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Learning about work, working life and post-school options: Guiding students' reflections on paid part-time work

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As many, perhaps most, high school students engage in paid part-time employment, there is available in any Australian senior school classroom a range of work experiences that can be used to assist students to consider and reflect on working life and post-school pathways. Furthermore, these experiences are more readily available and authentic than those provided through school organised work experience programs. In order to understand the effectiveness of such experiences, students and teachers in six schools across two Australian states participated in processes of guided reflection on these experiences. Consistently, across cohorts of students in all of these schools, the authentic workplace experiences of paid part-time work were identified as assisting in securing a range of educational purposes associated with students' learning about work, the world of work, and 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 and students' capacities and readiness to engage in reflection on their paid work.

Informing post-school pathways

Assisting students' successful transition to working life beyond the school is an implicit goal of schooling (Quicke, 1999). Beyond securing access to tertiary and higher education, this goal is usually achieved through two kinds of educational purposes. Firstly, programs provide experiences to develop the vocational skills required to perform specific occupational roles. In Australia, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, combine structured experiences in schools, vocational education institutions and workplaces, to provide this kind of preparation, as do the "stand alone" vocational education subjects made available to students in their schools or vocational education institutions (e.g., Technical and Further Education (TAFE)). Growth of participation in these kinds of programs indicates the increasing interest in these options within the community, by governments and parents. Secondly, there are options that assist students to learn about work and working life in order to inform their decision-making about and pathways beyond schoolings. This option is typically exercised through school-organised work placement and work experience programs, which are the

most common kind of vocational preparation Australian high school students access (Fullarton, 1999). Within this option, yet often overlooked, is the prospect of co-opting students' paid part-time work experiences, which is the focus of this paper.

The educational value of students reflecting on their paid employment is as a resource for developing informed and critical insights about work and post-school pathways. Patten (2001) proposes part-time work contributes to the socialisation and development of adolescents, through which they begin knowing how the world of work is organised, to facilitate career decision-making and job transitions. She claims that explorations of the world of work lead to better career decisions, interest-shaped occupational preferences and enhanced learning during preparation for vocational practice. Smith and Comyn (2003) similarly suggest that the development of employability skills arises from individuals' engagement in their first job. This development is founded in the authenticity of these working life experiences that are accessible for the majority of students through their paid work.

The premise here is that co-opting high school students' paid part-time work experiences likely provides more effective means to understand work and working life than can be realised through school-organised work placements and work experience programs. Up to 70% of Australian high school students in years 10 and upwards, of both genders and in both city and regional locations, engage in paid part-time work (Department of Education Training and Employment, 2000; Fullarton, 1999). In 2003, 79% of 15-19 year olds studying on a full-time basis were employed part-time (ABS, 2004). Consequently, in any Australian senior school classroom there will be a significant numbers and possibly a majority of students, with experience of paid work through part-time employment. These experiences constitute a first experience of working life for many, perhaps most school students.

To understand the potential utility of such experiences, students and teachers in six schools across two Australian states participated in processes of guiding students' reflection of their part-time work. The aim was twofold: (a) to assess the value of these experiences resources for classroom-based activities to assist senior year students reflect upon and learn about work and post-school options; and (b) to appraise ways that these experiences can be utilised and shared by all students, regardless of whether they are in paid employment or not. Importantly, the kinds of paid work the students engage in are not seen as exemplars of working life or career options. Indeed, there is little correlation between students' paid part-time work and their work destination (Fullarton, 1999).

Instead, these instances of paid employment are held as a platform of authentic experiences of work and working life as a resource for students to consider and critically reflect upon work and post-school options.

The working life experiences provided through the students' paid work are held to be distinct from work placement and work experiences organised through schools, in the following ways. The kinds of activities and interactions that comprise paid work include the exercise of the obligations of both employers and employees that are central elements of work and working life. Paid work also exposes the students to the kinds of demands, capacities and commitments required for working life beyond school (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. It is these kinds of capacities that employers claim are most valued as requirements for workplace performance and that are represented as the generic workplace competencies required to be developed by educational systems (e.g. (Ghost, 2002; Spring & Syrmas, 2002). Moreover, through their paid employment, students make contributions to taxation, healthcare and possibly superannuation, and may also be required to join and contribute to a trade union. Consequently, they might come to understand the exercise of social obligation and collective action that are parts of working life. Furthermore, as the duration of engagement in paid part-time work is typically far longer than that for work experience programs (Fullarton, 1999), it potentially has greater learning impact upon student-workers, than the shorter work placement experiences. Certainly, when school-organised work placements are aligned to the academic programs and the students' interests the outcomes are reported positively (Stasz & Brewer, 1998). However, it seems these placements arrangements may be the exception in Australia. Certainly, students in this project reported that the work placements were often based on convenience and there were no workplace visits by teachers or any attempt to integrate their experiences into the school curriculum.

