic food to people, and organic is good for health. In fact, Candy looked more mature than her actual age. She got her first job at age 13 when she graduated from the elementary school. She ran away from home that year, because she accidentally found out that her birth parents were actually her uncle and aunt. She did not want to depend on them financially, so she ran away, and got her first job at a restaurant. She told the researcher that she had some involvement with gang members, but she never did illegal work. She regarded herself as having good interpersonal relationships, so she could always get financial support from friends when she was unemployed.

Hsiao-Ki: Hsiao-Ki is 17, and is the only interviewee who lives in an intact family. He has an older sister studying in a university. He said he had a lot of problems with his parents. When they had a fight, he would run away from home. He violated the law last year, and was assigned a probation officer for three years. As requested by his probation officer, he needs to be in education, be employed, or attend a job training program while under probation. Since he likes cooking very much, he chose to attend a vocational school majoring in food and beverage management. But his attendance was not good, so he was referred to the FYP. When he was in the FYP, he cooked lunch for all program participants and workers. He was proud of his cooking, because *'It tasted good, and they all seemed to like it very much.'* After he finished the program, he went back to school again.

David: David was about one hour late for the interview. When he arrived, he kept apologizing for being late, and explained that he was late because he had to settle down some issues for his friend. David is 17 and lives with his father who is a lieutenant colonel. His father can support him financially, but he did not want to depend on him. He did not get along with his stepmother, so he ran away from home. Just like Hsiao-Ki, he violated the law when he ran away, then he was in probation for three years. He moved back to live with father since then, *'and try to behave, so my probation officer won't make a bad report to the judge.'* To him, the meaning of 'behave' is to go to school, to attend the FYP, and to stay away from bad friends. So after he completed the FYP, he went to an evening division of a private vocational senior high school, with the hope that he can work at the daytime.

The Experiences of Being NEET

Since most of FYP participants were from families that could not offer financial support, the experiences of being NEET was not fun at all. Some participants' parents actually were willing to provide financial support, but they did not want to take it. As

a result, most respondents could not afford to be in the NEET status too long, they were eager to get a job when they were short of cash.

NEET is not an affordable situation: For this group of youth; being in the NEET status did not seem to be a 'choice' or an interesting experience. Strong monetary needs had driven them to find jobs, to be self-sufficient, so that they did not have to depend on others, especially their families. Being employed meant they could become independent from their parents, an especially important thing for those who wanted to move out.

It usually took no more than 6 months for me to be unemployed, because I needed money. I usually used up my savings from the previous job in 3 to 6 months, so I had to work for money. (Sara)

I wanted to work to help with my grandma's nursing home expenditure. She raised me up and had a stroke last year. I wanted to move her to another nursing home closer to where I live, so I can see her more often. (Candy)

Money is very important for me, because I needed it to pay rent, to buy stuff, and I also wanted to save some money to go abroad in the future! If you are not working and not in education or training, it will be bored, and it is no fun at all. (Dong-Dong)

Unemployed is not fun, it's boring, and I need money, so I can move out. (David)

Sara and Dong-Dong thought one should not stay in the NEET status for too long, because 'you will get lazy and don't want to work anymore.' Working is definitely not easy, but it helps one to remain in contact with people, and with the real world.

Financial support when they are in NEET: Though they all recognized that they should not stay in the NEET status too long, they unavoidably faced the situation.

While these youth were not in education, employment, or training, where did they get their financial support? And what did they do? Were they just idle around?

About half of the respondents relied upon their own savings from previous jobs. *'I used my savings for daily expenses, and tried not to spend money on luxurious stuff,'* said Sara. *'I had some money left from my previous job, so I just used that.'* (Hsiao-Ki) *'I had savings; I always saved money when I was working. In case something happened, I could use my savings,'* said Dong-dong.

Hsiao-hwa and David would turn to their parents for living expenses that were usually only enough for meals and travel expenses. Hsiao-Hwa did not care much about getting money from her mother, because *'I am her only daughter and she had enough money anyway.'* David did not want to be dependent on his father too long, though his father is *'wealthy'*, as he said. *'I want to be economically independent; I don't want to take my father's money. I just think I am old enough to make my own livings.'* It seemed that financial independence also meant psychological independence from their family members. Therefore, for those did not have good relationships with family members, pursuing financial independence was very important to them.

