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In anticipation: educational (im)mobilities, structural disadvantage, and young people's futures

Abstract

This paper draws upon qualitative fieldwork undertaken in Hong Kong, over the space of a decade, to reflect upon how educational (im)mobilities are folded into the structures that would seem to determine young people's anticipation of futures. It draws upon two large research projects in particular - one which involved children's international migration in search of education; the other which examined examples of young people 'stuck' in Hong Kong and prescribed, by virtue of their 'failure' in the school system, particular circumscribed life chances. The paper attempts to change the spatial lens through which international education is viewed – away from the focus on 'exodus' (Abelmann et al., 2015) towards a sense of 'internalisation' (and the impact that international education is having 'at home'). The paper speaks to wider debates concerning educational migrations (the role of students as migrants) and the formative role that education (both domestic and international) plays in contemporary societies.

Introduction

'In these everyday places of home, school, and neighbourhood, concerns about the future are being played out in extraordinary ways' (Katz, 2017, p. 3).

‘For outcomes rarely unfold as anticipated once they engage equally wilful others and the play of scarcely controllable external factors.’ (Ley, 2003, p. 428).

International education is having a profound, structuring effect on societies throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The degree to which, and way in which, young people engage with international education determines, to a largely unacknowledged extent, their subsequent occupational success and life chances. Failure to engage with this process is not really an option – as has been argued elsewhere (Abelmann et al., 2015; Waters and Leung, 2017), international education has become ‘domesticated’ – in other words:

‘internationalisation increasingly represents the *internalisation* of foreign education – what we have called ‘domestication’. Through the process of domestication, we assert, international credentials are increasingly a central and normalised feature of local educational markets, with implications for how societies are governed and reproduced.’ (Waters and Leung, 2017, p. 233, emphasis added; see also Kang and Abelmann, 2011 and Ko et al., 2017)

International education is varied in its manifestations, and can include overseas study (individuals studying for a qualification outside their home country), types of ‘distance learning’ (usually on-line), branch campuses (overseas educational institutions opening a ‘branch’ of their school or university in another country), franchised programmes (overseas educational packages sold to a domestic provider) or foreign owned degree programmes

using a mix of ‘flying faculty’ (where international staff are flown in to teach on the programme) and locally contracted staff. It is a complex and ever-shifting landscape, intersecting with issues around migration, citizenship, class formation and identity (Healey, 2008; Marginson, 2008; Robertson, 2011; Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014).

In this paper, I want to argue that international education has, to a certain extent, displaced other forms of ‘elite’ education in Hong Kong to become a key differentiator of social, economic and personal success in the territory. Kenway et al. (2017) carried out ethnographic work in one (male) Hong Kong school within their broader sample of elite schools around the world. They noted the school’s concern about ‘losing’ good pupils to the UK and the continued ‘draw of the West’ (p. 123):

‘One of the factors propelling these students out of Hong Kong is the extraordinarily competitive local education scene, particularly with regard to entry to Hong Kong universities. We were told their parents think they must move as this will provide their sons with a ‘better chance of getting in to a better university’ in the UK. Further, some parents held the view that, at a prestigious Western school, their child would pick up new and valuable skills, including critical thinking and intercultural dexterity, that would contribute to the twenty-first century skill-set widely touted as necessary for the future, and an increasingly hyper-competitive, top-end labour market. And so it is that students such as these leave one elite school in their home country and travel to attend another elite school internationally – if, often, only for their final two or three years of schooling.’ (Kenway et al., 2017; pp. 170 – 171).

This is just one example of the significance of international education for the ‘super-elites’. What I want to stress, however, is that this concern with international education moves right through and permeates the whole education system, from the ‘top’ to the ‘bottom’. It is no longer an ‘alternative’ route for elites to follow but an integral part of the domestic education set up. Whilst for some young people international education continues to represent the strategic accumulation of capital (Ong, 1999), for others it is far more accidental or incidental (Forsberg, 2017a).

