



Article

The Needs of Youth in Transition after the Alternative Education Program in Taiwan

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Abstract: In Taiwan, three alternative education programs are available to support school dropouts facing difficulties in mainstream education. While some programs offer residential services specifically for individuals from dysfunctional families, eligibility is limited to those under 15, as the primary objective is to facilitate compulsory education completion. Consequently, when reaching age 15, program leavers must decide between returning to dysfunctional families and pursuing independent living. To examine how these programs can address the needs of the leavers, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with six program leaders nationwide. The findings revealed that the leavers have diverse needs, necessitating relevant services for a successful transition into adulthood. However, due to the absence of applicable laws or government policies regarding the leavers, the programs can only offer services during the pre- or post-leaving stages through private funding and community resources. This raises concerns regarding such services' stability and long-term sustainability, highlighting the importance of adequate funding. Collaboration between the government and program leaders is crucial in facilitating the leavers' transition based on the experiences of current programs and their specific needs, ultimately contributing to improved outcomes.

Keywords: alternative education; at-risk youth; leaving services; youth in transition



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1. Introduction

Education has been regarded as a basic human right by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Despite the fact that free and compulsory education is offered in most countries in the world, out-of-school children and youth present an unsolved global problem. According to [Unicef and Unesco Institute for Statistics \(2016\)](#), approximately 60 million children at primary and lower-secondary school age, and more than 140 million young people at upper-secondary school age are out of school. Among these children and youth, some never enter education and drop out from school due to various reasons.

Although young people can drop out at any point in time, research has pointed out that some cases of dropping out occur when young people move on to new learning stages. [Haney et al. \(2004\)](#) studied educational trends in the US from 1970 to 2000 and observed that there was a significant number of students repeating Grade 9 and dropping out at Grade 10. Even worse, some dropouts may become NEET (not in education, employment or training). A study in France indicated that 70% of youth leaving high school experienced a NEET status at least once over a three-year period ([Giret et al. 2020](#)).

A similar situation has been observed in Taiwan. The junior high school dropout rate in Taiwan decreased by 0.05% while the resumption rate increased by 2.34% from 2010 to 2019 ([Ministry of Education 2021](#)). Meanwhile, at the senior high school stage, nearly 20,000 students leave schools without a graduation diploma each year, among which more than 60% drop out at Grade 10 ([The Control Yuan 2020](#)).

This points to the importance of understanding the dropout problem in the light of youth transition. As the dropout problem is also related to at-risk youth, this study would like to focus on the transition needs of at-risk youth in alternative education programs.

With a zero-dropout policy in Taiwan, schools are obliged to look for long-term absentees, help them return to school and complete compulsory education. For those who struggle to adjust to mainstream education, the government offers three types of alternative education programs: the Tzu-hui program, the transitional resource program, and the transitional collaborative program. These programs provide an alternative curriculum and counseling services, and some also offer residential services to dropouts as many of them are from dysfunctional families and are prone to gang influence. Although most programs were designed to be short-term services, youth from dysfunctional families tend to stay till they age out (at the end of Grade 9 or aged 15). As a result, the program staff is at the frontline to help them move on to another stage of life. Entering adulthood is not easy for most youth, let alone at-risk ones. These young people grow up in a weak support network without adequate resources. If the programs abruptly end when they leave, to whom do they turn for help? This motivates this study to look at how the programs support youth through the transition with the appropriate program design and services.

The study aims to (1) understand the common transition needs of youth leaving the alternative education programs in Taiwan from the perspectives of the program leaders; and (2) understand how the programs support the youth in transitioning by providing various services.

2. Literature: Youth in Transition and Building Resilience

Transition is a process different from change. According to Bridge's transition model (Bridges 1980), transition, unlike change, is more of what happens to an individual internally when they face changes. Thus, it can be a slow process. Transition is an important area of concern in social work, especially in special education, rehabilitation, career planning, and youth development.

Transition can be particularly challenging for at-risk youth because they have to deal with these very limited resources—both internal resources and external resources. In helping these youth in transition, it is necessary to help them expand their resource pool. This work is very similar to building resilience. In the following, we shall first look at the youth needs in transition; then the transition services and how they are related to building resilience.

2.1. Youth Needs in Transition

In transition, young people have to adjust to a new life stage and deal with tasks such as taking up new roles and responsibilities, learning new life skills, adapting to new environments, and building new social networks. While all youth in transition have needs in education and employment, at-risk youth may have special needs as they have to take up adult roles and start living on their own.

