Learning About the World of Work: Co-opting School Students’ Paid Work Experiences

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Abstract

This paper proposes co-opting high school students’ paid part-time work experiences to develop their critical understanding of the world of work, beyond their schooling through post-school pathways. It argues that unlike work experience program or work placements organised through schools, students’ paid part-time employment provides authentic workplace experiences that have the potential to inform students deeply and critically about the world of work. These experiences include the reciprocal obligations that arise from paid employment and, as such, provide a rich base for high school students to explore the world of work, relationships in the workplace, what constitutes more and less valued work and how work is organised and rewarded. The co-opting of students’ work experiences for school-based activities may provide a useful base to explore the world of work both for those students who are employed part-time and those not employed in part-time work, but able to learn from their peers’ experiences. To assist achieving these goals some pedagogic tools are required to effectively describe, analyse and illuminate these experiences in classroom settings. A way of describing and critically appraising this paid work is proposed through individual and collective consideration of the activities and interactions that constitute students’ paid work experience. Given the difficulty of organising workplace placements and work experience programs, and the potentially richer outcomes, co-opting students’ paid work experiences presents a viable and worthwhile resource available in most classrooms for learning more about the world of work.

Integrating work and school-based experiences

The provision of workplace-based experiences and activities and school experiences that have a vocational education and training (VET) emphasis reflects a concern to
prepare Australian school students for school-to-work transitions and the world of work beyond schooling. However, the integration of these two kinds of experience - those in the school and those in the workplace - is seldom intentionally or purposefully structured (Fullarton 1999, Malley, Frigo & Robinson 1999), thereby perhaps weakening their potential separate and collective contributions. School organised work experience programs are usually directed towards one of two purposes: (i) work placements aligned to students' vocational interest; or (ii) programs that aim to provide students with the experience of work and workplaces (Billett 1998). Quite distinct educational goals are reflected in these purposes. The first kind of work experience is directed towards the development of the specific vocational skills required for a particular paid vocation. These experiences aim to assist and structure the development of the students' procedures, concepts and values associated with a particular kind of paid work. They assume that students have identified the particular vocation they wish to pursue and are directed towards achieving that as an educational goal. It is unlikely that without extensive periods of work experience students would develop the skills required for effective practice in their selected vocation. Consequently, extensive engagement in specific work activities is crucial. Structured work-based experiences related to school-based apprenticeships and traineeships are examples of this kind of workplace experience.

The second kind of workplace experience is directed towards students learning more generally about the world of work – working life, if you like – rather than a particular vocational practice. It comprises by far the most common kind of work experience program in Australia (Fullarton 1999). That is, these programs aim to give students 'a taste of the world of work' (Fullarton 1999) and of working life beyond schooling. This educational goal is more important than simply preparing students for transition from school to the paid workforce. It can also assist students to make informed choices about selecting the kind of employment and/or further education they want to pursue, and potentially develop an understanding of the requirements for working life which, for many, will be a key activity throughout much of their adult life. Moreover, individuals’ capacity to secure and enjoy a rich working life is associated with their identity and sense of self. Quickie (1999) argues that a reactive work ethic should be displaced by a concern associated with work being seen as a desirable activity, both individually and socially. Here, he echoes what Dewey (1916) proposed in respect to vocations being viewed as a direction in life that is meaningful, in terms of individuals’ goals and their social roles, rather than being premised on culturally sanctioned views about worth and standing. Certainly, in Australia, the standing and status of the occupation is held to be central to individuals’ identity “For nearly everyone work is a social protein, a buttress for identity and not a tradeable commodity” (Pusey 2003, p.2). Therefore, to make informed decisions, students need to understand something of what constitutes different kinds of work, their