Furthermore, I want to stress that international education is *itself* highly differentiated: the paper draws a distinction between *overseas* education and *transnational* education (TNE); the former involves a young people moving or migrating abroad to access an international educational experience, whilst the later involves accessing ‘foreign’ academic credentials *in situ*. Two brief examples highlight the main differences in these two educational ‘routes’:

A fictionalised example of an overseas, international or immigrant student

Worried about the heightened pressure in the Hong Kong education system (and the competitive nature of university admissions), Lena and her parents applied to immigrate to Canada for the last three years of Lena’s schooling. On finishing high school, Lena is admitted onto a degree programme at a reputable Canadian university near to where her family are temporarily residing. Lena spends the next few years studying for a bachelor’s degree, before deciding to return to Hong Kong to find work. As it happens, one of her friends, who also studied at the same high school in Canada as Lena, had returned to Hong Kong a year earlier, found work in an international banking firm, as was able to recommend Lena to her boss (who was

also, coincidentally, Canadian educated). Lena was invited to an interview and offered a job. Lena and her family have now all relocated back to Hong Kong and Lena is pursuing a successful career in international finance.

A fictionalised example of a transnational student in Hong Kong

Georgina has always struggled through school, despite working reasonably hard. She knows that she must get a degree but also knows that obtaining a place at a domestic university is extremely unlikely. She has some friends who have been admitted on to transnational education programmes without too much difficulty, so she decides, after 'failing' her secondary school exams, to study for a Diploma at a continuing education college in Hong Kong, before pursuing an Associate Degree [a pre-degree or foundational qualification]. She has heard that with an AD, it is possible to get a place on a British university course (TNE) in Hong Kong and to acquire a degree qualification in as little as a year and a half. She was a little disappointed at the content of the programme (she had already covered a lot of the material at AD level, and with the same teachers!), but nevertheless passed and graduated as quickly as she had been led to believe. She has since been applying for graduate-level jobs but so far has failed to get an interview (she fears her TNE qualification might not be recognised by employers). She is waitressing part-time in order to sustain herself.

Both 'types' of education, given in these two examples, might result in the same 'institutionalised cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) – a young person may engage in one or other form of international education and receive, at the end of it, an identical degree certificate from the same overseas university. However, in the labour market these two routes

result in profoundly different opportunities and outcomes for young people – those that have travelled overseas and studied (and resided for a while) abroad will find themselves *highly valued* in Hong Kong, compared to students who have undertaken transnational degrees ‘at home’ (where issues pertaining to absent value and pathologized failure are rife – see Waters and Leung, 2017; Leung and Waters, 2013). The manifold ways in which the valuation of cultural capital can be refracted by contextual, social factors are increasingly apparent (Holloway et al., 2012; Forsberg, 2017a, 2017b). I return to the issue of value (and the oppositional notion of waste), below.

A key difference between these two variants of international education (*inter alia*) is *mobility*. One type of programme contains what Murphy-Lejeune (2003) has called ‘mobility capital’. Mobility capital is difficult to define and almost impossible to disentangle from capital in its other guises (notably, social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital, after Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). However, what it indicates is some inherent value to ‘being mobile’, above the value that is accrued from an international education in other ways (Brooks and Waters, 2011; cf. Forsberg, 2017a). It may be possible, of course, to describe the value attached to an international education purely in terms of the cultural, social or symbolic capital it imparts. However, it is clear that overseas students (those who travel abroad for study) acquire some *additional value* from their mobility (and from the *length* of their sojourn) (Prazeres, 2017; Ong, 1999), compared to those who acquire an international education ‘at home’. Furthermore, however, transnational (i.e. stationary) students also appear to be perceived as ‘lacking’ due to their absent mobility. Thus, mobility is not just of benefit to overseas students but a *lack of mobility* distinctly and actively *disadvantages* TNE students. This quotation taken from one graduate interview indicates one aspect of this ‘disadvantage’:

‘One day I went to Admiralty [area in Hong Kong] to meet a client...I introduced myself and this guy said to me: ‘your English should be better [because] you have come back from the UK’...So I needed to explain [that I did my British degree in Hong Kong]. But sometimes I ask myself, do I really need to explain myself?...However, I do not want people to feel that I am intentionally misleading people. I am honest and I did not go to the UK. So even now, I am still thinking of how I should deal with this kind of situation.... I remember when I had my job interview. In the interview, there were also other applicants from HKU [University of Hong Kong], CUHK [Chinese University of Hong Kong)]. We had a group interview. I would say I graduated from X [UK] university...I think it is a matter of how I identify myself. I don’t want to...mention [it] but I also don’t want to be misunderstood that I claimed I had been studying in the UK, but kept quiet about it’ (Research interview transcript: David Kwok, graduated with a UK university degree in 2009, Hong Kong).