Candy did not think her adopted parents would like to give her money, so she usually borrowed money from friends, when she was short of cash. *'I would turn to my friends, who got help from me as well. You just needed to take care of each other, you know. When I was working, I took good care of them.'*

As for things to do while being in the NEET, most respondents' answer was quite simple: *'sleep!'* Since they got nothing to do, and they did not have much money to spend, most respondents thought if they could just stay at home, watching TV, and do

not go out to have fun with friends, they wouldn't need much money. Sleeping long hours could also help them to save money, as Hsiao-hwa said: *'I usually sleep 12 hours a day, so I just need to eat one meal, which saves me a lot of money in food.'*

For those who did not like to stay at home, staying with friends became a good option. Candy and David liked to stay with friends, especially those who have been helped by them before. *'You know, I helped them quite a lot when I have money, so it's their turn to pay me back when I am short of cash,'* said Candy.

The Experiences with the Flying Young Program

Reasons of participation: Participation of the FYP was voluntary, and most were recruited by program social workers or referred by social workers of non-profit organizations. In this study, four participants were referred by social workers; two were by their probation officers. For those who were invited by their social workers, they did not have to accept the invitation. So why did these young people agree to participate in the FYP? The answer was quite simple and consistent for many; they come to the program for money!

For the money the program offered. Yes, money! (Dong-Dong)

Money, of course! Though it was not much, it helped! (Sara)

My school social worker referred me to participate in the program, because I had no interests for school, and had been skipping classes seriously. I was kind of bored at that time, and I knew the program gave us money, not much, but easy to get, so I came. (Hsiao-hwa)

Many interviewees answered this question without any hesitation. Dong-Dong participated in this program when she was 16. At that time, she had no idea what this

program was about. She was just attracted by the monetary award offered for full participation of this program. The reward for full participation was not much (about \$100 US dollars at that time), but many interviewees regarded it as “easy” money. As Sara said, *'You just need to join the program, do some simple things, have fun, you may get some deduction for violating rules, but you can pretty much get the money at the end of the program.'*

Hsiao-Ki and David were also referred to participate in the program, but not much of a choice, because they were referred by their probation officers. Hsiao-Ki said, *'my probation officer told me that I should either go back to school or go to a job training program, or my record would look bad.'* At that time, he did not want to go back to school, so he came to the program. Besides, Hsiao-Ki always liked to cook; he enjoyed cooking very much, so he thought if he could join this program, he might learn *'some new skills to be a good cook!'*

The only exception was Candy, who asked to attend this program because she wanted to get some job trainings and hoped she could get a different job.

I started working fulltime at 13 when I just graduated from elementary school. I moved out of my (adopted) parents' home when I found out that they were not my birth parents. So I needed money to pay for rent, tuition, and living expenses. I just walked into a restaurant, asked if they could offer me a job. And I got it! I have worked there for three years, until the restaurant ran out of business. Then I worked for another two jobs..... I joined the program because I felt that I needed to learn something new, to do something different, not much for the money, but for the skills. So I asked my social worker, and she referred me to this program. (Candy)

In fact, Candy was the only interviewee who was ever employed fulltime for more than two years. She also had the longest time of employment among all. She had her first job at age 13, and remained in that job for 2 and a half years. She said her performance was better than expected, so she even got a raise in her salary. Candy's adopted parents were vendors, so she started helping the family business when she was just about 10. *'I am a good vendor, you know, I can call out loud, I am nice to people, and I run fast!'* The researcher further asked her why running fast was important. She answered frankly, *'because we were street vendors, we had to watch out for polices, so we won't get the fine.'*

Candy seemed to be more experienced and matured than other interviewees. In one way, she was the one who started working at the earliest age, stayed in one job more than one year, and had some relationships with gang members in her second job. In another, she was the only one who seemed to have the clearest goal for her future, to ask for participating in a job training program willingly, and to join in the apprenticeship after the training.