Critical, reflective and collective considerations of paid part-time work can provide students with an informed (educated) understanding of working life. Bailey, Hughes and Moore (2004) refer to a study in which one female student working at Macdonalds questioned the gender segmentation of that work -- that is, that the girls work the cash register whilst the boys cook the food. The teacher facilitating this session took the question from the student and used this to facilitate discussion on

gender segmentation in the workplace. The authors also conclude that students' engagement in this kind of interaction is deeply empowering and richly informative.

Teachable moments like that can be found in virtually every internships' seminar section, because the abstractions (gender, race, power, change) are, in fact, meaningful primarily in the context of lived experience -- and workplace learning students are having those lived experiences through which they can explore the ideas, and vice versa. (Bailey et al., 2004, p. 207)

Such understandings offer highly beneficial educational outcomes. Working life will constitute a major experience and preoccupation throughout adult life and one in which individuals invest in and develop their sense of self (Pusey, 2003). Hence, being informed about and making appropriate decisions about life beyond school stands as an important goal for schooling. These processes also offer the prospect 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). In all and specifically, the potential benefits are seen as being threefold. Firstly, a critical understanding may more fully inform student decision-making about the kinds of employment pathways they may wish to pursue. Secondly, it may motivate a more careful consideration by students of tertiary education pathway options. Thirdly, it may assist students' understanding of how to engage in paid work more effectively and how to achieve their personal and vocational goals in workplace settings. These all stand as important educational purposes.

There may also be potential educational administrative efficiencies and economies for schools' resources through utilising school students' paid part-time work in this way. The evidence from this study and elsewhere (Malley, Frigo, & Robinson, 1999) suggest that school-organised work experience programs are not always well organised and enacted. Also, students' experiences in their work placements are not always recognised, utilised or effectively engaged in the school curriculum, there alone given any value within the schools. Through engaging students' paid work experiences, schools can utilise a potentially important educational resource available gratuitously and easily in each senior school classroom. School resources can be then used for locating appropriate workplace experiences and work placements only for those students who are not engaged in paid part-time employment. This may also optimise the community's goodwill by only making demands for those students who are not or have not engaged in paid part-time work.

In sum, while school-organised work placements or work experience programs can provide rich and useful experiences, students' paid part-time employment is more likely to provide authentic working life experiences and over a longer duration, than those essentially substitute experiences of working life afforded through the school-organised work experience programs. Paid work potentially provides rich educative outcomes through being co-opted to understand work and working life, and inform decisions about post-school pathways. Moreover, they represent an under-utilised resource readily available in most, if not all, Australian senior school classrooms, and perhaps in many other countries. It is these rationales that motivated an investigation to explore the potential of utilising guided reflection of students' paid part-time work experiences to understand work, working life and post-school pathways. The next section describes and discusses the procedures enacted within that investigation.

