CO-OPTING SCHOOL STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCE OF PAID PART-TIME WORK

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The study reported here used high school students’ paid part-time work experiences to assist them reflect upon work, working life and post-school pathways. Because many high school students engage in paid part-time work, in any Australian senior school classroom there is a range of experience that can be used to assist students consider working life and post-school pathways. These experiences are more readily available and authentic than those provided through school organised work experience programs. In order to understand how the students’ experience of paid work might be best engaged, students and teachers in six schools in Victoria and Queensland participated in processes of reflecting on these experiences. Consistently, across all cohorts of students, authentic workplace experiences were identified as assisting a range of educational purposes associated with students’ consideration of learning about work, the world of work and to consider post-school options and pathways. Key variables in the likely success of this initiative were the facilitative capacity of teachers, their knowledge and valuing of working life outside schools; students’ capacities and readiness to engage in reflection of their paid work and the resourcing and privileging within the school of VET provisions.

Informing post-school pathways
Assisting students’ success in life beyond the school is an implicit goal of schooling. The emphasis on vocational education in Australian schools in recent years has contributed to this goal through encouraging students’ consideration of work options, work requirements and pathways to a personally fulfilling working life (Malley, Frigo, & Robinson, 1999). It usually does so in two ways. Firstly, programs are offered that provide experiences to develop the vocational skills to perform specific occupational roles. School-based apprenticeships and traineeships are examples of this kind of preparation, as are the ‘stand alone’ VET subjects made available to students in their schools or at TAFE institutes. The growth of participation in these programs indicates the raising level of interest in these courses. Secondly, there are programs that aim to assist students learn about work and working life in order to inform their decision-making about and pathways beyond schooling (e.g. Stasz, 1999). These include work placement and work experience programs of different kinds. This is the most common kind of vocational preparation that high school students access in Australia (Fullarton, 1999).

The project reported here focuses on this second kind of vocational preparation - learning about work and working life. Its key premise is that high school students’ paid part-time work experiences are likely to provide a more effective way of developing an understanding of work and working life than can be achieved through school-organised work placements and work experience programs. Many, perhaps most Australian high school students of both genders in both city and regional locations engage in paid part-time work (Department of Education Training and Employment, 2000; Fullarton, 1999). These experiences constitute a first step into working life for many, perhaps most school students. Up to 70% of both male and female students in their final years of schooling in both city and rural communities are estimated to participate in paid part-
time employment. Consequently, in any Australian senior school classroom there is likely to be a significant cohort, and very possibly a majority of students, with experience of paid employment. The aim here is to assess the value of these experiences as a resource for classroom-based activities to assist senior year students reflect upon and learn about work and post-school options and in ways that can be utilised and shared by all students, regardless of whether they are employed in this work or not. Importantly, this paid work is not seen as exemplars of working life or career options. Instead it is held to provide an authentic context for students to consider work and post-school options. Indeed, there is little correlation between students’ paid part-time work and their work destination (Fullarton, 1999).

The proposed educational value of reflecting on paid employment is through its potency as a resource for developing informed and critical insights about work and pathways to working life. These are found in the authenticity of its working life experience. These experiences in paid employment are likely to be distinct from work placement and work experiences organised through schools in: (i) the kinds of activities and interactions that paid work provides comprising the obligations of both employers and employees and (ii) the kinds of demands and commitments required of the student-worker (Billett, 2005). These include the need for punctuality, working with others, being effective with time and personal organisation, as well as the imposition of sanctions imposed if work requirements are not met. In addition, (iii) in paid employment students engage in making contributions to taxation, healthcare, possibly superannuation and may also be required to join and contribute to a trade union, thereby coming to understand the exercise of social obligation and collective action through employment. Also, (iv) the duration of engagement in paid part-time work is typically far longer than that of work experience programs (Fullarton 1999), thereby engaging students in experiences of working life that are of greater duration and potentially greater impact upon the student. While work placements or work experience program can provide rich and useful experiences, students’ paid employment is more likely to provide a set of authentic working life experiences over a longer duration, than those substitute experiences. The more authentic experiences of work potentially provide more educative experiences that can be co-opted to understand work and working life, and inform decision-making about post-school pathways and appear to represent an under-utilised resource readily available in most, if not all, senior school classrooms.