Likes and dislikes of this program: When these young people were asked about what they liked and/or disliked about this program, most stopped for while, and asked some time to think, because they did not think about such questions before.

I think I like the staff here, they were not like my school teachers, always asked me to do this and that, and always blamed me for doing wrong things. The workers in the program won't do that to us, they were nice people. (Sara)

I like the program's flexibility; it started in the afternoon, so I did not have to worry about being late in the morning. (Hsiao-hwa)

I like the program to take us out, to see and try different kinds of jobs, not just

sat in the classroom to learn boring stuff. (David)

I think the people, especially the workers here, yes, they are friendly, and they always bring us fun stuff. (Hsiao-Ki)

When David was referred by his probation officer, he was somewhat reluctant of coming; however, he turned out to be very satisfied with the program. He even asked the program coordinator if he could join the program again. David said he was impressed very much by visiting a motorcycle shop. *‘The guy (the owner of the shop) just disassembled a motorcycle, and reassembled it in a few minutes, and I was amazed by his skills. I wanted to be like him in the future.’*

As for dislikes about this program, David and Hsiao-hwa both mentioned they did not like the peers in the program. *‘Some were childish and stupid, you know, they are so noisy, impolite, especially when we were going out together, they made stupid move in the bus, made us all embarrassed!’* said David. Hsiao-hwa also mentioned that she did not like some program participants, *‘they pretend to know a lot of things, but they are just boasting. I don’t like to be with them.’*

Ideas about Work and Future Goals

Ideas about Working: What does working mean to these youth? When interviewees were asked this question, similar answers were given: just to make money! Though earning money was important for most participants, they did not expect to earn a lot. Some of their expectation was even lower than the minimum wage.

For me, 10,000 to 15,000 dollars a month is good enough. (David)

I think 15,000 dollars a month were reasonable for me, considering my age and educational level. (Hsiao-Ki)

For those who just wanted to make both ends meet, being employed was not much of an issue. For example, Hsiao-hwa attended night school, but did not want to find a job at day time, because she did not spend much money at all. Her mother gave her \$100 NT each day, and she thought this was enough for her. She lived at her boyfriend's home, and only ate one meal a day. She sometimes would have temporary jobs which would let her earn the money for new dresses, makeup, or hairdo. *'As long as you can live a simple life, you don't need to work hard to make a lot of money,'* said Hsiao-hwa.

The low expectation toward monetary rewards might be highly related to their previous exploited working experiences, though none of them mentioned it. As the researcher found, since they all have been employed under aged, their working right was not being protected at all. Dong-dong, Hsiao-hwa, Hsiao-ki, and David all had been paid under the minimum wage, the lowest was only \$50 NT dollars an hour (the minimum wage in Taiwan was \$95 NT dollars an hour). David had been working 19 hours a day, without a break. Hsiao-hwa and Hsiao-ki had the experiences of not being paid, because they quitted the job before they worked for 30 days. Hsiao-ki worked as a construction worker at age 13, and had resulted in a back injury, which still hurt him once in a while. When the researcher asked them whether they thought such working conditions and monetary rewards were unfair to them, most respondents just shrugged their shoulders. As David said, *'what could we do? We know we were working under aged, so the law won't protect us.'* It is clear that the previous poor and exploited working condition had made those young people believe that they cannot ask more from the work force, because it is a norm, not exploitation.

Though monetary rewards were important, they did not ask much. So what else did work bring to them? Most respondents thought that working was more fun than going

to school, because ‘*you learn real stuff!*’ as David said. All these young people were low academic achievers in the junior high school. Previous learning experiences were frustrating to them. All expressed that when they were at work, they learned different things than they had in school. Such things were more important than knowledge they learned at school.

You have to learn to be patient, yea, be patient is important! You have to be patient with your boss, your colleagues, and your customers. (Dong-dong)

I learned a lot of getting along with people, to put up with them, especially to my customers. (David)

I learn a lot about teamwork, to work with people is not easy. (Sara)

To be on time, I think. You cannot be late often, or you get deduction on your salary. (Hsiao-Ki)

To learn how to handle things properly, you know, it is more difficult than you think. (Candy)

To learn that working is not an easy thing, you have to deal with a lot of different people, and cannot get mad with them, even though they are wrong. (Hsiao-hwa)

It is clear that these young people indeed learned more from work than school. Skills of teamwork, problem-solving, taking responsibility, and being patient were invaluable assets for these youth.