What we see, here, is the double burden faced by TNE graduates in Hong Kong – on the one hand, they lack the advantages gained through overseas travel for study; on the other, they are met with suspicion and doubt precisely because they have an ‘international’ qualification without the attendant cultural capital attached to time spent residing abroad (in this case, the embodied cultural capital associated with attending an English-speaking higher education institution in the UK). Having an international qualification in this particular context is therefore *disadvantageous*. It might also be possible to view some TNE qualifications as

representing the opposite of value, or as Katz (2017) describes, mobilized in the production of *waste*.

This paper describes the role played by different forms of ‘international education’ in the context of wider educational structures and processes in contemporary Hong Kong. The bigger picture is that of extreme educational pressures and expectations in East Asia more broadly (returned to below). The paper aims to describe and explain how international credentials operate *within* existing educational circuits (Ball et al., 1995) (and not apart from, or alongside them as some sort of ‘alternative’ stream). As Kang and Abelmann (2011) wrote with respect to study abroad in South Korea, the domestication of these practices (and, conterminously, their increasing normalisation) has become a marked feature of international education over the past decade. In Cheng’s (2016) study of private degree students in Singapore, the fact that many of the programmes taught in these colleges were transnational in nature was almost incidental (again, underlining the point that TNE has become normalised in parts of Asia). In this paper, my aim is to unpack some of these complexities, to understand how they relate to structural disadvantages conferred on working class young people by the domestic education system as a whole.

A note on research methods

This paper draws primarily on the findings from two large research projects and one smaller project undertaken between 1998 and 2010, with an additional small project being undertaken presently (2017 – 2018). The arguments and observations made in this paper are thus inevitably an amalgam of this work, drawn together to create a bigger picture of the role that international education is playing in stratifying Hong Kong society along primarily class

lines. The projects have all been qualitative in nature, involving mainly one-on-one interviews (totalling ~ 200) and a small number of focus groups when deemed appropriate. Most of the interviews have been with children and young people – students and graduates attending high school or university; some have been with parents, school headteachers and teachers, university administrative and lecturing staff, employers and government representatives. Co-investigators, research assistants and sponsors in these projects are mentioned in the acknowledgements to this paper. Of the two large projects, one looked specifically at outward student mobility from Hong Kong to Canada for education (and back again for work), and the other explored the experiences of transnational students undertaking British degree programmes *in situ* (in Hong Kong). Taken together, these projects allow some meaningful insights around different ‘types’ of international education (including the differential value attached to these, the role and meaning of mobility in these, the student experience, and outcomes for students/graduates).

The Educational Context

‘College entrance exams [*gao kao*] are dreaded by the entire society, since they are imagined to mark the difference between a life worth living and a life not worth living’ (Bregnbæk, 2016, p. 141).

Space precludes a detailed discussion the meanings attached to education in the wider East Asian region. However, it is a salient backdrop to the arguments that unfold in relation to our data, below, so I will spend a few moments attending to some of the key aspects here. Many scholars (particularly anthropologists) have developed arguments around education, class and aspiration in (Greater) China (Stafford, 1995; Fong, 2011; Kipnis, 2011; Bregnbæk, 2016;

Woronov, 2016). Most stress the extreme levels of pressure felt by students, inflected through familial structures, to succeed in the school (and later, university) system. Whilst Woronov (2016) deals primarily with those who have ‘failed’ in the system, Bregnbæk (2016), in her book *Fragile Elite*, focuses on the ‘successful’ students – those who have gained entry to China’s top universities – and the high rates of suicides reported amongst this population. This feels like a perversion, somehow: why are the ‘winners’ in the school system killing themselves? The pressure is sometimes inescapable, she concludes. Students work so hard to get there (to university) that when they achieve it they feel totally ‘lost’ and lacking in purpose. Thus, it is worth bearing in mind that ‘failure’ is in the eye of the beholder – it is relative and yet it is personal. For some students, however, the pressure *is escapable* to an extent; those that have the resources to continue studying overseas (particularly in North America) where education is seen (‘fortuitously’) as both ‘easier’ and ‘better’. This represents the position of most of our overseas students, discussed below. They go overseas both to ‘escape’ a highly pressured Asian education system and to attain more valuable cultural capital in the process.

