

EMPLOYMENT AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS: EFFECTS ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING, ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY

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ABSTRACT

Teenage workers are now common in the workforce and studies have identified both benefits and problems associated with balancing school and work. This study examines the effects of personal and work characteristics on the psychological well-being, academic performance, and occupational safety of working high school students in the Eastern Townships. Results suggest that self-employment and working for personal growth are associated with higher levels of psychological well-being, and that teenagers working for a family business are exposed to more occupational hazards. School-year employment does not appear to impact on grades.

RÉSUMÉ

Les étudiants sont nombreux à occuper un emploi, et les recherches identifient des avantages comme des inconvénients à concilier le travail et les études. Cette recherche analyse donc, chez des étudiants de niveau secondaire des Cantons-de-l'Est, l'influence de différents aspects du travail ainsi que de certaines caractéristiques personnelles sur leur bien-être psychologique, leur performance académique ainsi que leur sécurité. Les résultats démontrent que les travailleurs autonomes ainsi que les jeunes qui apprécient travailler jouissent d'un plus grand bien-être psychologique. Il est aussi révélé que les adolescents qui travaillent pour une entreprise familiale sont plus à risque de subir des accidents reliés au travail. De plus, les résultats soulignent que le travail à temps partiel pendant l'année académique ne semble pas influencer les résultats scolaires.

During adolescence, youngsters further define their identities, clarify their values and goals, and increase their independence from their families. As part of this process, they develop their work values and career aspirations (Erickson, 1968). During this transitional period, an increasing number of teens work on a part-time basis while going to school. These young workers face, besides the regular school requirements and expectations, work-related demands and challenges, which may influence their quality of life and affect their well-being.

The number of adolescents who balance work and school has increased over the years to the extent that in 2004-2005, 34% of female and 28 % of male high school students between the ages of 15 and 17 were employed during the school year. They worked an average of 13 hours per week. The majority (60%) were employed in two main sectors: namely, retail and wholesale trade (e.g., grocery, clothing, health and personal care), and food services and the hospitality business. Furthermore, an increasing number of teens worked in information, culture/recreation, and educational services, whereas a declining number worked in manufacturing, forestry and agriculture (Usalcas & Bowlby, 2006).

Several studies have evaluated the influence of student employment on aspects such as academic performance, mental health (anxiety, depression), injuries, personal development, career maturity (career planning and exploration), and work-related attitudes. Investigations that evaluated the impact of the number of hours worked on students' academic performance have found mixed results. Some findings suggest that working has a beneficial effect on academic performance. Working a moderate number of hours per week has been found to be associated with higher school commitment, higher GPA, decreased chances of dropping out, and greater intentions of attending college (D'Amico, 1984; Mortimer, Finch, Ryu, Shanahan, & Call, 1996; Paschall, Flewelling & Russell, 2004; Staff & Mortimer, 2007; Steel, 1991; Warren, 2002). Other studies, however, report that working many hours has a detrimental effect on academic performance, although there appears to be no consensus about how many hours is too many (Largie, Field, Hernandez-Reif, Sanders, & Diego, 2001; Schoenhals, Tienda, & Schneider, 1998; Warren, 2002). Some studies found that working decreases school performance independently of the number of hours worked (e.g., Steinberg, Fegley, & Dornbusch, 1993).

A number of factors may influence the relationship (positive or negative) between work and academic performance. These include

personal characteristics of the student involved, characteristics of the job, and social support. It has been suggested that the discrepancies in academic performance found between workers and non-workers may be explained by individual differences (e.g., age, gender, self-esteem, school commitment, and educational aspirations) rather than the number of hours worked (McNeal, 1997; Steinberg et al., 1993; Warren, LePore, & Mare, 2000). Moreover, the quality of the job (e.g., job type, skill variety, role clarity, role conflict, level of decision-making and autonomy) may influence academic performance and students' well-being (Barling, Rogers, & Kelloway, 1995; McNeal, 1997; Mortimer, Finch, Shanahan, & Ryu, 1992; Mortimer, Harley, & Staff, 2002), as could family cohesiveness and parental involvement which may act as intervening variables between academic performance and students' work intensity (Largie et al., 2001; Paschall et al., 2004; Roiseman, 2002).