Engaging students' part-time work experiences in schools

The project 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 secure the consent and participation of a small number of schools in metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations to develop and trial this approach to student learning about working life. Ultimately, it involved a total of 10 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. This preference was premised on a desire to trial this process in educational environments that were anticipated to be supportive of initiatives which valued workplace experiences. In particular, as the project required some negotiation of instructional strategies with the teachers who were to implement them, an interest in this area was seen to be important. In total, six schools agreed to participate in the project. Four of these 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 Bedes 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 Whitefields 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 students' reflection on paid work. The goals in this stage were for teachers to identify and develop the most appropriate approaches and strategies to assist their students describe and critically appraise their paid work and reflect upon the implications for their post-school pathways. It was anticipated that the particular requirements for their implementation differed depending upon the school's setting, student cohort and location. Therefore, 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. As a starting point, a suggested classroom intervention (i.e., a set of four proposed one-hour sessions), including a framework to describe and analyse students' work comprising categories of work activities and interactions, was developed and enacted during the pilot phase. This framework was developed from one used to describe the requirements for work performance in earlier studies (Billett, 2000; Billett, Barker, & Herson-Tinning, 2004). The set of four sessions was developed in collaboration with the pilot school (Bayside State High). The sessions were as follows. The students described and critically appraised their paid work and working life and that of their peers, using the framework referred to earlier over the first two sessions. This included comparing their work experiences with their peers, which permitted students without paid work experience to learn about work and working life. Worksheets were provided to the students to assist their description and analysis. In the third session, the students considered how their work experiences might shape their decision-making about post-school pathways. Students were also encouraged 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. In the final session, the students were invited to appraise different ways of understanding work, work life and post-school experiences. Responses in the final two sessions were recorded on supplied survey forms.

It was explicitly stated in negotiations with the schools, however, that the proposed framework needed to be tailored by teachers to suit the particular requirements of their students. Funds were made available to each school to support this

initiative, potentially for teacher relief to prepare and tailor the interventions to the readiness and needs of the particular student cohort. However, it seems none of the participating schools elected to use these funds in this way.

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. Throughout, data were gathered in the form of students' worksheets and through interviews and interactions with teachers and co-ordinators. As indicated in Table 1, the numbers and year level of students participating in the activities differed across the six schools.

Table 1: Schools and participating classes

School	Year	Students
Bayside State High	12	10
Claybrook College	12	22
Greylands College	12	15*
St Bedes Colege	11	12
Whitefields College	11	16
Grasslands College	11	13

Note: * In the first round, 95 students completed the worksheets describing their paid part-time work.

However, the enactment of the procedures did not proceed as planned in all schools. These sessions were enacted successfully within Bayside High with a group of female year 12 students. Subsequently, the other schools requested and used the same set of resources, however often without any modification or consideration of the student cohorts and their readiness. Across the six schools, in different ways, students in these classes worked alone, as a class, in pairs or in small groups comprising students who were engaged in part-time employment and those who were not. Different roles could be allocated to students to assist their engagement in the tasks. However, the guidance and kinds of approaches to their enactment, although premised on a common set of resources and interventions, differed widely across the schools. These differences are seemingly shaped by students' experiences and readiness to engage in this kind of curriculum task, and the approach adopted by the teacher in engaging the students in classroom based reflections. Yet, despite the same set of resources being used, the school-based procedures were enacted and experienced by the students 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 giving up, and in another, not completing the full procedures.

As a result of these differences, the enacted processes and outcomes varied enormously across the six schools. The key factors shaping the enactment of the classroom processes were (a) the degree to which the teacher was able to facilitate the students' classroom processes, (b) the students' interest and readiness to participate in reflective classroom processes, and (c) the provisions and standing of work experience and vocational education programs within the school. So, in some schools, there was a clear difference between what was intended and what was enacted, with variations in processes and outcomes being reported across the six schools. An additional school (Claybrook College) was brought into the project after difficulties at one school (St Bedes College) and the availability and quality of its data. These issues with implementation are important in contextualising the reporting of the project's findings, because in many ways they inform the variations that occurred in the enactment of those experiences in the classrooms. It also brings centre stage a series of issues about the centrality of school practices, teachers' capacities and their role in vocational education and training provisions in schools.

Findings

Five sets of findings are briefly overviewed here. These comprise those about (a) the potential for students to describe and understand their work, (b) the potential and outcomes of reflecting upon paid work, (c) processes of engaging students in reflecting upon work and post-school pathways, (d) teachers' roles, and (e) considerations for vocational education and schooling.