Such processes offer the prospect of the educational benefits of equipping students with an informed and questioning understanding of work and working life are in assisting their decision-making in their school and post-school lives (Stasz, 1999). More specifically, these benefits are seen as being threefold. Firstly, a critical understanding may inform student decision-making about the kinds of employment pathways they may wish to pursue. Secondly, it may motivate careful consideration of tertiary education pathway options. Thirdly, it may also assist understanding how to engage in paid work more effectively and how they can achieve their personal and vocational goals in workplace settings. Overall, critical, reflective and collective considerations of paid part-time work could provide students with and informed (educated) understanding of working life (Quickie, 1999).

This understanding stands as a highly beneficial educational outcome as working life constitutes a major experience and preoccupation throughout adult life and one in which individuals invest in and develop their sense of self (Pusey, 2003). There are also potential administrative efficiencies to co-opting school students paid part-time work for these educational purposes. By utilising students’ paid work experiences, schools can utilise a resource available gratuitously and easily in each senior school
classroom. By recognising the legitimacy of the experiences of paid employment other benefits might arise. Schools’ efforts to locate workplace experiences and work placements might be directed to securing placements only for those students who are not engaged in paid part-time employment. This may well secure economies in school resources while maximising the utilisation of community good will in the provision of work experiences.

Engaging students’ part-time work experiences in schools
The procedures comprised three stages. The identification of schools and teachers to participate in the project constituted the first stage. The aim was to locate, encourage the interest and consent of a small number of schools in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations to develop and trial this approach to student learning about working life. It involved a total ten classes and their teachers in schools in Brisbane and regional Victoria during 2004 and 2005. Preference was given to schools with a record of involvement in vocational programs in order to trial this process in supportive environments. This included the negotiation of instructional strategies with the teachers who were interested in implementing them. In total, six schools agreed to participate in the project. Four of the schools were in metropolitan Brisbane, Queensland and two were in regional Victoria. The schools comprised: a Queensland catholic co-ed school, referred to as St Bede’s College; a Queensland private girls school, referred to as Claybrook College; a Queensland private co-ed school, referred to as Greylands College; a Queensland state school, referred to as Bayside State High; a Victorian state school, referred to as Whitefield's College; and a Victorian state school, referred to as Grasslands College.

The second stage was proposed to comprise working with teachers in the selected schools to refine the instructional focus and identify appropriate pedagogic practices to support successful reflection on paid work. The goal in this stage was to develop the most appropriate pedagogic strategies to assist students to describe and understand their paid work and reflect upon appropriate post school pathways. As the particular requirements for their implementation differed depending upon the school’s setting and location, it was seen as important to engage in the development of the pedagogic responses with the teachers who were to trial and implement them. Added to this was acknowledging the central role of teachers in the implementation of any educational initiative and to capture the particular situational constraints and opportunities of the school environment. That is, there was a need to permit teachers’ discretion in the design, enactment and evaluation of this approach within schools. The proposed framework for teachers to use, adapt and refine required engaging students in describing that work comprises categories of work activities and interactions. This framework was developed and has been used to describe the requirements for work performance in earlier studies (Billett, 2000; Billett, Barker, & Hernon-Tinning, 2004). It was explicitly stated, however, in negotiations with the schools that the proposed framework needed to be tailored by teachers to suit the particular requirements of their students.

The third stage comprised teachers implementing the classroom-based activities. The teachers’ role here was to guide the students in describing, sharing and critically, but constructively, appraising their workplace tasks, and to facilitate the process of student engagement and reflection. The first trialling of the strategies was with one class at Bayside State High in the final term of 2004, followed by the other five schools in the first two terms of 2005. In different ways, students in these classes worked alone, as a class, in pairs or small groups comprising students who were engaged in part-time
employment and those who were not. Different roles could have been allocated to students to assist their engagement in the tasks. However, the guidance and kinds of approaches to implementation differed widely across the school, dependent upon student experiences and readiness to engage in this kind of curriculum task, and the approach adopted by the teacher. Once the students had critically appraised their kind of work and working life and that of their peers, they were invited to consider the kinds of post-school pathways that lead to the different kinds of work that they have identified. In addition, they were invited to consider patterns and relationships between particular post-school pathways and the kinds of work they have collectively appraised. Students were able to critically reflect upon the different kinds of post-school pathways that are available, the kinds of attributes required to commence along these pathways and how best they serve particular vocational outcomes. Throughout, data was gathered in the form of students’ work sheets and through interviews and interactions with teachers and co-ordinators.