A number of positive outcomes are associated with working part-time during the school year. Working high school students are more likely than non-working ones to be physically active in their leisure time (Carrière, 2005) and to be involved in positive community-based activities (Paschall, Ringwalt, & Flewelling, 2002). In addition, psychological benefits may result, especially when the job provides opportunities to develop skills valuable for the future (Charner & Fraser, 1988, in Yamoor & Mortimer, 1990; Mortimer et al., 1992; Mortimer, Harley, & Staff, 2002; Skorikov & Vondracek, 1997). One of the developmental tasks of adolescence is to identify one's vocational interests and aspirations (Erikson, 1963; Gottfredson, 1981). Working students may have the opportunity to explore and experience first-hand certain aspects of work that may be related to their professional aspirations (Loughlin & Barling, 1998). Accordingly, working during adolescence has been shown to be associated with present and future career planning and exploration (Creed, Patton, & Prideaux, 2007; Hill & Woolmer, 1987), and with the development of career maturity and career development attitudes (Creed & Patton, 2003; Loughlin & Barling, 1998; Yamoor & Mortimer, 1990). Early employment may be advantageous to future labor-force participation, employment status, and income (Carr, Wright, & Brody, 1996; Hamilton & Powers, 1990).

Although balancing school and work may generate a number of short- and long-term benefits, working (particularly long hours) during the school year has also been linked to adverse outcomes. Working students may experience symptoms of psychological strain, such as decreased sleep and somatic complaints, and physical

injuries (Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991; Weller, Cooper, Basen-Engquist, Kelder, & Tortolero, 2004; Weller, Cooper, Tortolero, Kelder, & Hassan, 2003). An increase in risk-taking behaviors such as smoking, alcohol use, and substance abuse has also been noted (Carrière, 2005; Mortimer et al., 1996; Weller et al., 2003; Wu, Schlenger, & Galvin, 2003). However, Paschall et al. (2002) described the association between part-time work and adverse outcomes as *spurious* and linked to basic demographic and socioeconomic differences between working and nonworking teens.

Occupational health and safety is a major concern. Canadian statistics show that one in seven young workers is injured on the job, and that injured young people (ages 15–29) represent one in every four injured workers in Canada (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety). Almost every month, one young employee dies at work (Ledoux & Laberge, 2006). These statistics are particularly alarming given the proportion of students working in sectors associated with high levels of occupational injuries. According to Weller et al. (2003) the highest injury risks sectors employing adolescent workers are, in order, agriculture, restaurants, construction and yard work. Yet, workplace injuries remain underreported by teenage workers (Parker, Carl, French, & Martin, 1994).

Young workers are also exposed to several factors that may influence their well-being, such as organizational constraints (e.g., irregular schedules, lack of supervision, low pay, lack of training, etc.) and physical constraints (repetitive work, physical effort, exposure to high levels of noise, use of dangerous equipment, etc.) (Ledoux & Laberge, 2006). Some specific factors have been found to be associated with work injuries among teens. These include male gender, negative mood, physical hazards, heavy workloads, boring job tasks, depressive symptoms, and on-the-job use of alcohol and marijuana (Frone, 1998).

In summary, adolescents who work while attending school are faced with additional expectations and challenges. The literature shows that they are exposed to occupational circumstances that may influence their academic performance, psychosocial functioning, physical well-being and professional aspirations. The question, then, is not whether part-time work is either *good* or *bad*, but rather, what are the factors contributing to a more positive working experience for these youths?

Study objectives

This paper presents results obtained from a broader project studying experiences of senior high school students who work on a part-time basis during the school year. Specifically, the investigation examined whether findings of studies previously reported in the literature generalized to students living in the socio-cultural context of the Eastern Townships in Quebec. The aim of the study was to assess the influence of personal and work characteristics (i.e., age, gender, motivation for working, type of employment, number of hours worked) on students' psychological wellbeing, academic performance, and occupational safety.

