

# Engaging or Disengaging: A Review of Social Services for Disengaged Youth in Shanghai, China

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**ABSTRACT:** *Disengaged youth, who are out-of-school and unemployed, remains to be one of the most marginalized but under-served group of youth in China. Focusing on disengaged youth in Shanghai, this article examines their needs and reviews existing services. This article closes with a discussion anticipating new opportunities that accompany the more systematic cooperation among diverse domains to promote thriving of the disengaged youth.*

**Key words:** *Disengaged Youth; Youth Development; Chinese Youth.*

## BACKGROUND

Disengaged youth, or community youth, refers to unemployed adolescents and young people who do not pursue any further studies in the 16-25 year age bracket (Political Committee of CPC Shanghai, 2003). In 2014, 36.7% of the global unemployed were working-age unemployed youth (International Labor Organization, 2015). The youth unemployment rate of 16% in China is substantially higher than the overall unemployment rate of 4% (Dasgupta & Huynh, 2012). In Shanghai, nearly 10% of the junior middle school graduates, usually aged 16-17, stop pursuing any further education in high schools or technical schools (Shanghai Statistical Bureau, 2015). The overall amount of disengaged youth reached 75,000 in 2005, and it continues to grow on a 20% basis annually (Chen, Zhou, & Tian, 2006).

Disengaged youth are faced with more obstacles in their transition to adulthood, such as low educational levels, under-qualified professional skills, and an increasingly demanding job market (Chen, 2010; Li, 2006; Su, 2007). A series of factors are identified to be associated with their disadvantaged positions. Most of them are from single-parent or low-income families, and grow up under unsupportive family environment (Kang & Li, 2010). Apart from a scarcity of resources from family, disengaged young people also experience multiple forms of exclusion from the wider social contexts, including the rigid educational system, limited social networks, and strong social bias (Chen, 2010; Ding 2008; Xu, 2007). Therefore, they are often confined to menial, low-prestige and part-time jobs, which hardly meet up their expectation. As a result, they easily quit those jobs and remain economically dependent on their parents. Previous studies suggest that disengaged youth often suffer from mental problems such as depression, anxiety, and internet addiction (Cheng-Lai & Dorcas, 2011; Du, 2010). They also engage in a range of risk-taking behaviors such as shoplifting, physical fighting, and substance abuse (Jiang, 2006; Li, 2006; Xia, 2014).

## Existing Services for Disengaged Youth in Shanghai

Shanghai is one of the most rapidly developing cities in mainland China. Youth-serving programs for disengaged youth can be classified into youth training schemes, community schools, and rectification services (Xia, 2014). Shanghai government encourages disengaged youth to take part in schemes such as Spread Wings under Sunlight. A technical certificate and two types of vocational qualifications

would be accredited to participants after their completion of the training courses. Ever since 2004, this scheme has trained 4,399 disengaged youth with a remarkable employment rate of 73.76% (Spread Wings under Sunlight, 2010). The other two programs, community schools and rectification services are community-based. While community schools offer technical training courses and recreational activities, social work agencies are featured with clinical services. Take Shanghai Sunshine Community Youth Affairs Center for example. With branches located in each community, this Center provides prevention and promotion programs that address issues such as internet addiction, delinquency, and crime. Characterized by rectification services, it also offers ameliorative services such as counseling, quality building and skill training.

## Critiques and Implications

Though the aforementioned services have been running over a decade, the amount of disengaged youth in Shanghai remains disproportionately little changed (Ding, F., 2008; Ding, J., 2008; Li, 2008; Xu, 2007). Evidence suggests that those programs' ineffectiveness maybe due to the deficit perspective, the institutional design, and many operational problems.

First, current services are mostly deficit-based. Disengaged youth are considered as broken, in need of psychological repair, or problems to be managed (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998), rather than resources to be developed (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, b). Services are thereby taking a top-down approach, which places youth workers and service users on a less equal basis. This ultimately marginalizes the young people and jeopardizes their positive development (Chen, 2010 Fan, 2007; Su, 2007).

Second, service providers are challenged by multiple institutional factors. 1) Targeted training is largely missing from the existing activities held in community schools, which offers courses to all residents in the community no matter old or young, employed or unemployed (Xu, 2007). 2) There is a lack of systematic coordination among different community stakeholders to enhance the sustainability of the programs and other youth-supportive services. Existing programs are generally funded and run by different institutions or departments, making the consultation process even more bureaucratic and less efficient (Chen, 2010; Ding, 2008; Ding, 2008). 3) Insufficient funding remains to be a serious predicament faced by service providers. Unsecured financial resources exert negative impact on poor communities. Since local programs are primarily sponsored by local funding sources, poor communities are less likely to provide

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adequate youth development programs compared with those more affluent areas (Quinn, 1999).

Third, it is also noteworthy to point out several issues encountered during the program implementation, including: 1) low participation rate—possibly due to the not so needs-based activities and insufficient promotion; 2) inadequate district and school infrastructure to support activities; 3) limited rigorous investigations into the programs' effectiveness and efficiency; 4) lack of professional personnel who are held accountable; as well as 5) lack of whole-person and individualized educational or vocational planning. The existing community's services primarily focus on employment or re-employment, yet ignore participants' emotional, cognitive, and medical needs (Chen, 2010; Ding, 2008).

As Pittman and colleagues (2000) once put, "problem free is not fully prepared". In order to better engage adolescents and young people who are disengaged from education or work, it is conducive to apply a more strength-based approach that emphasizes the acceptance of youth preparation and development, not just problem prevention and deterrence. It is supported by a solid and growing empirical base indicating that well-designed,

Well-implemented and youth development programming can positively influence a diverse array of social, health, and academic outcomes, and reduce cognitive and behavioral problems (Catalano et al., 2004). Emerging programs launched by social work agencies aims to foster a three-level intervention system which covers primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention (Xia, 2014). This initiative potentially provides participants with developmentally rich contexts where relationships form and opportunities for growth in multiple areas proliferate. Disengaged youth would feel supported and empowered through the enhancement of not only adolescents' skills, but also their confidence in themselves and their future, characteristics, and connections to other people and institutions by creating environments. Moreover, since this systematic approach requires collaboration among multiple entities, careful sufficient coordination and regular evaluation are thereby critical also viable in the service delivery process (Kang & Li, 2010).

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