Understanding working life through paid work

Across all schools, the participating students had the opportunity to gain insights from and reflect upon different kinds of paid part-time work, so the first premise of the study was upheld. The kinds of employment the students engaged in were categorised under three headings: (i) retail; (ii) food preparation and service; and (iii) other. Fullarton (1999) identified a similar pattern of students participating in retail and food preparation and service work roles. However, striking amongst these categories of work was the diversity of employment and experiences in retail and food service workplaces. While

some students engaged in large retail settings, such as supermarkets and general stores, others worked for small retail operations. In the former, much of those workplace interactions were with peers and other workers while, in the latter, they were engaging directly with managers and owners more frequently. Also, the kinds of activities they engaged in and responsibilities they were required to fulfil differed quite markedly across these retail workplace settings. As with part-time retail work, there was a diversity of experience in food service outlets and they were similar to those experienced in retail workplaces. While some students worked in fast-food outlets, others were engaged in restaurants, cafes and food outlets that were quite small and specialist in their products. There are also significant differences in the requirements for work. For instance, securing gratuities (i.e., tips) from customers in restaurants is associated with a particular focus on teamwork: providing the kind of service that would secure gratuities. The “other” category of employment was quite diverse and appears particularly influenced by the location of the school. Not surprisingly, students in both the regional areas engaged in activities that could easily be distinguished from their metropolitan counterparts (e.g., farm work, hospitality settings, garage work). Also, there was a pattern across the sample of different kinds of outcomes associated with the schools’ cohorts. Some cohorts seemed far more likely to be engaging in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships than others. Also, there was something of a contrast between the kinds of employment that the Year 12 students from Claybrook College (a prestigious private girls’ school) secured, compared with their peers at Bayside State High, for instance.

Within each school cohort, therefore, diverse kinds of retail, food service and other work experiences were accessible for use as an educational resource. At Whitefield College these included retail in a pharmacy; food service included coffee, pizza, bakery; with other including housekeeping in the snowfields. At Claybrook College, the retail work included costume hire and manufacture, with the food service roles involving waiting on tables and working in an ice cream store. Here, the other work included physiotherapist’s receptionist, training army cadets and a swimming pool attendant. At Greylands College, where 95 students completed information on their part-time employment, the retail work included both large and small retail workplaces with a range of specialities (e.g., vegetable store, video hire, newsagents, pharmacies). The food service work included preparing hamburgers in a small takeaway cafe, making pizzas, cooking fish, and working in coffee bars and restaurants. Other kinds of work

included: gymnastic coach; fibre glassing; electrician; swimming coach; hairdresser; working in the kitchen design workplace; newsagents; administration within an aquatic centre; butcher; production of pharmaceuticals; trade assistant; working in a timber yard; and office work.

The process used in the classrooms aimed at engaging students in describing and reflecting upon, and then sharing, their insights into and understanding of these diverse 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: (a) the distinctions between the conditions and roles of part-time workers and those of full-time workers; (b) the unrewarding and unattractive nature of menial work; (c) different discretion afforded to workers and under what circumstances; (d) how prospects for workers' advancement in the workplace differed; (e) concepts about teamwork, sometimes with a critical perspective; (f) the standing of workers and their treatment; and importantly, (g) understanding and articulating the requirements for work performance. In addition, students were able to identify and articulate important features of work and working life. For instance, most of the respondents were able to provide a definition of teamwork. Moreover, some provided critical examples of the importance of teamwork, and working together. Perhaps not surprisingly, as many students were engaged in service and retail outlets, the importance and characteristics of working together were highlighted in the data. For those in retail and service employment, there were often critical comments about their treatment by customers. Rudeness by customers particularly irked the male students. In these ways, the students were able to provide quite critical and nuanced accounts indicating what they had learnt through their part-time employment.

The evidence suggests that when provided with an opportunity to reflect on their paid work, students in each cohort were able to identify and critically appraise the salient features of work and working life. Given that many of these insights derived from experience over time and engagement in paid work activities, these authentic workplace experiences appear to offer a rich resource to consider work and working life. However, the degree to which they are maximised and reflected upon constructively in the classroom, appears to be a product of the understanding of work by teachers and their capability to facilitate this within the classrooms, and the readiness of students to engage in this kind of activity.

Reflecting upon paid work

Consistently, across all cohorts of students, there was support for reflecting upon paid work experiences as being an effective resource 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 seems to be an association between the facilitative capacity of the teacher and student cohorts reporting this response.

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

However, all the other students at this school identified contributions of the process of reflecting on their paid work 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 has made me want to never work with food (#6); it has 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 a checkout girl at Coles in the future. Does not open many horizons for the future and is very monotonous (#9); owning my own business (#10); it has made me think that I do not want to work in a fruit store (#11); but I do not want to work in retail but it 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); wants to work so I can earn money, don't want to work in the food industry (#16).