At this point, some more detail on the types of educational pathways young people in Hong Kong were following (at the time that most of our research was undertaken, just prior to the introduction of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education in 2009) is required. The route idealised by most of the population involved success in two sets of high school examinations (taken at around the ages of 16 and 18) and entry into a domestic university (one of eight in the territory). However, access to first-degree places in Hong Kong has been - and still is - notoriously difficult. For example, in 2015 in Hong Kong, there were only 14,600 first degree full-time places available for 58, 652 applicants (Ng, 2017). This ratio has remained fairly constant for many years. Households with the resources necessary (financial

and cultural as well as social capital) were able to leave the domestic system and continue schooling overseas. As noted in Waters (2008), in the late 1990s it was possible to observe a trend in middle-class and more wealthy families migrating to Canada, when the eldest child was around 14 years old, just prior to sitting the HKCEE (Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination) (with a bearing on subsequent university entrance). Young migrants were then able to complete the last few years of schooling in Canada before entering university there. Similar patterns have been observed for migrants to Australia, New Zealand and the United States of America (Ong, 1999; Lewis, 2005; Collins, 2006; Arkoudis and Tran, 2007). Perhaps most notably, however, pertaining to the arguments made in this paper, many of these students subsequently returned, as graduates, to Hong Kong and secured jobs in desirable and well-paid professions (Waters 2006, Waters 2008; cf. Findlay et al., 2017). Any history of ‘academic failure’ had been decisively erased.

For those young people *lacking* the resources needed to travel overseas, however, the story was often rather different. When, around the year 2000, the government sought to expand higher education in the territory, it did so not by increasing the number of university places available within its domestic universities, but by opening community colleges and introducing a new qualification – the Associate Degree (AD) – targeted at those students who had ‘failed’ to get into a domestic university by the desired route. The so-called ‘articulation rate’ of the new Associate Degree (that is, the number of individuals with this qualification able to enter a domestic university on a full-degree course) has been dismally low (Wan, 2011), leaving some young people disappointed and dejected. The AD is not an ‘alternative’ path into domestic universities for the vast majority of young people. However, the AD *has* been useful for articulating unproblematically onto transnational degree programmes (TNE), offered by overseas provider institutions, at undergraduate level (also known as top-up

programmes). The majority (over 70%) of these programmes in Hong Kong are offered by UK-based universities. They tend to be in a limited range of subjects (most commonly, business- and management-related courses, with few humanities-type options available). Figures for 2015 include 587 higher education courses run by 36 different UK higher education institutions (HEIs) in Hong Kong; 80% of TNE in Hong Kong (offered in conjunction with a local HEI) is British; Australia is next biggest provider (12%), then USA (4%) (Hong Kong Education Bureau, Dec. 2015).

The tertiary education system in Hong Kong, therefore, is at least three-tiered, and includes ‘successful’ young people attending domestic universities, wealthy and well-resourced young people (some ‘successful’, most less-so) attending overseas universities, and less successful (also known as ‘failing’) young people taking sub-degree qualifications (including the AD but also the Diploma and Higher Diploma), hoping to transition into domestic universities but in fact finding that their only option is to take one of many TNE ‘top-up’¹ degrees on offer within the territory. What is particularly interesting is the central role that international education (qualifications and institutions) plays in this structural, hierarchical means of differentiation. In Hong Kong, at least (and probably elsewhere in parts of Asia), international education has become well and truly domesticated (Waters and Leung, 2017). It plays a fundamental role in the wider process of institutionalising values (Illich, 1971). As Illich (1971) has written: ‘The institutionalized values school instils are quantified ones. School initiates young people into a world where everything can be measured, including their imaginations’ (p. 40). The imaginations of young people – how they imagine their futures – are fundamentally shaped by their interactions with the education system from an early age

¹ The term ‘top-up’ refers to undergraduate qualifications and the fact that they can (in principle) be used to ‘top-up’ an Associate Degree or Higher Diploma qualification to ‘full’ degree level.

and a coterminous exposure to the possibilities of ‘overseas’ study (Findlay et al., 2012). International education is implicated in the process of ‘value making’ in contemporary Hong Kong. However, the complexities of international education (the means by which it can be, and is, *differentiated* – see Waters, 2012) require further exposition.

