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The Benefits and Risks of Adolescent Employment

Jeylan T. Mortimer, Ph.D. [Professor]

Department of Sociology and Principal Investigator of the Youth Development Study at the University of Minnesota

Jeylan T. Mortimer: mort002@umn.edu

Abstract

Much controversy surrounds the consequences of adolescent paid work, with researchers coming to diverse conclusions about whether work is good, work is bad, work doesn't matter (the purported effects of employment are spurious, dependent on processes of selection), and work matters for some youth but not others, depending on their prior backgrounds and attributes and the contexts of their employment. This article summarizes findings from the Youth Development Study, a long-term, ongoing longitudinal study that has followed a community-based panel from middle adolescence through early adulthood. The findings address this debate and support the final perspective—that the effects of teen employment on the successful transition to adulthood depend on its patterning through the years of high school (most invested, steady, sporadic, and occasional employment patterns) and its quality. Moreover, the YDS shows that patterns of teenage employment are linked to the social origins and motivations of youth upon entry to high school, and suggest that teenagers exercise agency as they build human capital during high school through education and work experience. The article concludes with a discussion of what parents, counselors, and others can do to help children make sound employment-related decisions during adolescence so as to assure effective career exploration and a successful school-to-work transition.

Having a paying job at some time during high school has become a near-universal adolescent experience (Committee on the Health and Safety Implications of Child Labor, 1998; U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). Many youth start to work informally even earlier, at about the age of twelve, most often in their own neighborhoods, babysitting, shoveling snow, cutting grass, or doing various odd jobs. At first, paid work is episodic and generally quite limited. By the age of 16, adolescent workers are more likely to have formal jobs, working in the retail and service sectors of the economy, especially in fast food restaurants, grocery stores, or other retail stores. Employment becomes more regular and more time-consuming during the latter years of high school, with many teens working 20 or more hours per week.

The prevalence of teenage employment has sparked lively debates over whether adolescents should work, for how many hours, and in what kinds of jobs. Most parents like the idea of their children working, as they think that employment instills a whole array of positive traits, including independence, responsibility, interpersonal skills, and a good work ethic (Phillips & Sandstrom, 1990). Parents believe that the jobs that they themselves held during adolescence helped them to acquire these very same attributes. In fact, when asked in very general terms about whether the jobs they held in adolescence had any negative effects, only a small number had anything to report. Their adolescent children also want to work to earn their own spending money to be able to buy the accoutrements of adolescent life and take part in the often expensive leisure activities popular among their peers. While a minority of teenagers give their earnings directly to their parents, earnings from teens' part-time jobs help many families economically insofar as adolescent children are able to purchase themselves items that their parents would otherwise provide. Teens buy clothes, food, gas, and music; some save a portion of their earnings for larger purchases or even to attend college (Shanahan, Elder, Burchinal, & Conger,

1996). Adolescents tend to report high levels of satisfaction with their jobs and hold many of the same beliefs as their parents about the benefits of employment.

On the other side of the debate, some educators complain that working teens put in too many hours on their jobs; they may come to school tired, have little time to see their teachers after school for special help, and avoid extracurricular activities (Bills, Helms & Ozcan, 1995). Some developmental psychologists echo these concerns and warn that employment may cut short, or even deny, youth an essential “adolescent moratorium,” a stage of life free from adult-like pursuits, stressors, and responsibilities (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991). They believe adolescence should be a time of exploration—a time to figure out who one is and what path one should follow. According to this point of view, too much work may have severe opportunity costs with respect to healthy identity formation.

This article will address the probable benefits, as well as some potential costs, of teenage employment. Initially, four plausible answers to the general question, “Is working good for teenagers?” are presented. Then it will highlight findings of the Youth Development Study, an ongoing longitudinal study, that bear directly on this question. Finally, implications of the findings that may be of interest to parents, educators, and others with interests in enhancing healthy youth development will be discussed.

Is Working Good For Teenagers?

Researchers across disciplines, including psychologists, sociologists, and economists, have been systematically studying adolescent employment for several decades. As Staff and his colleagues (2009) have noted based on their extensive review of the literature, four basic answers to the question, “Is working good for teenagers?” have emerged. The first is highly affirmative, largely in accord with what youth and their parents believe. Youth themselves think that employment helps them to develop a wide range of beneficial attributes, such as the capacity to take responsibility, develop time-management skills, overcome shyness with adults, and handle money. Furthermore, at least while they are in the work setting, employment makes them feel more like an adult. Employed teens have high rates of job satisfaction (Mortimer, 2003).