Perhaps, for this cohort of students, it might seem 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. The teacher at the school also began planning ways for integrating the students' experience in paid work within their vocational subjects, to give credit for their learning through this work.

Although the students at St Bedes College did not engage enthusiastically with the classroom-based activities, even their data reveal informed insights—that might have been stronger had the activities been engaged in more effectively. Their responses include concerns about menial work, different conceptions of teamwork (including a critical one about the failings of co-workers), the importance of customer service work, the different times at which work is busy, the way that checking money at the cash registers—but not cleaning—is closely monitored, and the conflict between their personal values and having to be pleasant to customers.

Overall, through deliberations and discussions, the students in the study were able to use workplace experience to inform them about work, working life and post-school options. These included learning:

- about working life;
- about different kinds of work—what is common and different among them;
- about the kinds of work they do not want to engage in post-school;
- about the kinds of work they want to seek employment in post-school;
- whether preferred work options are actually what the individual wants to do; and
- 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 opportunities to consider working life, preferences for forms of employment and a consideration of the importance of experiencing authentic kinds of work to which their efforts and investment at school, tertiary and higher education are directed.

Engaging students in reflecting upon work and post-school pathways

Although resisted by some and not to all students' liking, the reflections on their paid part-time work were effective in assisting most participating students to consider work and working life. However, students' engagement with these reflective processes needs to be carefully managed. The limited scope of the study in terms of the numbers of schools engaged prevents any generalisations. However, given the breadth of kinds of work these students engaged in, there can be some confidence to suggest that the findings here are not restricted to the participating schools. In some schools, the activities occurred during class time. In others, they were enacted during lunch breaks and spare periods in their timetables. There was also wide variation across the sites in students' familiarity with using group work as a tool for learning as well as their interest and capacity to provide written statements. Had data gathering been based on tape recorded conversations rather than text, quite different data may have been elicited, because many students were perceived to be more competent in discussing their ideas than representing them in written form. Reports from the teachers suggested that the two most engaged, constructively critical and seemingly effective classroom discussions were those that both comprised groups of Year 12 female students (Bayside High, Claybrook College. Overall, it seemed that male students resisted writing responses and that within these schools the more senior the classes the more likely the classroom-based activities were productive of rich reflections. These conclusions are based on teacher interviews, and the researchers' observations about the written data provided by students.

As part of the final sessions, the students evaluated the reflective process used in school. The students were asked to indicate the usefulness of the approach taken within their school. Using a 5-point Likert scale, the students indicated their perception of the usefulness of the classroom-based activities they had engaged in at school. The data from Greylands College and St Bede's College are not included in this table, because the activity was either, respectively, not undertaken or the data were incomplete. Overall, as indicated in Table 2, the majority of students in the other schools rated the activity as being "helpful" or better. That is, the students agreed that the process had helped them think about work, working life and post-school pathways. In this table, the four schools that provided data are presented in the left column, and also the number of respondents from that school. The frequency of the students' rating of the utility of these interventions is then indicated across the columns to its right. The two most

frequent responses were those reporting the process as being either “helpful” or “useful”. When aggregated with the responses reporting the process to be “very useful”, those reporting these experiences positively were far greater in number than those reporting its efficacy to be limited.

Table 2: Usefulness of trialled approach

School (n=)	Very useful	Useful	Helpful	Not very useful	Not at all useful
Bayside (9)		2	5	2	
Grasslands (10)	1		1	4	3
Whitefields (16)	1	5	3	4	2
Claybrook (17)	1	7	8	1	
Totals	3	14	17	11	5

Note: Greylands College and St Bedes did not complete data used in this table.

The students reported that what was most useful in the trialled approach was the process of thinking about and discussing their paid employment. They saw their experiences reflected in that of others, were able to identify something of the diversity of paid work, and could decide on what they did not want to pursue in their careers and how best they should learn about the world of work beyond schools.

While some students regarded this process as unhelpful, they did complete the work sheets and record their reactions to paid employment. Even those students who strongly disliked their paid employment, and also indicated that discussing it was not helpful, concluded that the best way to learn about the world of work and preferred work options was to engage in authentic work experiences. While the teaching and learning strategies in this research were not always optimal, the importance of discussing and thinking about their authentic work experiences on the part of students emerged as a central concern. Central here as well are teachers’ knowledge of their students’ capacities, preferences and needs that might best inform the optimum kinds of classroom interventions.