Education and a value- and waste-producing system in Hong Kong

Cheng (2016), drawing on Anagnost’s (2004) work, has written on the ‘corporeal politics of value’ in the context of Singapore’s education market. His study explored how private degree students (viewed, sometimes, as failures) negotiated the ‘value’ of their qualifications compared to those attending a domestic university. Interestingly, private degree students were able to resist and push back against dominant discourses of value and failure:

‘Private degree students.... fashion themselves according to a different circulation of value meanings. This separate circuit of value practices and meanings simultaneously exist alongside and circumvent the dominant subject of value as embodied within the ‘higher quality’ public university student.’ (Cheng, 2016, p. 293).

Conversely, in our study of TNE students in Hong Kong, we found that young people were consumed by dominant narratives of higher quality, and lesser quality, humans (Anagnost, 2004). Unlike Cheng’s research participants, who he described as actively subversive, the participants in our study were less politically engaged and less able, therefore, to reclaim the value of their experiences in any meaningful way (with a few, notable, examples).

Our findings aligned more with Woronov's (2016) discussion of educational value in contemporary China, which is harsh and unforgiving – the students in her research were 'failures': 'because common sense logic in China tends to equate exam results with an individual's moral and personal value' (p. 2): 'vocational students' were seen as 'stupid and lazy and deserve their limited occupational futures' (Woronov, 2016, p. 6). Vocational students were aligned, socially, with the TNE students we interacted with in Hong Kong, despite the fact that our TNE students were pursuing *degree* (not vocational) qualifications. These studies speak to the ways in which a university education has become an 'object of desire in itself' (Kipnis, 2011); how it involves a system of prestige in relation to 'non-educated' others (Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery, 2004; Kipnis, 2011; Woronov, 2016). This relational system of prestige (and value) helps to embed international education *within* domestic education, placing those without a degree at the bottom of the pile, followed by TNE graduates, with domestic degree graduates and overseas degree graduates generally located at the top, depending on the employment sector doing the 'valuing'². The fact that most people fail to question this hierarchical system of differentiation can be explained, partly, by various disciplinary techniques deployed by the state involving circulating discourses around education, meritocratic achievement and value (Cheng, 2015; Waters and Leung, 2017).

Many of the conditions described by Woronov's (2016) account of vocational (VE) students in China's education system were paralleled in our TNE study. In China, complaints were

² In the private sector, overseas graduates are invariably placed above domestic graduates in terms of 'value' (even though most young people aspire to a place on a domestic university course first and foremost). As I explain in Waters (2006 and 2008), this is largely because of the embodied cultural capital acquired by students during their time living 'overseas'. Public sector institutions (such as the civil service, still tend to value graduates of domestic institutions more highly, reflecting a recognition of the competitive difficulties of getting into a domestic university and partly in an attempt to maintain the value of domestic qualifications over and above overseas ones).

filed by parents of ‘successful’ children when VE students were taught in the same buildings as the ‘academic streams’ – many VE courses were therefore taught in alternative sites, such as at waste treatment centres or even boarded up buildings. VE students were often taught by a mix of permanent and contracted staff. Similarly, Waters and Leung (2013), describe how TNE students had assumed they would receive tuition ‘on campus’ but in fact found that their classes were held somewhere away from the university site, for example in office buildings down town. Like VE students, TNE students were also taught by a mix of permanent staff and staff on short-term contracts, supplied by agencies.

Vanessa Fong’s (2011) work on Chinese overseas students extended Ong’s (1999) arguments by focussing not only on economic elites but on more ‘ordinary’ families who nevertheless desired an overseas education for their children. Mobility, it would seem, remains the ‘principle and modus operandi for value production’ in education (Chu, 2010, p. 10). Important here was the discourse of *return* amongst Fong’s research participants – their intention was not to leave China forever, but to return to China as ‘citizens of the world’. Like Woronov (2016), I think it is essential to expose the structures that lead to educational (dis)advantage and social inequalities, rather than pathologizing failure. Few students who find themselves at the bottom of the educational hierarchy are ‘stupid and lazy’ – neither do they ‘deserve’ their limited occupational futures. In the context of Hong Kong, I want to highlight the role that international mobility/immobility plays in these structures. It is important to eschew viewing overseas educated young people as somehow separate from (and not in any way responsible for) domestic educational hierarchies. They do not exist in a bubble (despite their tendency to cultivate an exclusive ‘club’ status, see Waters, 2007), just as elite schools operate *within* non-elite, state systems of education (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2016).