Methodology

Study Sample and Procedure

A cross-sectional survey was conducted in May 2005 at a mid-sized English regional high school in Sherbrooke, Quebec. During class time, 263 students completed a booklet in which they identified socio-demographic information and answered questions about their job characteristics, grades, and goals for the future. Participants further completed standardized scales evaluating emotional exhaustion, psychological strain and work overload.

Emotional exhaustion resulting from work was measured with the 3-item scale reported by Iverson, Olekalns, and Erwin (1998). A sample item is "I have felt emotionally drained from my job." Responses are given on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "all of the time" (7). Higher scores reflect an increased sense of emotional exhaustion. The internal consistency of the scale in this study was good ($\alpha = .86$).

Psychological strain was evaluated with the General Health Questionnaire-12. This 12-item scale is a context-free measure of overall psychological functioning and well-being (Banks et al., 1980). An example of an item is "Have you been able to concentrate on whatever you're doing?" Items are rated on a sevenpoint scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "all of the time" (7). Half of the questions are negatively worded. A higher score indicates greater psychological strain. The internal consistency of the scale in this study was good ($\alpha = .85$) and equivalent to those found in other studies.

Work overload was evaluated by a four-item scale (Kelloway & Barling, 1994), ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly disagree. A sample item is "There was never enough time to get

everything done", and the internal consistency was .75.

Parents were informed of the study and were given the option of excluding their child from participation. Students were told that they could withdraw at any time and that their participation was completely anonymous. Results were analyzed with nonparametric and parametric tests (chi-square, independent t-test, ANOVA, and multiple linear regression), and the significance level was set at $p < .05$.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Two hundred and sixty-three participants completed the survey. Of these, 75% ($N = 197$) reported that they worked during the school year. These students (98 males and 99 females) were in levels 11 or 12, and ranged in age between 14 and 18 yrs ($M = 16.3$). The majority of participants was able to communicate in French and English, with 85% reporting that they felt prepared to work in an environment requiring them to speak French.

Working was defined as any activity out of school that included employment in a family business (family farm, store, restaurant, etc.), a business or organization not owned by family, or self-employment (e.g., snow removal, lawn care, house cleaning, babysitting). Fifty-four students reported working for a family business, 111 for an outside employer and 87 were self-employed. One hundred and forty-nine students reported working one job-type (family, outside work or self-employed), 41 reported working two job-types, and seven reported working three job-types. On average, students worked 16 hours per week; 50% worked 13 hours or less and 12% worked 30 hours or more.

One half of the working and non-working participants planned to attend university (see Figure 1). As shown in Figure 2, over one quarter of working students stated that they hoped to remain in the Eastern Townships to live and work. When comparing the intentions of working and non-working students, a trend was found suggesting that a higher proportion of working students plans to remain in the Eastern Townships than non-working students ($\chi^2 (1, N = 263) = 3.07, p < .08$).

Part-time Work and Academic Performance

The grades of working students did not significantly differ from those who did not work (25% of the sample). Contrary to findings of other studies, work intensity did not have an impact on students'