There were suggestions from students 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, reflection upon paid work experiences in classrooms can be an effective pedagogical device both for 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 offer an educational resource for reflecting on working life and

post-school pathways. Central to achieving this outcome is the role and capacities of teachers in this kind of process, in particular in engaging and guiding students in constructive reflective processes and discussions, particularly those students who are only developing the capacity to engage in those kinds of guided and collaborative instructional processes.

Teachers' roles

From the data and teacher interviews, not surprisingly, the role and skills of teachers were identified and reinforced as being crucial in shaping the effectiveness of these reflections of paid part-time work. The five key variables across the six schools were:

- the capacities, interests and age of students;
- the practices and policies within the schools that shape activities and priorities;
- presence and quality of school organised work experience;
- participation in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships; and
- the interests, capacities and experience of the teachers.

As foreshadowed, the anticipated enactment of this project had included engaging the teachers in a process of planning for the interventions in each school. However, this was enacted only in part in some schools (Claybrook College, Bayside High and Grasslands), and not at all in the others. In essence, each school used the set of interventions prepared and trialled at Bayside High in different ways, but without tailoring it to their students' readiness and capacities. Some teachers encountered problems in the first session but continued on, unsure about consistency of findings and claiming they would be corrupting the data if they changed to meet their particular students' requirements. In addition, those teachers who had been directed to the task by another (in one case absent colleague), enacted the classroom-based processes with very little enthusiasm. The teachers' unwillingness or inability to customise the resources they requested and were provided with highlights and rehearses the issue of the ways that learning resources designed to support externally derived curriculum initiatives are likely to be interpreted and enacted in classrooms.

Certainly, there was considerable variation in the enactment of the classroom-based interventions. In some instances, teachers handed out the materials with students directed to work individually, albeit sometimes resentfully. Yet in other circumstances

the students worked in groups and as suggested, some had open discussions. Others engaged their students, clarifying and addressing their questions, and importantly, questioning their assertions. The worksheets and other feedback indicate that there were clear differences in both the outcomes for students and the appreciation of the potential of considering their part-time employment when this was the case. The familiarity of teachers with the world of work beyond the school, and their beliefs about its value, and potential for learning occurring outside school, appeared to shape how they participated in school-based activities. Also, the capacities of teachers to facilitate a learning process, for instance, to engage students constructively in critical reflections on their paid work, varied across the six schools. Yet, it should be noted that there seemed to be an absence of professional development opportunities that could have assisted and supported enactment of the classroom based activities. This was despite funds being made available for this purpose.

This consideration is important. The key finding of this study is that the quality of the classroom-based interventions is central to realising the potential learning opportunities provided by students' paid part-time work. In particular, the capacity of the teacher to understand and value the potential richness of these experiences, engage students positively and facilitate reflective practice around their own school-to-work trajectories, were most salient. Certainly, the demands brought about by this research were clearly additional and not all of the teachers who ended up enacting it were those that initiated the schools' involvement. On the other hand, effective practices were demonstrated in at least three schools. Positive outcomes arose with students using the same processes that had been less successful in the other schools, thereby providing evidence of the capacities for facilitating student learning through reflecting on their paid part-time work. Importantly, the instances of productive enactment of these experiences across six schools seem to reside in effective classroom management practices. Clearly, teachers are the key to students' reflecting on their paid employment. Standing out were the capacities of teachers to:

- adapt and utilise resources to meet learners' needs and secure the intended educational goals;
- facilitate student learning (i.e., drawing upon their experience rather than teaching them);
- manage the teaching/learning process, in particular, their capacity to engage students in productive critical reflection;

- understand the potential of reflecting upon work; and
- enact processes reflecting a broader view about learning and educational goals.

From observations within this scant sample, it seems that teachers confident enough and with the capacities to engage students in facilitative processes and seek advice from outside the classroom or school may connect classroom practice, students and their paid employment more effectively. This conclusion is not to denigrate teachers. Indeed, the teachers who appeared to struggle the most were those who had the task passed on to them by a more senior colleague. Instead, it is about the kinds of practices and values that teachers possess which could limit or extend the potency of rich learning experiences through reflecting upon paid part-time work.