Future Goals: Though all respondents agreed that working is more fun than going to school, when the researcher asked them what they planned for their near future, it was surprised to find that most respondents still chose to get higher education, at least a high school degree. In fact, all interviewees' educational experiences had not been very pleasant; most of them thought school was boring and frustrating. So why did they still choose to go back to school?

Well, diploma is important, though the school teaches me less than I have learned from work, you just needed the degree to show people that you are educated.
(David)

In Taiwan, there are so many people with a graduate degree. So I at least have to get a high school diploma, and maybe to go to college. (Dong-dong)

I hope I cannot only get a high school diploma; I also want to go abroad in the future. Though it is like a dream, a hard to reach dream to me, I really hope that day can come. (Sara)

I hoped I can finish my high school education, and get a B level certification in Chinese cuisine cook, or become a bartender. (Hsiao-ki)

I wanted to go to college, so that I can find an easier job which did not need to stay up late or consume too much of energy. (Hsiao-hwa)

Sara wanted to go to Australia, to join the 'Working Holiday Marker' program. It's a program that allowed young people aged 18 to 30 to get a visa for working, short-term education and tourism for one year. Sara got the information from the website. She

was very much interested in doing that. *'But I have to learn English first!'* Sara knew that in order to make her dream come true, she had to work hard to save money, and to improve her English.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Interviews with these young people revealed some crucial information worth for further discussion. The following will summarize important findings and discuss issues raised with respect to formulation and delivery of related policies and programs for these young people.

The NEET Group Was Misunderstood

First of all, for most of these young people, not being in work, education, or training was not much of a choice, but an unexpected condition. They did not show any significant risks in their lives or engage in serious misbehavior. They did not try to avoid regular jobs or enjoy the idle lifestyle. To the contrary, they were eager to get employed, to be in the work force, and to be self-sufficient. It was surprising to find that for these young people, they did not think they should depend on their parents and enjoy casual life. Maybe it was because most of their parents were not reliable. However, even for those whose parents were willing and able to support them, being economically independent was still very important to them.

For all respondents in this study, they had worked for some period before age 16, the legally allowed minimum age of work. To them, staying in the NEET status was not affordable; it tended to be very short. They either tried hard to get employed or got themselves enrolled in an educational program. However, their previous poor educational performance had prevented them from enrolling in public schools that required higher scores in the entrance exams, so they all chose to attend the night program of private schools. Attending the night program allowed them to work at daytime to pay for their tuition and living expenses. The choice of staying in

education seemed to remove them from the NEET status, but in fact, previous failed school experiences happened again. Many experienced truancy and exclusion. Some thought that the school program just could not teach them much vocational knowledge or skills. As David said, *'you know, the courses were crap, the textbook just showed us pictures of screwdrivers, hammers, and told you what these were, so stupid!'* David wanted to be an automobile repairman, so he attended the vocational night school, with the hope that he could learn some skills to get a license. However, the school program was too simple, and he didn't feel he was learning anything from it.

The pathway to work or education was usually not smooth to them, so it came to the third choice: to attend a job training program. In fact, before participating in the FYP, attending a job training program was least of a choice to these young people. *'The programs were not designed for us, some of them were too far, some were just not interesting,'* said Sara. Hsiao-ki thought that participating in a job training program was unrealistic, because *'I won't get any money when I am in the program, it just did not work for me!'*

Yates & Payne (2006) interviewed some young people participating in a social service program, and tried to understand if the use of the 'NEET' label was adequate to classify this group of young people. They found that the 'NEET' was a problematic and negatively-perceived label that simplified a heterogeneous group of people. This label would divert our attention to examine risk factors, so that purposes of related programs were to reduce the number of people in the 'NEET' status. Findings of this study supported their proposition. We need to recognize that their reasons of not being able to be in employment, education, or training, so that we can develop programs that are responsive to their needs.

