

School-Work Youth Transition: Summary

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Focus

This case study examines policy and practice related to school-work transition (SWT) programs within the K-12 education system in Ontario and Alberta. Recent educational reforms in these provinces include initiatives aimed at improving student transitions.

Literature review

School-to-work transition (SWT) has become a major preoccupation in Canada and other industrialized countries (OECD, 1999). This increased interest raises questions about the relationships between education and employment, formal and informal learning, and equity for different groups of students. Research suggests the need to empirically analyze the new economy in terms of claims about levels and types of skills required and changing conditions of work (Lowe, 2000; Livingstone, 1999). An expanded conception of work and learning to include paid and unpaid work, and formal and informal learning would also contribute to policy debates. For example, a focus on work experience courses should raise questions about the extent to which schools and employers recognize and value informal learning and unpaid work experience. From a conflict perspective, educational credentials serve to exclude certain groups and the valuing of formal knowledge and skills reflects the outcomes of positional competition (Murphy, 1988; Brown, 2000). Authors argue that more attention should be paid to the actual learning processes in work experience to help students relate formal and informal learning, promote the valuing of such knowledge, and promote the radical educative possibilities of work experience (Guile and Griffiths, 2001; Shilling, 1987; Kincheloe, 1999).

Objectives

Our objective is to learn more about how work education programs work in order to inform policy and practice. We specifically address the lack of information in research literature about the experiences of historically disadvantaged students (cf. Levin, 1999) and the perspectives of organized labour and community groups (Taylor, 2002).

Research strategy and methods

Phase 1 examines why and how SWT policies developed, how they are conceptualized, and how they are evaluated through an analysis of policy documents and interviews with government representatives. *Phase 2* explores different interpretations of labour market “realities” through focus groups with representatives from employer organizations, organized labour, and business-education foundations. The most intensive part of the research, in *phase 3*, involves an in-depth analysis of work experience programs (cooperative education, work study, apprenticeship) through observations, and interviews with students, parents, educators, employers, labour representatives, and other relevant participants within different communities.

School-Work Youth Transition: Description of Research

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Focus

This case study examines school-work transition (SWT) programs within the K-12 education system in Ontario and Alberta. Our objective is to learn more about how work education programs are conceptualized and implemented at provincial and local levels in order to inform policy and practice.

Literature review

In recent years, policy-makers in a variety of countries have expressed concerns about the longer and more complicated transitions of young people into paid employment (OECD, 2000). Concerns stem partly from the fact that the unemployment rate for youth is typically double the rate for adults (OECD, 1999) and students are disproportionately engaged in nonstandard work (Felsted, Krahn, and Powell, 1999). Many educators are concerned about the failure of compulsory education systems to adequately prepare non-college bound students for paid work (Ryan and Imel, 1996; Orr, 1998; Russell, 2000). Employers argue that students lack employability skills (Bloom, 1991; Taylor, 2001).

Across Canada, SWT has also become a preoccupation (OECD, 1999). In both Ontario and Alberta, education ministries are working with other government agencies, employers, and educators to encourage more involvement by “partners.” For example, the Ontario Ministry of Education recently launched a promotional campaign called *Passport to Prosperity* to encourage employers to become more involved in K-12 SWT programs, while Alberta Learning began to fund an industry-driven foundation called *Careers the Next Generation* (CNG) for a similar purpose (Taylor and Lehmann, in press).

The increased interest in combining school and workplace learning raises a number of important questions. First, what is assumed about the relationship between education and employment? Second, what is assumed about formal and informal learning? And finally, what work and education pathways are most common for different groups of students?

Policy makers generally agree that the average level of skills required in the labour force has increased, there are areas of labour shortage, and there is a need to develop skills through formal education and training (Government of Canada, 2002; Smith, 2001). As part of the skill development process, groups like the Conference Board of Canada and Human Resources Development Canada have worked to develop lists of employability or essential skills. Ministries of education are increasingly interested in incorporating these skills into curriculum and student assessment. Governments promise to make curriculum more rigorous and relevant, “raise the bar for everyone,” and certify students’ skills.

However, empirical investigation of Canadian trends indicates that there has been only gradual skill upgrading, that most work organizations (including high performance ones) continue to operate on principles of hierarchical control, and that the professional class is increasing very slowly (Livingstone, 1999, pp. 137, 162). Lowe (2000, p. 118, 84) adds that there is a “field of dreams” quality to discussion about the changing structure and quality of work and suggests that “paid work reform” needs to be considered as seriously as educational reform. Work by these writers suggests the need to empirically analyze the new economy in terms of claims about levels and types of skills required for different types of work and changing conditions of work.