The second answer is negative, emphasizing that work carries with it many risks. Critics of adolescent work point out that teens who work long hours tend to have lower grades than teens who work fewer hours; there are similar gradients in a range of academically relevant indicators such as absences from school and dropping out. These critics also report that as hours of work increase, adolescents drink and smoke more, and engage in a wide range of problem behaviors (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1995; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991; Steinberg, Fegley, & Dornbusch, 1993).

A third position is that work makes very little difference with respect to healthy development; what pass for “benefits” as well as “costs” of employment are attributable to self-selection. Teens who enter adolescence with strong academic interests and goals may work very little during high school, and when they do have jobs, they limit their hours of employment so as to not jeopardize their grades. Those who choose to work long hours, in contrast, already engage in more problem behavior, are less interested in school, and get lower grades even at the start of high school (Staff et al., 2009). Thus, according to this perspective, problem behavior of adolescent workers is more a function of pre-existing differences than an outcome attributable to their employment.

A fourth answer to this perplexing question has also surfaced: employment has different consequences depending on both the characteristics of the adolescent and the circumstances under which it occurs (Lee & Staff, 2007). To fully understand the consequences of teenage

work, we must address the degree of investment in employment and the particular experiences that youth have while working; that is, the quantity as well as the quality of work, as well as adolescents' social backgrounds, academic promise, and motivations to work.

Youth Development Study

The Youth Development Study (YDS) was initiated more than 20 years ago in an attempt to address the controversies surrounding adolescent employment (Mortimer, 2003). Importantly, the YDS is a prospective study, enabling observation of teens' time commitments to their jobs, numerous indicators of the quality of their work, and the adolescents' own self-reports of their subjective experiences of working as they move through high school and into college or the work force. Surveys were initially obtained from 1,000 students, randomly chosen from a list of 9th graders (mostly 14 and 15 years old) attending the St. Paul, Minnesota Public Schools in the fall of 1987. Each spring during the four years of high school (1988–1991), the students filled out surveys containing large batteries of questions about their work experiences, including intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of work, stressors, relationships with supervisors and co-workers, job satisfaction, and commitment.

After the students left high school, the YDS continued to survey them near-annually by mail. Currently, the youth are in their mid-thirties, and approximately 75% of the original cohort has been retained in the most recent waves of data collection.

There are, of course, both disadvantages and advantages of long-term studies of this kind. The data describe the work experiences of teenagers more than twenty years ago. High school students are less likely to be employed today, especially in the midst of our current recession, and teenagers' attitudes toward work may have changed as a result of their reduced job prospects. Still, if one is interested not only in immediate correlates and outcomes, but in long-term effects of teenage employment that may not be apparent until many years after high school, then data of this kind are essential. Because of the lengthening transition to adulthood, it takes a long time to ascertain whether early work experience actually influences eventual educational attainments and career establishment. We do have some information, nonetheless, that bears on the question of change over historical time. While the students were in high school, we also asked the students' parents to complete questionnaires to obtain parents' views about their own experiences of employment when they were teenagers and about their attitudes toward their children's work. As noted above, there was general agreement across generations about the benefits of teen employment.

The YDS has enabled us to understand much about teenage employment, including its short-term consequences as well as its longer-term implications for educational attainment and career establishment. What have we learned from this prospective study?

Patterns of Work Experience through Time

We find clearly identifiable patterns of teen employment with distinct precursors and likely consequences (Mortimer, 2003). It is insufficient to know merely whether a teen is employed, or even how many hours that teenager works. Instead, it is more fruitful to understand how employment is patterned throughout high school with respect to two temporal dimensions: the duration and intensity of work (see Table 1). The "most invested" workers are employed in most months of observation (22 of 24, in fact, from the 10th through the 12th grades), and during this period they work on average more than 20 hours per week. "Sporadic" workers also put in a lot of hours when they are employed (more than 20), but they only work about half the months of observation. "Steady" workers, like the "most invested," are employed most of the time during high school, but they moderate their hours, working on average 20 hours per week or less. "Occasional" workers are employed relatively few months (similar to the "sporadic"

workers), but also limit their hours of work to 20 or fewer per week. Testimony to the ubiquity of adolescent work, only 7% of the panel did not hold any employment when school was in session. Because the debates about teenage employment largely concern the conflicts between work and school, this typology does not reflect summer employment.

The research further revealed that steady and occasional workers came from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and were more intrinsically motivated with respect to school in the 9th grade. They were more likely to enjoy school, to think they were learning things at school that would be important to them in later life, and to have high grades. They also had higher educational aspirations for the future. Not surprisingly, they limited their hours of work and were therefore able to participate in extracurricular activities, spend time with their families and friends, and engage in the highly valued “well-rounded” adolescent life style. When asked about why they obtained their first jobs, they were more likely than the other youth to say that they wanted to save money for college.