2.1.1. Education

Most countries offer free-of-charge education from 9 to 12 years. However, some students need additional support other than free education to keep them in school. Studies revealed that some students face many challenges such as feeling disorientation when moving to a large high school campus, facing higher expectations from teachers, adjusting to a more distant teacher–student relationship, having anxiety in building new social networks, and having lower learning motivation (Veasey 2011; Montgomery 2013). Dealing with difficulties arising from changing environments requires an effective transition process to maximize the likelihood of success in the new stage (Wilkinson and McDaniel 2020). Neild et al. (2008) suggested efforts to lower the dropout rate should focus on the critical high school transition year.

2.1.2. Employment

After compulsory education, some youth choose to start working instead of pursuing higher education. However, starting a career is not an easy path to choose. The unemployment rate for people aged 15 to 24 in Taiwan has been the highest among all age groups in the past decade. According to the [Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics \(2021\)](#), the high youth unemployment rate was caused by instability issues such as the frequent switching of jobs, which is still common for youth first entering the workforce. [Lee \(2011\)](#) also pointed out that at-risk youth who left education early had a hard time remaining stable in employment because academic qualifications considerably affected the career types and the number of opportunities available in the labor market. It resulted in more youth becoming NEET.

2.1.3. Taking Up Adult Roles

[Mendes et al. \(2014\)](#) suggested that entering adulthood is an accelerated process for at-risk youth. Growing up without adequate resources or a solid *supporting* network, these young people have to survive independently and adopt the role of an independent adult at an earlier age. Living as an adult means that a person has to manage personal finances, build social networks, master basic life skills, and most importantly, adjust to the adult role physiologically and psychologically ([Pai 2012](#)). *This identity-rebuilding process is far from easy for youth growing up in challenging environments.*

2.1.4. Accommodation: Living with Families or Independently

This issue is particularly important to youth who have been placed in residential facilities. The main reason for youth to enter residential programs is that their original families are not properly functioning. When they age out of care, most of them are left with two options: going back to their dysfunctional families or start living independently. Both can be hard options for two reasons. First, either way, *youth have to adjust to the “new” environment* after spending a certain period of time in out-of-home care. Second, those *going home* may have to face parent–child conflicts ([Pong et al. 2017](#)) and those *living independently* have to deal with life responsibilities prematurely ([Pi 2006](#)).

2.2. Transition Services to Build Resilience

From earlier social work perspectives, children growing up in unfavorable living conditions may suffer biologically and psychologically, which results in learning difficulties and problematic behaviors. Since the 1970s, researchers in education, social work, psychology, and other fields have found that children are capable of thriving and surviving in very challenging conditions because they were able to develop a capacity called resilience to help them adjust well to a new environment ([Grossman et al. 1992](#)). From then on, the research focus has been shifted to explore more on the protective factors than on the risky factors that influence a child’s growth and development.

[Grotberg \(1995, 1999\)](#) defined resilience as “a universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimize or overcome the damaging effects of adversity”, and resilience is acquired instead of being innate. Therefore, resilience is not measured by the number of protective or risky factors existing in a child’s life. Instead, it is something that can be developed and improved. A resilience-based approach is aimed at helping children develop their capacity by strengthening the protective factors and reducing the effect of risk factors. [Pai \(2012\)](#) suggested that resilience can be built through three approaches: (1) the psychological approach that focuses on developing personality traits (e.g., optimism, confidence) and improving biological conditions (e.g., intelligence, physical health); (2) the social approach that focuses on developing parental support, building positive school atmosphere, and having caring adults around; and (3) the human–environment interaction approach which is a combination of both (1) and (2).

The notion of resilience has changed for the development of children and youth services in the past decades. Many child and youth services adopted the resilience approach

and aimed to grow their resilience as a trait and equip them with skills to help them through adverse times of life. Studies have found positive outcomes when the resilience approach was used in youth projects (Hirsch et al. 2016; Sanders et al. 2015; Sulimani-Aidan 2015). Studies found that transition services improved young care leavers' quality of life and ability to function in society (Smart 2016; Van Breda 2017). In light of this, from the resilience perspective, it is necessary to understand the services for the youth leaving the residential programs (leavers) in alternative education programs. Through this understanding, a deeper insight can be gained into the current practices to suggest resilience-based service models for the leavers.