Consideration for vocational education and schooling

Smith and Comyn (2003) claim that Australian schools are struggling to develop employability skills. They found that these skills may not be the first priority—or even a priority at all—within some schools. Similar findings were evident here, albeit in different ways, across the six schools. Given the context and focus of this research project—developing students’ understanding of work, the world of work and post-school pathways within schools—it is appropriate and perhaps necessary to comment on the prospect for schools to be able to provide effective vocational education experiences. The sample of schools here is small; these schools were selected, however, on their profile of offering vocational education provisions. Given the experiences of and data from within this project, it would be remiss not to offer some reflections upon the role of the schools in developing employability skills of these kinds. For some time now, there has been considerable governmental interest in the role that schools might play in the provision of vocational education and training. Certainly, in Australia there is widespread support for schools’ involvement in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships in the development of specific vocational skills. Moreover, it is clearly a growing interest within schools for engagement in vocational education programs. It is taken that the majority of this interest is in finding appropriate educational activities for students in the senior years. But how genuine is this interest at the classroom and school system level?

The schools’ commitment to the staff teaching and administering vocational education in schools’ programs may be emblematic of these concerns. As noted above, teachers were the key to the quality of the educational aspects of assisting students to

reflect on their paid employment, working life and school pathways. Yet how much is vocational education in schools premised on the efforts, intelligence and capacities of teachers in schools, rather than being sustained by the schools' resources and systems? In an earlier study of vocational education across three regions within Australia (Billett & Hayes, 2000), the quality of engagement of schoolteachers in vocational education and training (VET) programs was most noteworthy. It was often the teachers' strenuous and determined efforts that underpinned the success of the VET in school programs in these communities investigated in that study. These teachers were referred to in this study as "zealots" and it was speculated about their ability to sustain that level of effort over the long term. The sense was of teachers who were agents of change giving everything, working long hours and securing the best possible outcomes for the students at that time. Yet there was also a sense that this was occurring in ways that were unsustainable unless adequate support was provided for these teachers. This suggests the need to consider carefully the degree to which schools engage fully in vocational education in schools' programs and whether it is with similar resources, interest and purposefulness that they would pursue other elements of their educational program (e.g., high status academic programs).

Evidence of schools substantially realigning their *modus operandi* to secure effective and adequately resourced vocational education and training programs was not apparent across all the schools in this study. There was little evidence that schools' resources as intents were strongly directed towards the vocational education and training provisions. The data indicated significant differences in the qualities of the organisation and implementation of school organised work experience programs, school-based apprenticeships and traineeships and the overall provision of vocational education. Some teachers shared experiences and reservations that did much to support this perception. Others, however, clearly had a higher level of resources and support for the programs, yet there was little to suggest that these were core activities and priorities.

Moreover, the 'closed culture of the school' – a curtailing, rejection and denial of the works of contributions outside the school -- encountered in at least three of the schools can be contrasted with the kinds of institutional practices that schools need to engage in to build positive relations with the community, and assist students' transition into post-school pathways, particularly those who have goals other than entrance into higher education. Some schools are less effective than others in the fulsome engagement

with the community beyond the school required for effective vocational education and training programs.

Learning through paid-part-time work

In conclusion, school students' paid work experiences are held to provide a rich resource to consider and reflect on work, the world of work and post-school pathways. The students in this study report the importance of accessing authentic work experiences as a means of understanding the world of work and also making informed choices about (a) working life, (b) what is common and different about work options, (c) preferred kinds of work they want to engage in post-school, (d) whether individuals are suited to their preferred work options, and (e) whether individuals are suited to their preferred post-tertiary or higher education work options. In these ways, this experience went beyond understanding the world of work; it included students making informed choices about careers, which they would only otherwise experience after extensive periods of schooling and tertiary or before higher education preparation could be fulfilled. Consequently, it seems that students' paid work experiences offer schools a potentially viable and highly accessible alternative to work experience programs and one that can be effectively integrated into the schools' curriculum. 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. In these ways, they offer a basis to prepare students for the world of work beyond schooling, which stands as an important educational goal. School teachers' competence in terms of vocational and specific teaching skills to engage and assist students reflect constructively on their work experiences and the support of the school, including privileging this kind of learning, stand as key prerequisites for the successful implementation of VET in schools initiatives.

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