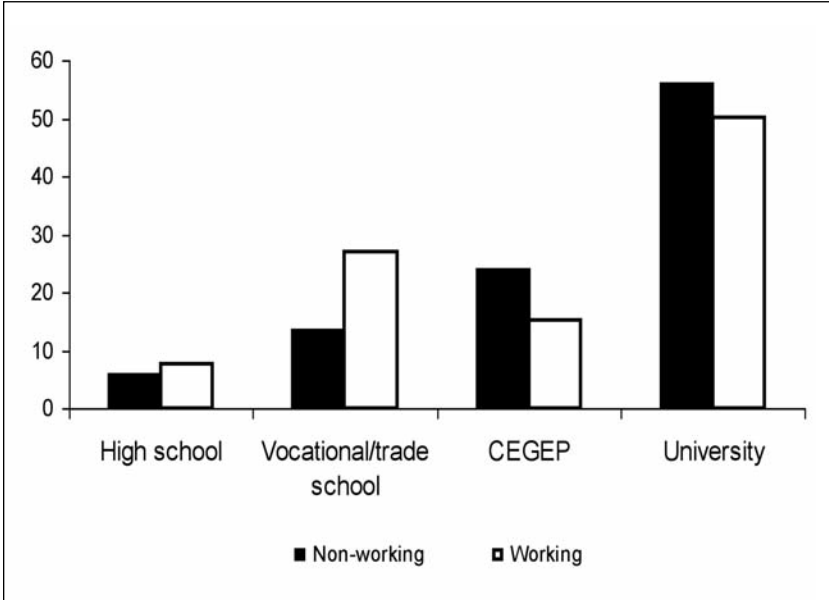


Figure 1

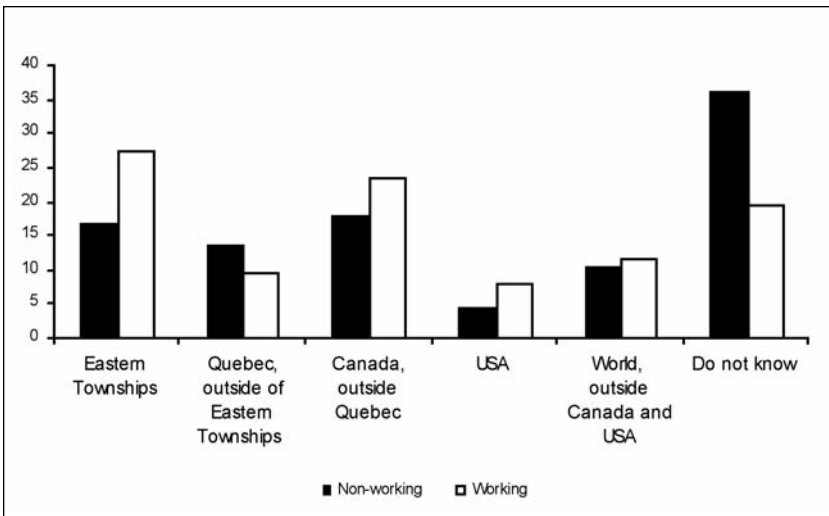


Figure 2

self-reported grades. Whether the number of hours worked was used as a continuous variable or divided into categories (high-low, high-moderate-low) with cutoff points identified in other studies (15, 20 or 30 hours), no significant differences were identified.

Impact of Reasons for Working and Job Type on Psychological Well-being

The reasons for working included: money (89%); because they liked it (32%); it's something to do (30%); to help the family business (10%); and to help out the family financially (8%). These reasons were systematically related to aspects of students' psychological well-being. For instance, teens who reported that they worked because they liked it, experienced significantly lower levels of emotional exhaustion ($t(194) = 2.60, p < .01$) and psychological strain ($t(182) = 2.17, p < .03$) than those who did not state this as a reason for working. Students who worked to help the family financially experienced higher levels of emotional exhaustion ($t(194) = -2.68, p < .01$) and psychological strain ($t(182) = -2.11, p < .04$) than those who did not. Levels of emotional exhaustion ($t(194) = 3.12, p < .002$) and perceived work overload ($t(194) = 4.61, p < .001$) were significantly lower when students were self-employed rather than working for an outside employer or for a family business.

Occupational Safety

Thirty percent of the respondents indicated that they had reported at least one workplace accident they personally experienced to management during the school year in which the survey took place; 28% experienced at least one workplace accident but did not report it. Boys experienced significantly more unreported accidents than girls, $t(193) = 2.23, p < .03$. Sixty percent came close to having an accident on at least one occasion (a near miss) during that same time-period. A multiple regression analysis conducted to determine factors predicting the frequency of near misses revealed that adolescent boys were more likely to experience near accidents than girls, and that emotional exhaustion and working for a family business predicted the frequency of near accidents, ($R^2 = .13, F(3,193) = 9.12, p < .001$). Age, motivations for working, and the number of hours worked did not predict the occurrence of near misses, and were consequently excluded from this regression analysis.