Experiences with the Flying Young Program

Though respondents participated in the program at different times and sites, their

opinions and experiences with the program seemed to be quite similar. Participating in the Flying Young Program was not planned for most respondents. When they first joined in the program, they did not expect to learn job skills. Some of them did not even know it was a job training program. The monetary rewards offered by the program were definitely attractive to them, especially when they were in the 'NEET' status. In addition, compared with their previous educational and working experiences, staying in the FYP was much easier. Therefore, most of them were satisfied with what they got from the program. Other things they appreciated with this program included: program staff, flexible schedules, and field trips to different workplaces. Most agreed that workers in this program provided emotional support to them. When they were in this program, they felt better about themselves. Field trips helped them to learn the diversity of jobs available for them. Such learning experiences were more effective than traditional classroom learning.

Although the respondents were generally satisfied with the staff and program contents, their experiences with program peers were not very positive. Young people participated in this program with different intentions and backgrounds; they might not get along very well. Such group dynamics resembled their previous experiences in school, so they were not happy with it.

The FYP was a job training program, but it was interesting to find that program participants did not mention much about what kinds of job skills they had learned from it. What they cared most was the people they met and the relationship they had in the program. This program offered a venue for these young people to experience positive as well as negative interpersonal relationships. These could be important assets for them.

Appraisal of Working

Though most of these interviewees have been exploited in the work force, most

enjoyed working more than schooling. Good workplace interpersonal relationships, such as with the boss, coworkers or customers, were the key reason of their job satisfaction. As Hsiao-ki said, *'The guys I worked with were nice, they gave me chances to learn, even when I made mistakes; they would forgive me.'* Sara also mentioned, *'The people I work with are nice, they don't see me as a kid, they teach me new stuff, and they believe I can do a good job.'* David thought that the joy he had with his job mainly came from the customers of the convenience store he worked. *'I like to talk to my customers; they show their concern to me. They are my nice neighbors, friends!'*

From the description of their enjoyment in working, we know that these young people are not in lack of working ethics; instead, they value work highly and appreciate what they have learned at work. In this study, we found that young people's aspiration for reasonable payment tended to be lower than their actual market value. They didn't care about doing boring or monotonous work; they just wanted to be employed. As many young people had been underachieving academically while at school, having a job was much more fun than studying at school. The world of work brought them some positive experiences, and helped them to feel better about themselves.

Implications for Future Programs

It is evident that for these young people, they have strong intention to work or to stay in education; they did not make conscious decision to stay in the NEET status. These young people do not actually have difficulty of finding a job on their own, but the problems are: how to keep the job and how to avoid being exploited by their employers? Their previous working experiences have made them believe that they did not worth much, but in order to survive, they don't seem to have many choices. This result gives us some insight for future policies and programs. First, the government

should actively involve in developing adequate job training programs for young people. These programs should not just focus on teaching work skills or ethics, but to teach young people their rights in the work force, and to provide information regarding labor laws and regulations. These young people have to know the minimum standards for working conditions, and that they are being protected by the law once they reach age 16. Free legal resources should be available to them, so that they can get assistance when they encounter exploitation or inadequate treatment in the workplace.

A good job training program also needs to offer monetary incentives to increase young people's intention to participate, especially for those who are from disadvantaged families. These young people just cannot afford to stay in the job training program without income. Monetary rewards cannot only attract them to come, it can also prevent early dropout of the program.

Although finding a job is not difficult, availability of adequate jobs as well educational opportunities for these young people are still not good. To help young people transit to the work force more smoothly, job training programs should include the arrangement of apprenticeships or work placements for them. The apprenticeship socializes young people while it educates and trains them. Through the apprenticeship, young people can learn basic but critical skills. They cannot only acquire economic benefits, but also shape their perceptions, attitudes, and behavior about the work. They need career mentors to be role models, and the apprenticeship offers a better chance than the regular workplace in fulfilling this need. Adults in the job training program can help them feel confident and pride about themselves, and to be able to take the challenges in the work force.

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