The most invested workers, in contrast, were distinctive in their interest in gaining work experience. Their parents tended to be less well-educated, and the youth themselves had lower educational aspirations and were less engaged in school. During high school, they described their jobs in ways that seemed more “adult-like”; they not only worked more hours and had higher earnings than their less work-invested peers, they also reported that their jobs gave them more learning opportunities, more supervisory responsibilities, and were more stressful. Sporadic workers were more like the most invested than the other youth, but they were the most strongly oriented to their peers upon entry to high school, and reported the most problem behavior.

Clearly the evidence supports processes of selection to work—patterns of employment during high school do not occur randomly but instead are linked to students’ socioeconomic backgrounds and their interests in school. The findings suggest that youth may be exercising agency, as their employment experiences during high school reflect their goals, articulated as early as the 9th grade. The steady and occasional workers pursued a line of action that reflected their strong academic motivations; they were building human capital mainly through their high level of engagement in school. For them, work was a “side line,” or even an activity that supported their educational goals—through saving for college. The most invested workers, in contrast, were seemingly more reliant on their work experiences than their school experiences to build their human capital.

Furthermore, steady and occasional workers were more likely to attend 4-year colleges and obtained highly coveted B.A. and B.S. degrees relatively quickly (Staff & Mortimer, 2007). The most invested workers were more likely to attend community colleges and vocational schools. They moved more rapidly toward “career” jobs, that is, jobs they themselves considered to be their careers (Mortimer, Vuolo, Staff, Wakefield, & Xie, 2008). Sporadic high school workers seemingly fell through the cracks, reflecting their relative lack of investment in work and in school. They were the most likely of all groups to be “idle,” neither employed nor in school, during the years immediately after high school.

The Quality of Work

The Youth Development Study also found variability in the quality of adolescent employment. Defying the notion that all teen employment is essentially the same, teenagers generally move from jobs that are more simple to those that are more complex during the four years of high school, obtaining more training, greater supervisory responsibilities, and more opportunities for advancement (Mortimer, 2003). Work quality was found to be significantly related to teen self-concepts and attitudes. That is, those whose work experiences affirm their capacities as workers (e.g., having jobs that “pay well”) and give them opportunities to advance develop a

stronger sense of self-efficacy overtime (Finch, Shanahan, Mortimer, & Ryu, 1991). Stressors at work, in contrast, led to diminished self-esteem and self-efficacy, and appear to foster depressed mood (Shanahan, Finch, Mortimer, & Ryu, 1991). Interestingly, however, these negative consequences are short-lived; work stressors during adolescence may actually increase resilience (Mortimer & Staff, 2004). That is, those who experienced stressors in their jobs during high school were less likely to exhibit declines in self-concept and mental health in response to similar work stressors confronted four years after high school. Those youth, however, who had not had these prior “steeling” experiences responded to the same problems at work in much the same way as their peers had during high school. We conclude that moderate stressors at work during adolescence may teach teens valuable lessons.

In Summary: Is Work Good for Youth?

Based on the findings of the Youth Development Study, we conclude that the first two answers to the question, “Is work good for youth?” are far too simplistic. Employment can have both negative and positive effects, and many of the differences between teenagers who work at high and low levels of intensity may be attributable to self-selection. We find evidence, however, that work experience can promote the healthy development of some young people, especially when it is moderate in intensity and steady in duration—attributes that assure that employment does not interfere with other important elements in a teen’s life, and instead foster an appropriate balance between school and work. Steady work may foster the development of time management skills that serve young people well as they move into college, since most college students continue to work to support themselves and to pay tuition, at least partially (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002). In fact, we find remarkable continuity in patterns of working and studying during high school and the years thereafter (Staff & Mortimer, 2007).

High school jobs may also be quite beneficial for those youth who are less interested in college, and do not have the familial or personal resources (high aspirations and engagement in school) to successfully pursue a four-year college degree. Whereas moving quickly into a self-identified “career” job will confer less socio-economic benefit than pursuing higher education and later career establishment, obtaining steady work with “career prospects” is certainly a positive accomplishment for a young adult.

Much research on substance use, problem behavior, and other so-called negative consequences of employment indicates that these are largely attributable to self-selection rather than to work experience itself (for a review, see Staff et al., 2009). That is, youth who already exhibit problem behavior gravitate toward more intensive work. Employment as well as problem behavior, like early sexuality and the use of alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs, may be seen as “claims to adult status,” or indicators of “pseudomaturity.” Moreover, earnings from work may be used to purchase alcohol and drugs and to support activities, like cruising around in cars, with like-minded peers. It is noteworthy that, when differences in attitudes and behaviors are appropriately taken into account, the bad consequences of employment often disappear.