3. Method

As the aim of this study was to gain an understanding of youth needs in transition and how their needs were being addressed, a qualitative approach was adopted. While there may be youth aging out and facing transition in all types of alternative education programs, only the residential ones were selected to be the focus of this study because it was expected that these youth may have more diverse needs, and residential programs may take up a more important role in their life as the service time was very long. Currently, only 7 residential programs are running in Taiwan and 5 agreed to participate in this study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Please refer to Appendix A) with six program leaders (L1 to L6) from these 5 programs. One leader from each program was invited to take part in the interview except for one program in which there were two leaders being in charge of the education department and the residential department, respectively. The interviews were carried out from May to August 2021. Four interviews were completed face-to-face as planned, two were conducted through Google Meet during the lockdown in the COVID-19 pandemic. Each interview lasted for 90 to 120 min and all of them were recorded under the consent of each research participant. After data collection, the voice recordings were first turned into transcriptions and then analyzed thematically. The interviewees' responses were then coded and categorized as common themes emerged.

The coded transcripts were carefully checked against the original voice recordings and interview notes to ensure their credibility and authenticity. Interviewees were also offered opportunities to read the transcripts and revise them if needed to ensure confirmability. The research results are presented as follows.

4. Results

4.1. Need for Transition Services

In all programs, the interviewees reported that the majority of youth left the programs at the age of 15 (or upon completion of Grade 9), meaning that most of them aged out of the program. This was different from the program's original purpose, which was to offer short-term counseling and help dropouts move back to mainstream schools. Youth returning to mainstream education needed transition services, but youth moving to another stage of life after education required legal employment and independent living which are goals that require more support to reach. All interviewees recognized the urgent need for transition services for the youth to live stable lives after leaving the programs, which was not easy at all. One interviewee (L6) even reported the youth "going back to their original situation—joining gangs and engaging in underground economy activities such as abusive debt collection, gambling and fraud," and without continuous services to support them, "the previous efforts to help would be in vain."

4.2. Leaving Process

According to the interviewees, the leaving process could be divided into two stages, the leaving preparation and the after-leaving stage. The leaving preparation stage generally started 6 months before leaving, while the after-leaving stage mostly lasted for 6 to 12 months. All programs provided different transitional services to youth in both stages. Yet, they also mentioned that in reality, the service duration period was flexible depending

on the situation of each youth. Two interviewees (L4 and L6) reported that the leaving preparation, in a broad sense, actually started as early as from entry because youth spent at most 1–2 years in the program which was not long enough to equip them with the necessary skills and help them live a stable life afterward. Thus, the preparation must start earlier. Similarly, all interviewees said the after-leaving stage could be extended to a few years, and, knowing that the youth had limited resources, they would continue to support them when possible.

4.3. Transition Services

The transition services were designed to meet the individual needs of youth leaving the programs. While transition services were highly personalized, there were some common elements and practices. In this study, the elements that half of the interviewees described are regarded as common. They are categorized and described as follows.

4.3.1. Education

In the leaving preparation stage, the programs helped the youth raise their academic abilities to reach the benchmark for graduation to increase their chances of entering senior high schools by developing multiple talents, introducing different types of senior high school programs, especially the vocational ones, so that the youth could make informed decisions about further education. In the after-leaving stage, the programs continued offering academic support with volunteers. They built connections to the senior high school counseling teams and military instructors (i.e., a special team in the Taiwan education system responsible for student discipline in senior high schools) to form a support network for the youth.

However, it was difficult for youth who had been falling behind in schools for most of their life to motivate them to pursue their education goals again. As compulsory education ends, it is not a must for students to stay in school, and high school teachers are no longer obliged to track absentees and early school leavers. Three interviewees (L1, L4, and L6) described this difficult situation when trying to keep youth in education.

4.3.2. Employment

Youth opting out of education or having financial needs may choose to enter the workforce. In the leaving preparation stage, the programs helped youth start career planning by organizing workplace tours and career talks. They also offered basic vocation-training courses and made connections to various industries and companies to provide job shadowing experience to youth. In the after-leaving stages, the program staff regularly visited the youth's workplaces to check on adjustment progress and communicated with the youth's job managers and supervisors to create a friendly working environment. Despite the strong need for career services, three interviewees (L2, L4, and L6) reported the lack of suitable resources in the market. There were not enough friendly employers or companies that were willing to offer training to the youth. In addition, in helping the youth work, their age (usually 15 years old) was another problem as the legal age to work in Taiwan is 16. Child labor laws rather limit the chances the youth leaving programs can provide, as few employers would be willing to employ them.