Findings
Six sets of findings are briefly overview here. These comprise: (i) the enactment of the procedures; (ii) understanding work; (iii) reflecting upon paid work; (iv) engaging students in reflecting upon work and post-school pathways; (v) and teachers’ roles; and (vi) considerations for vocational education and schooling.

1. Enactment of the procedures
Firstly, the enactment of the procedures did not proceed as planned in all schools. In the pilot study, the teacher requested that a set of sessions by developed by the researchers. This was done. These were implemented with a few adjustments within that school. All the other schools requested and used the same set of resources, however often without any modification or consideration to the student cohorts and their readiness. However, despite the same set of resources being used, the school-based procedures were enacted in quite distinct ways. In some schools, students struggled and in some cases resisted expressing their experiences in written form. In two instances, the teachers and the students struggled to implement the procedures: in one instance, gave up, and in another did not complete the full procedures. As a result, the processes and quality of outcomes varied enormously across the six schools. The key outstanding issues that shaped the enactment was: (i) the degree to which the teacher was able to facilitate the learning process of the students; (ii) the interest and readiness of students; and (iii) the provisions and standing of work experience and vocational education programs within the school. So there was a clear difference between what was intended and what was enacted in schools, with variations in processes and outcomes clearly being reported across the six schools. An additional school was brought in to the project after difficulties at one school, and the availability and quality of its data. This initial finding is important for the reporting of the other findings, because of the variations. It also raises a series of issues about the centrality of teachers’ role in vocational education and training provisions in schools.

2. Understanding work
The process used in the classrooms committed students to reflect upon and share their understanding of their work experiences. In different ways, the students were able to present critical, although sometimes unreflective, analyses of their work experiences. They readily identified crucial features of work and working life. These included: (i) the distinctions between the conditions and roles of part-time workers against those of full-
time workers; (ii) the unrewarding and unattractive nature of menial work; (iii) different discretion afforded to workers and under what circumstances (e.g. where money is involved); (iv) how prospects for workers advancement in the workplace differed; (v) concepts about team work, sometimes with a critical perspective; (v) the standing of workers and their treatment (e.g. by rude customers and ‘uncaring’ bosses) and; (vi) importantly, understanding and articulated the requirements for work performance. The evidence suggests that when provided with an opportunity to engage in a consideration of their paid work that students are able to identify the salient features of work and working life. Through the processes of describing their experiences of paid work, the students were able to identify and critically appraise many features of work and working life. Given that many of these insights derived from experience over time and engaging in paid work activities, it is claimed that these authentic workplace experiences provide a richer base to consider work and working life over substitute work experiences, such as those offered through schools based work experience program. The degree by which these paid work experiences are maximised and dealt with constructively in classroom, appear to be a product of the understanding of work by teachers and their capability to facilitate this within the classrooms.

3. Reflecting upon paid work
Consistently across all cohorts of students, there was support for the workplace as being an effective environment to learn about the world of work and to consider post school options. This support manifests itself quite differently. Some students agreed that the kind of processes trialled in this project were helpful in thinking about the world of work beyond school. Where this was the case, there seem to be an association between the facilitative capacity of teacher and student cohorts reporting this response.

Other students, referred to other kinds of work based experiences, paid part-time work itself, school organised work experiences, those of others as being important experiences to understand how best to understand the world of work, as being inevitably the optimum location to understand the world of work and the considerations about post school pathways. Yet, the evidence here suggests that unless there is a facilitative process, students may not engage in a constructive and critical reflection on upon those experiences. So, principally and repeatedly a consideration of authentic work experiences was reported as a basis for informing students about post school options. Moreover, more nuanced considerations of this experience were suggested by students in response to the ideal means of being informed about career options. Some students suggested that the opportunity to sample different kinds of work and workplace experiences, or for people who are knowledgeable about the actual experience of the particular work might share those experiences with students in order to understand what constitutes that work. Others suggested that, there was a problem in not being able to experience their preferred form of work prior to being close to the completion of a tertiary or higher education program. That is, after considerable investment in time, money and other resources had been expended.