Analysis of the relationship between education and the economy could also benefit from broader conceptions of both work and learning. SWT programs tend to value formal credentials over informal learning, and paid work over unpaid household and volunteer work. However, results from a survey about adult learning indicate that adults spend more time engaged in informal learning and that participation is more evenly spread across social groupings (e.g. based on education, income, sex, ethnicity, age) than for formal education (Livingstone, 2000). The problem is therefore not so much a lack of skills as a lack of recognition and valuing of informal learning and unpaid work.

The fact that informal learning has not been adequately valued in either the workplace or school is evident from the history of vocational programs (Lazerson and Dunn, 1977; Gradwell, 1999). Some writers explain this in terms of the view that credentialed work includes *status* characteristics as well as *technical-functional* aspects, and therefore the valuing of different forms of knowledge reflects positional competition among different social groups (Brown, 1995, 2000; Collins, 1979). Professionals and elite social groups have historically promoted the superior value of the “abstract utilitarian knowledge” associated with formal learning (Murphy, 1988; Guile and Griffiths, 2001). From this perspective, there is reason to be concerned that such knowledge will continue to be used to determine whether students will be excluded from, or allowed to acquire the corresponding practical and status-cultural knowledge (Murphy, 1988; Taylor, forthcoming). Furthermore, there is reason to be concerned that informal experiential learning will not be given value equal to formal learning by either *schools* or *employers*.

Because of the valuing of formal over informal learning, inadequate attention is often paid to the actual learning processes involved in work experience. For example, Guile and Griffiths (2001) argue that work experience proponents incorrectly assume that students will easily assimilate relevant workplace knowledge, skills, and attitudes through experiential learning. In contrast, they argue that students need to learn how to make links between work experience, its underlying knowledge and skill, and its context (p. 116). From this perspective, work experience programs should encourage learners to develop the capacity to draw on formal learning in order to interrogate workplace practices and vice-versa. This view challenges notions of formal and informal learning as transmission and attends to the differences in these forms and in the ways they are valued. By attending to the educative possibilities of work experience, it is possible to see them as a basis for radical educational practice (Shilling, 1987; Kincheloe, 1999; Simon, Diplo and Schenke, 1991; Lehmann and Taylor, in press).

Objectives

We are interested in exploring how work experience programs have been conceptualized and implemented at provincial and local levels, with specific attention to gaps in the literature related to the experiences of historically disadvantaged students (cf. Levin, 1999) and the perspectives of organized labour and community groups (Taylor, 2002).

Our research questions are:

1. At the provincial level, how are high school work experience programs (cooperative education, work experience and work study, apprenticeship) conceptualized and how do they relate to other educational reforms?
2. At the community level, how do different “stakeholders” think about the local economy and how does this influence the form and content of SWT programs?
3. At the school level, how do work experience programs work in practice and what are the implications for different groups of students?

Research strategy and methods

The research design is informed by our interest in the relationship between the micro-sociological level of individuals and the macro-sociological level of policy, structures, and organizations (Smith, 1987; Campbell and Gregor, 2002). Our research phases correspond to the above research questions and levels of analysis as follows:

Phase 1: Provincial SWT and Work Education Policy

The purpose of this phase of research is to understand provincial policy by examining how and by whom SWT policies and work experience programs and procedures were developed; how they fit with other educational programs and reforms; and how they are conceptualized, implemented and evaluated. Levin (2001) provides a useful review of literature that focuses on educational policy processes from the point where an issue becomes recognized as a policy problem to policy development, implementation, and assessment of outcomes. Since the state arguably plays a key role in determining the nature of positional competition and conflict through policy (Brown, 2000), this is an important part of our case study. To understand the way in which work experience is conceptualized at a provincial level, it will be useful to consider the different models of work experience proposed by Guile and Griffiths (2001). These models vary in term of their purposes, assumptions about training and development, organization, and desired outcomes.

Part of data collection involves examining policy documents from ministries of education in Alberta and Ontario. For example, The Ministry of Education in Ontario outlines policies and procedures for cooperative education and experiential learning (Ministry of Education, 2000) within the broader framework of Program and Diploma Requirements for high schools (Ministry of Education and Training 1999). Alberta Learning similarly outlines off-campus education policy (Alberta Learning, 2000) within the broader framework of its Guide to Education: ECS to grade 12 (Alberta Learning 2002). Recent reforms in Ontario include new K-12 curriculum, annual education plans for students, a

grade 10 literacy test, 40 hours of unpaid community experience for high school students, and the requirement that all districts provide SWT and cooperative education opportunities. Recent reforms in Alberta include new Career and Technology studies curriculum, new Career Directions courses, the recognition of Tech Prep certificates on the high school diploma, and a review of the Integrated Occupational Program.