Whilst value is always relative, it is worth thinking about the opposite of value and the (educational) conditions that might produce this. Cindi Katz's ongoing project on 'childhood as spectacle' (2008, 2011, 2017) articulates the ways in which children (specifically childhood) might be seen as 'accumulation strategy, as commodity, as ornament and as waste' (2017, p. 3). Katz uses the metaphor of 'waste' to highlight the contrasting experiences of middle-class children and 'the rest' in the contemporary United States. She highlights the anxieties that ordinary families are feeling around social, economic and political concerns that are channelled into 'various 'management' strategies' (2017, p. 4). These management strategies signal an attempt to reassert control over one's life – and children's education is one sphere where such management just seems possible. They include attempts to undertake constant monitoring and surveillance of children's attainment in school, engaging in extra-curricular activities as a form of enrichment (caricatured in Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*; see also Holdsworth and Brewis, 2014, on student volunteering) and language immersion programmes: 'These kinds of practices smuggle with them an almost magical 'investment' in the child as oneself, one's future, and *the* future' (Katz, 2017, p. 4).

'The social reproductive practices associated with the concerted cultivation of children are labors of love, but they are also a means of cultivating parents in a Foucauldian sense. These cultural forms and practices of class formation make a space of conformity and competition, a realm of social life that parents often feel compelled to participate in so their children 'stay in the game'. All the more so when the game is unclear' (Katz, 2017, p. 5).

Household educational strategies in Hong Kong are woven in to wider discourses around (de)value and ‘failure’, wherein failure is pathologized. Parents will invest heavily in the child, so the child therefore shoulders the ultimate blame when they fail to achieve as expected. Furthermore, in our research we found that the vast majority of young people ‘own’ that blame – they internalise their failure (few young people that we interviewed made recourse to wider structures and injustices – see Waters and Leung (2017) for a discussion of this). In what follows, I explore some of the issues attendant with focusing overly on educational strategizing and decision-making as conclusive acts (Zhang, 2017).

Strategies, decision-making and aspiration around education

As noted by Yang (2018) in a recent, insightful paper, a great deal of literature around education and households has centred on concepts of strategizing (educational strategies/ household management strategies) and decision-making. I would like to make two points in relation to this. First, it is notable that educational strategies (and mobility strategies more broadly) are commonly enacted but are often thwarted in some way or another. David Ley (2003) has written about this in relation to Canada’s Business Immigration Program; whilst the Canadian state had certain ideas around the function and outcomes of its immigration regime, migrants themselves had other plans and objectives. He writes:

‘[the state presupposed] unidirectional movement [of migrant households] from an origin to a destination, with subsequent incorporation of this population within the paradigm of national citizenship. But many of those who qualified through the

program did not share this assumption, holding instead to the transnational model of circular movement and flexible citizenship' (p. 438).

Consequently, both the state and the immigrants were 'disappointed' with the results – the state failed to secure the permanent citizens it desired whilst the migrants failed to launch successful business ventures in Canada. Elsewhere, I have drawn attention to the oft-overstated 'agency' given to individuals concerning their educational and migratory decision-making (Waters, 2010). Lo et al.'s (2015) collection of essays emphasises the unexpected eventualities befalling South Korea's 'study abroad' families, for whom the aspiration of an overseas education rarely lived up to the reality (failure, articulated in different ways, was often a prevailing narrative in early study abroad accounts). Second, is the fact that such strategizing may not be present *at all* but may be part of a far more haphazard and less 'planned' *process* (Carlson, 2013; Yang, 2018). The 'act' of decision-making is reflected upon by Zhang (2017) in relation to migration, and McCormack and Schwanen (2011) more generally:

'Despite the ease with which decisive moments can be identified and accounted for retrospectively, the decision remains a spectral event, difficult to pin down or isolate as a bounded moment. Equally, while often assumed to be taken by an individual, the decision is not so easily located within the limits of a self-contained, sovereign subject, emerging instead as a distributed, relational process...In this context it becomes all the more important to address the question of where, when, and how decision-making takes place and the practices and techniques that aim to facilitate this process towards different political and ethical ends. Equally importantly, it becomes

imperative to examine how practices of decision-making are implicated in space-times—that is, to examine how decision-making takes place in particular spatio-temporal contexts but also how, in doing so, it generates spaces and times with variable reaches and intensities.’ (McCormack and Schwanen, 2011, p. 2801 - 2802)

Thus, it is possible to see, in our data, how international education can be both strategically planned and decided upon (in the case of overseas students) and unintentionally adopted (for the majority of TNE students). Many overseas students had planned their mobility over several years. For TNE students, the dominant narrative was ‘I had no choice’ and ‘this was my only option’. TNE programmes offered a last resort and the only way for students to acquire a degree qualification. That said, *a decision* nevertheless is made (however constrained it might be). What is often interesting is not the decision itself (I disagree, in part, with McCormack and Schwanen and would instead assert that a decision is, by necessity, represented by a confined moment in time and space) but the ramifications and consequences of that decision. How one comes to justify a decision can often involve a sense of cognitive dissonance, post hoc rationalisation, or even changing one’s mind. The possibility of changing one’s mind, however, rests on the existence of a decisive (and time and space limited) act. So, all the students we have researched have, in some way or another, made a decision about their futures, and have based this decision on *anticipation*; whilst students might fail (or, indeed, succeed) to acquire cultural capital, they nevertheless anticipate some sort of ‘return’ from their education, however small. In what remains of the paper, I discuss the contrasting experiences of ‘overseas movers’ and ‘transnational stayers’, in order to draw out how different and differentiated experiences of international education (and strategizing within a highly structured, structuring system) co-exist within the same social realm.

Overseas movers

A convenient myth has built up around international education, that prescribes that only ‘elites’ travel overseas for education, whilst less successful individuals stay at home. More and more research in this area has shown that this is clearly not the case; usually, it is young people who have failed (or *anticipate* failure) within the domestic education system that seek schooling or university abroad. Here, such anticipation is described by our research participants who subsequently went to Canada to pursue the last few years of high school and on to university:

I don't think that I would have had a chance to go to university there [Hong Kong] because it's really competitive. High school here [Canada] is pretty relaxing. You don't really do much and you pass everything. (Research interview transcript: Michael is a fourth-year Canadian university student seeking a career in accountancy).

They [Brenda's parents] were afraid that I can't get into university...In Hong Kong you have to pass all those examinations and you have to get a high mark in order to get into university and that's really difficult...My parents believed that I'm not smart enough to get into university in Hong Kong. Actually...they still believe that the university outside of Hong Kong is much better...It's a win-win situation. (Research interview transcript: Brenda graduated from a university located in Vancouver and works in Hong Kong).

Brenda's description of a 'win-win' situation exemplifies the way in which overseas education sits within domestic education and labour markets in Hong Kong. The symbolic capital attached to an overseas university degree is deemed 'better' (in other words, more valuable) than the domestic equivalent within the private employment sector. And our research findings bore this out; graduates returning to Hong Kong with an international degree from a university in Canada, the United States or the United Kingdom were still highly 'prized' within high paying private sector jobs. Graduates repeated stories about the inferiority of 'local' graduates (particularly when it came to conversational English and a general confident outlook). They perpetuated discourses around their own superiority. Thus, mobility enabled them to gain a distinct and tangible advantage over their 'immobile' peers. Mobility is key; as the example of TNE, describe below, demonstrates, the 'international' nature of the degree programme has no bearing on the 'value' attached to that programme and, in some cases, can result in a graduate's qualifications becoming devalued.