Advice for Parents, Teachers and Others who Work with Youth

In view of these findings, how should parents handle the issue of adolescent work? Our findings suggest that youth work is not a strong matter of contention in most households, since the vast majority of parents and teens seem to be in agreement about the potential value of employment during the adolescent years. Parents, however, can still play an important role in guiding their children toward the kinds of work experiences that will be most beneficial, and helping them to avoid the risks of employment.

Parents should counsel their children to avoid hazardous workplaces. Though serious injuries in the workplace are relatively rare events, they do happen. From 1992 to 2000 approximately

68 youth died from work-related injuries each year, rates fell between 2000 and 2004 (Windau & Meyer, 2005). Parents and their teenage children should be well informed about the child labor laws in their states, as states vary in their regulations with respect to hours of work on school days, nighttime employment, and specifically prohibited occupations and tasks for 14 to 18 year-olds. Parents may inform themselves about these laws by checking the websites of their State Departments of Labor. For example, Massachusetts has prepared an informative downloadable pamphlet for parents and teens (http://www.mass.gov/Cago/docs/Workplace/teenguide_final.pdf). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) also maintains a very useful website (<http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/teenworkers/index.html>).

Parents should also monitor their children's employment so that they are aware of the number of hours the adolescents work, the timing of those hours (weekday afternoons or weekends, night time work), and the general patterning of the work throughout high school. These temporal dimensions should be considered in view of the adolescent's long-range goals. If the objective is to graduate from a four-year college, the teenager might benefit from having a steady job, but one that is limited to 20 or fewer hours per week. A "most invested" pattern of employment, is more compatible with the goal to transition more quickly from school to work, and become established in an occupational career. Teens should be encouraged to cut back on employment that "crowds out" other activities that play an important role in adolescent development, such as sports and other extracurricular activities in school, developing friendships, and time with the family. They should also avoid work that is highly stressful and carries with it few learning opportunities.

Teachers, counselors, coaches, and others who work with youth should also be aware of the linkages between patterns of work investments in high school and subsequent educational and career achievements. These adults are in particularly opportune positions to help youth to develop strategies to achieve their higher education and vocational goals. Teachers could take greater advantage of the fact that so many of their students have paid jobs, for example, by encouraging them to reflect on their work and its relation to what they are learning in the classroom in their writing assignments (for example, are they learning things in school that could be helpful in their jobs, presently or in the future? Do experiences on the job help them to better understand ideas what they are learning in school?).

Teachers and counselors might also guide students' job-seeking. Although teens tend to move toward jobs that require more training and involve greater responsibility as they advance through high school, youth who want to work should be encouraged to seek learning opportunities and other experiences that will help them to explore their emerging vocational interests and abilities. To enhance vocational development, jobs in a variety of workplaces may be more useful than settling into a single job during the high school career (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). Teachers might present opportunities for students to discuss their work experiences in class—both good and bad—and what they have learned from them, thereby increasing students' collective knowledge of the conditions of work in various workplaces throughout their communities. In this way, students may be able to make more informed decisions about the kinds of jobs that would be most useful to them.

Due to the limited job market for teenage workers, sometimes teens can gain access to a wider range of work settings through volunteering, internships, or various programs sponsored by their schools, including "job shadowing" an experienced worker, or work-study experiences. It is unrealistic to expect teenagers to make firm occupational choices during high school, and relatively few do so in this era of extended higher education and prolonged transitions to adulthood. Nonetheless, it is still worthwhile to begin thinking about work and the kinds of challenges and opportunities that would be most congenial to a teen's nascent interests and

capacities. Teens may begin to think about what kinds of rewards at work are most important to them, be they intrinsic (e.g., autonomy, responsibility, opportunities to express creativity, a job that enables them to help other people) or extrinsic (e.g., high income, opportunities for advancement), or some combination of both. It is during high school and the years immediately following that these values crystallize. Much school and major “shopping” as well as occupational “floundering,” could possibly be avoided if young people’s work values were sufficiently formed to provide a basis for effective educational and career decision making. Some combination of paid jobs, internships, and volunteer jobs might encourage optimal career exploration and long-term benefits.

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Table 1

Adolescent Patterns of Employment During the School Year

Average Intensity	Duration (grades 10–12)	
	High (22 of 24)	Low (10–12 months of 24)
Work more than 20 hours a week	Most Invested (26%)	Sporadic (18%)
Work 20 hours a week or less	Steady (25%)	Occasional (24%)