Discussion

The results of this investigation show that three quarters of the students surveyed were employed during the school year. They worked for various reasons and for different types of employers, and these factors had an impact on self-reported levels of well-being. In this study, the number of hours worked did not have an impact on academic performance. This may support Markel and Frone's (1998) suggestion that it is the combination of undesirable work circumstances and higher work intensity that leads to greater work-school conflict. Perhaps the students' work circumstances were sufficiently positive as to not affect their grades.

Students' reasons for working and type of employer are important, as they seem to affect their well-being. Psychological strain and emotional exhaustion are lowest when students work because they wish to and when they are self-employed. Self-employed students in particular report less emotional exhaustion. Perhaps self-employed students have greater control over their work experiences (e.g., tasks, hours, clients) which allows them greater autonomy and less work constraints. However, gender differences may partially explain these results, as a higher proportion of girls reported being self-employed. More research would be needed to understand the personal and job characteristics of self-employed youth that might contribute to the differences between them and youth working for others.

Adolescents' occupational safety must be emphasized. Consistent with the existing literature (Frone, 1998; Weller et al., 2003), adolescent boys experienced more unreported accidents and near accidents than girls. This may be related to the nature of the jobs held by adolescent boys or to personal attributes, such as higher levels of risk-taking behaviors. In addition, working for a family business predicted a higher occurrence of near accidents. Perhaps family businesses tend to be in more dangerous sectors (e.g., agriculture), and perhaps safety issues and guidelines are less promoted in these types of businesses. Moreover, young employees may not feel they have the power to demand the implementation of safety measures or to create safer work circumstances for themselves. CSST occupational safety programs (e.g., Escouade jeunesse, Défi prévention jeunesse!) should be promoted or made accessible in high schools in order to reach the working students, while ensuring that these programs are available to English-speaking youth. Moreover, efforts should be made to raise the students' awareness of their rights and responsibilities, as well as those of their employers, as they are

stipulated in the *Commission des normes du travail du Québec* (Quebec Labour Standards' Commission). Judging from these results, this may be of particular importance with respect to family businesses.

Based on Canadian census data, Flock and Warnke (2004) reported alarming rates of out-migration among Quebec's young English-speaking adults seeking economic opportunities. The present study reveals that only one quarter of students (working and non-working students combined) plan to remain in the Eastern Townships, therefore suggesting that this out-migration trend will continue. Furthermore, apparently many high school and vocational school students from the Eastern Townships expect to leave the region to pursue their education elsewhere (Brault, Karpenko & Kishchuk, 2005). Consequently, initiatives promoting regional employment and educational opportunities for English-speaking youth, such as *Topportunity* of the Townshippers of Tomorrow Committee, are particularly warranted. However, on a good note, a majority of students considered themselves capable of working in French and English, therefore the results of previous studies may not generalize to this sample.

As with any study, one must be careful of limitations in this study and avoid over-interpretation of the results. This study is foremost a descriptive study that cannot and should not be interpreted as an indication of causal relationships. All we can really say for sure is that we found relationships between the various variables reported and that certain factors seemed to be important towards understanding the students' work experience. We cannot firmly state that any one measure in this study causes another. Nonetheless, we have in these results an interesting snapshot of the current experience of English-speaking working teenagers from the Eastern Townships.

Overall, outcomes of the present study are in general agreement with those of other investigations conducted in the area that indicated that there are many benefits but also potential drawbacks to working while in school. The research suggests that the quality of the work experience is important (Kelloway & Barling, 1999), because part-time employment contributes to the formation of occupational aspirations and work attitudes (Loughlin & Barling, 1998, 2001), thereby having potential long-term consequences. It is therefore important that this work experience be as positive, safe and respectful as possible. These young workers are tomorrow's colleagues, managers and employers.

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