At Claybrook College, some of the year 12 students did not believe that this process assisted them think about the world of work beyond school. For instance: "not so much, doing the same thing, but something to deal with customers"(#1);
"hasn't really, not in the field of work I want to do in the future -- but has taught me how the workforce operates" (#5). However, this last comment suggests that richer or transferable forms of learning occurred for the student.

Yet, the other students at this school identified contributions of the process in guiding their post school directions: "it makes me think I need to get better qualifications in order to get better pay" (#2); "It made me want to have a better job as you don't get paid as much. Leads
to not wanting to manage a cleaning product store" (#4); -- but has taught me how the workforce operates" (#5); "it is made me want to never work with food" (#6); "it is made me think that I would like some day to own my own business, but I do not want to make a career out of sewing/designing costumes" (#7); "I don't want to be checkout girl at Coles in the future. Does not open many horizons for the future and is very monotonous" (#9); "owning own business" (#10); "it is made me think that I do not want to work in a fruit store" (#11); but I do not want to work in retail has helped teach me how the workforce operates" (#12); "opening options, preparing me for what I should expect if I'm going to the same work area, exploring choices and different job descriptions within my career advice" (#13); "makes me want to work with people, but not in a convenience store or restaurant" (#14); "has attended the fact that she wants to work so I can earn money, don't want to work in the food industry" (#16).

So, the students’ reflections on those experiences were instrumental in appraising post school options. Perhaps, for this cohort of students, it might be argued that the classroom-based activities were unnecessary. That is, they would have worked these things out for themselves. Yet, these students through their collective reflections upon their paid part-time work began to militate for a provision of work experience within their school. The appraisal of their experiences led them to come to value the importance of engagement in the workplace. That is, through deliberations and discussions they identified the worth of workplace experience as informing them about work, working life and post school options. These included:

- Learning about working life;
- Learning about different kinds of work -- what is common and different among them;
- Learning about the kinds of work they do not want to engage in post school;
- Learning about the kinds of work they want to do post school;
- Learning whether preferred work options are actually what the individual wants to do; and
- Learning whether the preferred post tertiary or university occupation is actually what individuals want to do.

In this way, the students identified the importance of paid work experiences in providing quite different opportunities for them to consider working life, preferences for forms of employment and a consideration of the importance of experiencing authentically kinds of work to which their efforts and investment at school, tertiary and higher education are directed.

4. Engaging students in reflecting upon work and post-school pathways

Overall, students reported engaging in the process of reflecting on their paid part-time work as being useful. Clearly, the process of having to write down their experiences discomfited some students. A greater focus on discussion might be a preferred approach for students, particularly those struggling to express themselves in written form. From some observations, it seemed that the richest interchange and sharing occurred through small group and whole group processes and that these processes might be those best deployed in classrooms to engage students in reflecting upon their paid work experiences. Here, there was a requirement to capture data from students in written form, which may have interfered with more familiar classroom interactions. It is noted that the rich and sometimes nuanced discussions in the classroom were not reflected in the brief written statements provided by the students in their work sheets. Significantly, often even those resenting the process of reflecting upon their paid part-time work still concluded that the best way of understanding work and post school pathways was through authentic workplace experiences.
There were suggestions about other means of learning about occupations, including the advice from teachers, access to electronic resources and agencies that understood forms of employment. However, the evidence suggests that when tailored to the students’ readiness and preferences, that the reflection upon paid work experiences in classrooms can be an effective pedagogical device for both those students who are engaged in paid part-time work, and their peers who are not. So whether used on their own, or augmenting other activities or resources, school students paid work experiences offers an educational resource that is available in most, if not all, Year 11 and 12 classrooms in Australian schools.