4.3.3. Personal Development

As mentioned before, the transition is more about what happens to an individual internally instead of what happens to their surroundings. Helping youth deal with psychological issues is essential in having them ready to move on. In the leaving preparation stage, the programs helped youth overcome psychological obstacles and build positive values towards life through casework and group sessions. In the after-leaving stage, the program staff continued to offer counseling through regular visits to the youth's homes, schools, and workplaces. While the programs endeavor to offer continuous support, youth have voluntarily use such resources, especially after leaving the programs. However, five

interviewees (L1, L2, L4, L5, and L6) reported difficulties in following up when the leavers were not voluntary enough, and several leavers could not be reached. There was a lack of incentives or motivation to increase voluntary participation.

4.3.4. Family Relationship

Helping families has never been a major objective of alternative education programs. However, this has to become a part of the leaving services because a large proportion of youth still have to rely on family support, though limited, in growing up. In the leaving preparation stage, the programs helped improve the positive parent–child relationship and created opportunities for family interactions through family celebrations and trips. Parental education was also offered to improve parenting skills. In the after-leaving stage, the programs included regular family visits as a way to support the families and the youth. Yet, these efforts were far from enough to change family functioning significantly. Four interviewees (L2, L3, L4, and L5) mentioned that unfavorable parenting practices and frequent parent–child conflicts made it harder for youth to live stable lives or make sensible life decisions regarding education and employment.

4.3.5. Building Support Network

As most youth in the programs have grown up in an environment where there are few resources and support, an important part of the transition is to help them build a stronger support network as they leave. This process is continuous, and thus it is difficult to make a clear stage division. All interviewees reported that they worked on this by connecting youth to formal resources (e.g., government welfare) and informal resources (e.g., churches and local charities) and helped the youth access these resources on their own. When necessary, the programs made case referrals to other programs that could continue to help the youth after leaving.

Yet, the network building was not as successful as planned. Four interviewees (L1, L3, L5, and L6) experienced tension between the youth’s friendship networks and the ones around the youth. Many youth had previous connections with gang members in the community, and their bonding was strong. Interviewee L5 said, “It was very unlikely for them to stay away from the gangs who gave them a lot of psychological support for years.” With the gang’s influence, it became harder for the healthy social network to make a difference in the youth’ lives.

4.3.6. Independent Living

All interviewees reported that there were youth who had to live independently at age 15 after leaving the program due to various reasons and agreed that independent living was the best possible option for some youth. Helping youth with such needs is highly challenging. First, the youth at age 15 is not legally an independent person, and communicating with and obtaining consent from parents and/or legal guardians is difficult as most youth with this need are from seriously dysfunctional families. Moreover, relevant resources are extremely scarce. Despite the difficulties, the interviewees said that they had tried all possible ways to meet such needs. According to the interviewees, the following is what they attempted over the years.

- Sparing a room in the current residential building for the leavers;
- Setting up a new, supervised youth dormitory, especially for the leavers;
- Renting a place outside for the leavers and checking on them regularly;
- Helping youth to enroll in schools or join companies that provide accommodation;
- Referring eligible cases to government-run placement facilities.

5. Discussion

5.1. Why: Significance of Transition Services

Every person has transition needs at a certain point in their life. The difference is some own the resources to meet such needs and others do not. At-risk youth grow up

without adequate resources to support their development; so, it is a social responsibility to help them. Alternative programs have been provided for this purpose. Yet, such support stops at age 15 and no aftercare services can be guaranteed. According to the interviewees, leavers often returned to old lifestyles and suffered from poverty and gang influence. The interviewees' experience was consistent to the former studies which pointed out that youth with unplanned exits were having lower school rates and higher crime rates after leaving (McMillen and Tucker 1999), and transition planning was necessary in preventing poor outcomes including academic failures and disciplinary infractions (Wilkinson and McDaniel 2020). This constituted a social injustice to the youth as they were somehow forced to live in a risky environment. To society as a whole, seeing youth falling back into harmful lifestyles means that large resources were wasted on alternative programs without positive outcomes. Therefore, transition services are essential in supporting youth in their strife for success despite the challenging environment, to lengthen and strengthen the current programs' positive impact and to reduce social costs in the long run.