Transnational 'stayers'

TNE students in Hong Kong undertook UK international qualifications not out of preference for a British degree but because they felt they had no choice. Without these qualifications, they told us, they would be ineligible to apply for graduate-level jobs and so would be destined to undertake degrading and unsatisfying menial work for the rest of their life. Virtually none of our interviewees mentioned the 'attraction' of attaining an international qualification. There was absolutely no comparison drawn with the acquisition of the same qualifications abroad. One of the most surprising aspects of our findings on UK transnational education in Hong Kong was the blatant failure in the portability of the value of a UK degree (in this particular context) (Leung and Waters, 2013). Students who acquire an international

degree *in situ*, through TNE, are not afforded the same ‘cultural capital’ as those who travel overseas for international education; despite the fact that identical degree certificates may be awarded. This leads to a simplistic and depressing but accurate conclusion: those young people who can afford overseas study (those already rich in capital) are rewarded for their privilege by more, valuable capital; whereas those lacking in capital resources having to ‘make do’ with a transnational international education find that their disadvantage is perpetuated.

Yang (2018) talks about a ‘community of complicity’ (p.8) that has emerged within the particular context of international education that he was studying – Indian medical students in China. He describes the various ways in which these Indian students’ experiences are marred by ‘failure’ and inferiority (such as an inability to study for these competitive qualifications ‘at home’, the inability to pay for more expensive private education ‘at home’ and a substandard learning experience in China). And yet, the different parties involved in delivering and receiving this ‘international education’ remain unified, complicit and silent about these inadequacies. Whilst it might be possible to read a similar degree of complicity amongst TNE students and the wider relations that make TNE ‘happen’, the sense of community that Yang describes was apparently lacking in the Hong Kong case. Rather, interested parties were disjointed and separate; students were united only in their dissatisfaction with their situation but this unity did not stretch to the concept of *community*. In Yang’s (2018) research, parents were described as ‘content enough’ to know that their children were acquiring some sort of education qualification: in our sample of TNE students in Hong Kong, parents remained deeply dissatisfied with the situation, as the following quotation from one of our interviewees attests:

‘Somebody aged fifty plus, like our parents, they do not recognise these are degrees. They would only think local universities are real ... Even now, my parents do not think that I have completed a degree course... In their eyes it’s not a degree... My parents thought I lied to them about studying a degree.’ (Research interview transcript: Monica Shaw, successfully completed a one-year British degree course in 2008).

Yang’s (2018) point about the contextual complexities of decision-making around international education, however, is well made (see also Forsberg, 2017b), and borne out by our findings on TNE in Hong Kong.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have seen the diversity of ‘international education’ as it manifests within one domestic educational setting (Hong Kong). International education is a complex and multi-faceted entity. But it has also effectively entered into domestic systems almost surreptitiously – both government and young people are complicit in the expansion and embedding of international and TNE qualifications. International qualifications have become *normalised* within the domestic education and labour markets. Consequently, the explicit role that international education plays in the hierarchisation and stratification of young people by class (undermining any sense of educational meritocracy) is habitually hidden. In this paper, I have explored this by juxtaposing two sets of ‘international students’ – one group who moved overseas for education and one who undertook a transnational degree programme ‘at home’, to examine in detail the reality of ‘mobility capital’ and how it seems to confer

unmitigated advantages on young people privileged to be able to travel and study overseas. Paralleling this, international education also has a role to play in the production of young people as ‘waste’ (after Katz), reinforcing attitudes towards educational ‘failure’ in Hong Kong. In short, international education is thoroughly embedded in the domestic education system and the hierarchisation of young people relating to their relative (im)mobilities.

There are some caveats to the arguments made in this paper. The paper has taken Hong Kong as a ‘unit’ of study and has assumed that individuals leaving to go overseas for international study will often return to Hong Kong and enter the labour market here. It should be noted, however, that some young people who opt for overseas study see this as a stepping stone towards future mobility trajectories, outside Hong Kong. This was highlighted in a recent paper by Findlay et al. (2017), where the results of a substantive survey of internationally mobile students showed that: ‘a significant number of students...saw their future life plans through a global lens. This chimes with the idea of a ‘sense of unlimited global mobility’ (Gomes 2015, 10). In other words, student career aspirations need not be fixated on a particular country, but instead can be borderless and open.’ (p. 197). Our findings do not contradict the claims of Findlay et al. (2017); rather, combined, our research emphasises the complex dynamics of international education and how it can and does interact with geography in different ways. More work is needed on the particular ways in which international students (in all of their diversity) make and remake places.

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