In addition to document analysis, we will conduct interviews and/or focus groups with representatives from different ministries involved in SWT. We expect to talk to a maximum of 8 individuals in each province.

Phase 2: Education and the New Economy

The purpose of this phase is twofold: First, to explore the different interpretations of labour market and workplace realities expressed by different groups from selected communities in Alberta and Ontario; and second, to examine the relationship between these interpretations and the organization of work experience courses/programs. We assume that there may be conflicting views regarding changes in the conditions and requirements of work and would like to understand the bases for these views. It is also important to understand the relationship between different “realities” and high school work experience courses and programs. For example, what kind of placements (i.e., occupations, industries) are seen as most likely to benefit students? Is there more focus on apprenticeship or cooperative education/work study? Are sufficient placements available for interested students?

We will focus on a total of four communities—two in Ontario (Toronto and a rural community to be determined) and two in Alberta (Calgary and a rural community to be determined). Our method includes examining labour market information in these communities (e.g., environmental scans produced by local training boards in Ontario, government documents) and conducting focus groups (maximum of 3 in each community) with members from union locals, employer groups (e.g., Chambers of Commerce) and local industry-education groups.

Phase 3: Work Experience in Practice

This phase is most intensive and will build on knowledge about the context gained from phases 1 and 2. Our purpose is to gain an in-depth understanding of how work experience programs work in practice and the implications for different groups of students. For example, it has been well documented that certain groups (e.g., working class, female, Aboriginal, some visible minority groups, disabled, rural) experience more difficult transitions (cf. Krahn, 1996; Crysedale, King and Mandell, 1999; Looker, 1996).

Questions in this phase include: Who controls the learning process? How are school (formal) and workplace (informal) learning related in courses like cooperative education, work study, and apprenticeship? How is informal learning and unpaid work valued by schools and employers? What are the outcomes of SWT for different groups? And finally, what recommendations might be made to schools, districts, and ministries to improve SWT and work experience?

Our purpose is to focus on the forms, contents, and outcomes of work experience programs. Therefore, literature that examines the process of experiential learning with attention to the labour process will be helpful (e.g., Guile and Griffiths, 2001; Shilling, 1987).

We plan to focus on the same four communities as in phase two. Our method includes observing and interviewing students and other participants (maximum of 80 interviews) who are involved in work experience (cooperative education, work study, and apprenticeship). Relevant items from the national survey will also be administered to students at the four sites and we will compare findings with patterns of formal and informal learning among similar groups in the national survey. We will identify specific sites with the aid of provincial data, discussions with our labour and education partners, and community groups. For example, the carpenters union (Local 27) works closely with Toronto Catholic and public school districts to offer a pre-apprenticeship program for high school students. This is a possible site for an examination of youth apprenticeship in Ontario. In Alberta, students considered to be “at risk” academically are streamed into the Integrated Occupational Program (IOP). Given that apprenticeship programs attract over 80 percent males, a focus on the work experiences of females in an IOP high school in Calgary would provide an interesting contrast.

Criteria for selecting sites and participants include: courses or programs that include in-school and workplace learning; unionized and non-unionized worksites; inclusion of students from different academic streams within schools; and over-representation of students from historically disadvantaged groups.

Role of each team member

Alison Taylor (University of Alberta) will be primarily responsible for all phases of the research. She will work with Sandra Clifford (Ontario Federation of Labour) to further develop the research plan. David Livingstone (CSEW), Jackie Skytt (Alberta Teachers Associations), and Tom Fuller (Alberta Federation of Labour) will act primarily as advisors to the team.

Training process and responsibilities of students

We plan to include one post-doctoral fellow and an MA student as part of the research team. These students will work closely with project leaders and will be involved in all stages of the research, including the dissemination of results. They will be trained in interview and data analysis methods, as well as report writing for different audiences.

Outputs and dissemination of results

Results will be widely disseminated through publications and presentations and/or reports to partner and community groups. Publications will include a book manuscript, scholarly articles, op ed pieces, conference papers, and press releases. Presentations and reports will be directed to groups representing educators, organized labour, employers, government, youth employment centres and other community agencies.

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