5.2. *Who: Redefining Role of Service Providers*

All interviewees described that most youth aged out of the programs and they had strong needs in transition. On the other hand, though the programs played an important role in helping these youth in transition, the interviewees described two major obstacles: the lack of relevant policies and stable resources. The reason behind this is an inappropriate role define for the program. These programs were only regarded as short-term and their efforts in guiding youth in transition were not recognized. Just as Hu (2013) suggested, an alternative education program should be designed with a more comprehensive perspective and its roles can be dynamic and diverse. It is reasonable to suggest that the alternative education programs should be given more weight in the education system, for example, being established as a proper institution with the same legal status, funding and resources comparable to a regular school.

5.3. *How: Future Development of Transition Services*

Based on the interviewees' suggestions, recommendations were made in this study regarding the future development of transition services for youth in residential programs. Firstly, there must be firm youth policies regarding youth aged 15–18, stating that all the education and career options available and listing resources that can be accessed. Apart from the transition service, four out of six interviewees suggested offering alternative programs to accommodate youth aged 16 plus so that they can be more well prepared before they start living as adults. The 16+ programs may take many forms, such as the following:

- Extension of the current programs serving youth up to age 18;
- A youth village that provides residential services and counseling;
- A training center that provides day-time vocational training and residential services.

While there is no established practice for such 16+ programs in Taiwan, it may be valuable to look at the model of "Boys Town" in the US (Larzelere et al. 2004) and the "Schools for Social Development" in Hong Kong (Wang et al. 2014) as a reference. Both programs provide education, counseling and residential services, and also accept at-risk youth up to age 18.

6. Conclusions

In the study, we interviewed the program leaders. The interviewees confirmed that there was a general and genuine need for comprehensive leaving services to meet the transition needs of the youth leaving the programs. While the programs set out to solve dropout problems, their efforts have been in vain with the needs of the program leavers ignored. Interviewees observed the leavers falling back into harmful lifestyles and disadvantageous environments. However, all programs have made extra efforts to involve a wide range of community resources to support them as much as possible.

As it was not a designated responsibility to provide services for the leavers and thus there are no official standard operation procedures, such services have become highly individualized and localized. Yet, it is reasonable to suggest that the service design and objectives bear a clear resemblance to the resilience approach. First, the leaving services were neither correctional nor remedial in nature. Second, most services described in this study were aiming to increase and strengthen protective factors in the youth's lives. At an individual level, the programs helped the youth in the programs build positive attitudes and equipped them with the life skills necessary to assist them through adverse times. At a social level, most endeavors were made to find resource providers in schools, workplaces, and communities, and build a stronger network to support youth in the future. While only one interviewee mentioned building "resilience" in their services, it is evident that other programs have shared a similar idea. This also corresponds to what [Pai \(2012\)](#) described as "human-environment interaction approach" to build resilience.

Transition services may be necessary to help youth succeed but providing such services is never easy. All interviewees described obstacles and difficulties including involuntary participants with whom contact was suddenly lost, dysfunctional families whose impact offset the positive development in youth, and gang influence that drew the youth into threatening and harming society. In light of this, the following suggestions have been made to inform and enhance the future policy and program design:

- Encourage further studies in using the resilience approach to develop transition services.
- Create opportunities for researchers, program leaders, policy-makers, and professionals from all relevant fields to exchange ideas and experiences to build a service model for helping at-risk youth in transition.
- Make firm and clear policies to define the role, functions and responsibilities of alternative programs.
- Provide stable government funding for the programs.

7. Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

It must be noted that the above discussion is preliminary and brief, and needs a firmer consensus among the program leaders to develop better programs in the future. In addition, this study included the perspectives of the program leaders only. It is suggested that future research may take a closer look at the transition needs from the perspectives of young people. As each program is localized and highly different, it is also suggested to study each program individually using participatory observation methods or field research to understand how and why the services were developed into the present state.

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Appendix A. Interview Outline

1. Personal information about the interviewee (name, title, years of experience, ...);
2. Program information (organization rationale, types of service offered, ...);
3. Service users (gender, age, reasons for enrolment, ...);
4. Transition services prior to leaving;

- Reasons of leaving;
 - Duration of services (starting and ending time);
 - Methods and tools for needs assessment;
 - Content of services;
 - Ways to fund the program;
 - Obstacles and coping strategies in providing these services.
5. Transition services after leaving;
 - Eligibility;
 - Duration of services (starting and ending time);
 - Criteria for case closure;
 - Ways to fund the program;
 - Obstacles and coping strategies in providing these services.
 6. Expectations and suggestions for service development.

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