5. Teachers’ roles
Beyond the readiness and characteristics of students, the key variable in achieving the best outcome from students’ reflections upon their paid work experience is the capacities of teachers to provide effective classroom-based experiences. Standing out were the capacities of teachers to: (i) adapt and utilise resources to meet learners’ needs and secure the intended educational goals; (ii) facilitate student learning (i.e. drawing upon their experience rather than teaching them); (iii) manage the teaching/learning process, in particular, their capacity to engage students in productive critical reflection; (iv) understand the potential of reflecting upon work; and (v) enact processes reflecting a broader view about learning and educational goals. However, it is acknowledged that the process of engaging students’ reflections upon their paid work experience may require a more or less structured approach given the readiness and capacities of students. A concern arising from this study was that some teachers engaged in a culture of closing themselves off from the researchers. Despite offers of support and guidance, they were reluctant to engage with sources of advice outside of the school and utilise the funds provided as a resource for the students and the research. That is, the closed culture of the school was exercised in some instances to exclude potential support and advice, seemingly where it was most needed. These actions only serve to underline the key importance of the quality of teachers who are confident enough to engage students in facilitate processes and seek advice when best advice might be sourced outside the classroom or school. These considerations seem most relevant to initiatives aimed improve information about post school options for school students, as such as the Australian National Industry Careers Advisers initiative.

6. Consideration for vocational education and schooling
There are some broader tentative findings arising from this study. Firstly, the capacity to adapt a vocational education initiative or module to the needs of the student cohort emerged as a key issue. In all of the schools, the teachers enacted prepared materials with little or no modification. While this was successful in some schools, in others it led to unsatisfactory outcomes for the students and teachers. This uncritical (and possibly unplanned) enactment of externally derived materials is problematic. It also hints that, unless teachers have the capacities to adapt materials, that educational resources such as Training Packages might be implemented without being adapted to the particular student cohorts’ needs and capacities. Secondly, the reluctance of teachers to engage with others outside the school suggests that the actions may be directed by their experiences and capacities alone, rather than drawing upon available sources. This is seen as being the exercise of the closed culture of schooling that is particularly inappropriate with vocational education initiatives because of the rich association between the processes and outcomes of those programs and what occurs and is available beyond the school. Thirdly, some of the teachers demonstrated a narrow view of learning and vocational education, and possibly a limited view of the world of work beyond schools is problematic for an effective provision of vocational education.
Associated with this, is the capacity of teachers to effectively adapt and utilise experiences outside the school (e.g. paid part-time work). Fourthly, given that the schools selected to participate were identified as those with a commitment to and history of involvement in vocational education and training, the level of competence and capacities demonstrated by some of the teachers was surprising. Indeed, this track record was not predictive of positive education experiences on its own. For instance, from appraising the process, it seemed that of the two schools where the processes was most effectively enacted was, in the first instance, by a careers counsellor at Whitefields College, and in the second instance by a teacher in a school that has only a limited vocational education profile (Claybrook College). However, and conversely, the vocational focus and facilitative expertise of the teacher at Bayside High School was evident. So, within this small sample, factors other than claims about the vocational education and training profile a school seem to be linked with effective school-based activities associated with understanding work, working life and post school pathways.

Learning through paid-part-time work
In conclusion, these school students’ paid work experiences provide a rich resource to consider and reflect on work, the world of work and post-school pathways. They report the importance of accessing authentic work experiences as a means of understanding the world of work and also making informed choices about: (i) working life; (ii) what is common and different about work options; (ii) preferred kinds of work they want to engage in post school; (iii) whether individuals are suited to their preferred work options; and (iv) whether individuals are suited to their preferred post-tertiary or higher education work options. In these ways, these experiences went beyond understanding the world of work, it included students making informed choices about careers, which they would only otherwise experience after extensive period of schooling and tertiary or before higher education preparation could be fulfilled. Consequently, it seems that students paid work experiences offers schools a potentially viable alternative to work experience programs. Critically reflecting upon students’ paid work experiences within schools also provides a means for informing considerations of post-school pathways, and augmenting career development activities within schools. These experiences can be integrated within the school curriculum to secure authentic vocational outcomes and relevant course content. School teachers’ competence in terms of vocational and specific teaching skills stands as key prerequisites for the successful implementation of VET in schools initiatives.

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