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Preparing Youth for Work

Youth workforce development is an important policy objective under any circumstance. Young people need to be integrated into the workforce for the economy and society to function. It is a basic, fundamental need. In this era, several macro-level developments make this especially vital. Within most Western countries, the baby boom cohort is reaching retirement age and there is a need for new workers to take their place. Young workers are also necessary to keep social security systems solvent: the fewer young people in the workforce, paying into social security, the less funds will be available for the retired. On a global level, competitive forces have increased and a skilled workforce is essential for any country to maintain its position.

Nonetheless, integrating youth into the workforce is not easy, and the difficulties have been exacerbated by economies weakened by the Great Recession. Articles in major national publications such as *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic* highlight policymakers' attempts to combat soaring rates of youth unemployment in Europe.[1] In Italy, for example, for those younger than age twenty-five, the unemployment rate has topped 40 percent.

In the United States, which has recovered more quickly from economic setbacks than Europe, the youth unemployment rate is lower, approximately 16 percent, but this is still more than double the overall US unemployment rate. Minority youth have always had much higher unemployment rates than majority youth. At present, the official black youth unemployment rate in the United States is approximately 30 percent (and many consider this figure to be an underestimation, as it counts only those who are actively seeking employment). Early unemployment can "scar" youth and make obtaining employment as an adult more difficult, and consequently

[1] Ewing & Eddy (2013); Thompson (2013).

the developmental transition into adult life more problematic.[2] At age forty-two, wages may still be 13 to 21 percent less for those who experienced unemployment during their youth,[3] bringing hardship to individuals and families. Over the long term, these issues can tear at the social fabric of society.

Historically, a variety of social policies have sought to prepare youth to enter the workforce. Rather than review these exhaustively, we shall consider major systems in Europe and the United States.[4]

The German apprenticeship system is widely considered the "gold standard" in youth workforce development.[5] Germany has a dual education system that combines extensive on-the-job training (a minimum of three days each week) with at least one day per week in school. The on-the-job training is provided by designated, experienced workers and may include rotation among various jobs in a firm. The schools provide both general education (e.g., in German and social studies) as well as instruction geared toward developing understanding and skills for the work that youth are doing at a firm. There is an effort to integrate the academic material with applications in the workplace, so that subjects, such as math, are oriented toward the needs of specific occupations. Learning in school is designed to supplement what is learned on the job.

The German dual system is regulated by federal (national) law and involves cooperation among the government, employers, and unions (a state of affairs that is currently unimaginable in the US context). Apprenticeships normally last for three years. They are offered in 348 occupations, the majority in service sector jobs (60 percent) and the remainder in industrial production (40 percent). Almost a quarter of all German firms (24 percent) train apprentices and approximately two-thirds of youth complete an apprenticeship by age twenty-five. Nearly 60 percent of all apprentices are

[2] Bell & Blanchflower (2011); Gregg & Tominey (2005); Mroz & Savage (2006). Ellwood (1980) is an important early study. The broader area of minority youth unemployment has been of scholarly interest for several decades; see the excellent early collection of papers by Freeman & Holzer (1986).

[3] Gregg & Tominey (2005).

[4] For a report on European initiatives more broadly, see European Commission (2013) and reports from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (e.g., OECD, 2010). There is also research on European and US samples that addresses the school-to-work transition outside of the policy and program context (see, e.g., papers in the anthologies by Neumark, 2007, and by Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; also Ryan, 2001). For the developing world, see National Research Council & Institute of Medicine (2005).

[5] This discussion draws largely on Steadman (2010) and Hamilton (1990). For a more skeptical view, see Harhoff & Kane (1997).

subsequently employed by the firm in which they completed their apprenticeship. Related systems exist in Austria and Switzerland.[6]

In the United States, apprenticeship training is decidedly less popular.[7] Historians note that the US apprenticeship system had been significantly weakened by the end of the nineteenth century. Instead, the vocational school replaced the apprenticeship as the primary vehicle for workforce development training. The US government began funding vocational education in 1917 with the passage of the Smith–Hughes Act. Stand-alone vocational schools, or vocational tracks within comprehensive high schools, were often quite popular. As sociologist Kathryn Neckerman notes, in Chicago in 1925 almost 60 percent of high school diplomas were conferred for completion of two-year and four-year vocational programs. One of the best equipped vocational high schools in Chicago had an enrollment of 7,000 by 1930. However, African American students faced discrimination, both in enrolling in the more selective vocational schools and in entering trades.

There have been continual efforts to invigorate vocational high schools.[8] The most intensive, current effort to improve workforce development of in-school youth focuses on the creation of career academies within high schools. These schools are organized around a career theme and provide academic and technical curricula, work-based learning opportunities, and links to local employers. Findings from MDRC's experimental evaluation of nine academies suggest a number of positive outcomes.[9] In particular, male academy students earned more than their non-academy counterparts, with the highest impact among those most at risk for dropping out. Such gains were not evident among female students. Additional problems were noted, including a high attrition rate and reduced enrollment in academic courses. This type of whole-school reform is also costly and complex, making it difficult to implement well.[10]

[6] France, which does not have as extensive an apprenticeship system, has a high rate of youth unemployment (though not as high as that of Italy) (Cahuc, Carcillo, & Zimmerman, 2013).

[7] The discussion of the US experience draws heavily on Hamilton (1990), Kett (1977), Neckerman (2007), Douglas (1921), and Stull & Sanders (2003). For a more recent, positive perspective on the potential of US apprenticeships, see Halpern (2009).

[8] MDRC has conducted experimental evaluations of career academies that suggest their promise, especially for males (Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Kemple, 2008). See more general discussion of career academies by Stern (2003). For a consideration of contemporary career and technical education, see Stone & Lewis (2012).

[9] Kemple & Willner (2008).

[10] National Research Council (2003).

Other real or perceived shortcomings persist. Vocational high schools remain stigmatized for what is deemed to be an inferior education, leading to inferior jobs. Theorists on the political left have criticized schools for reproducing the social class system, and vocational schools are part of this critique.[11] During discussions in Chicago, top administrators in career and technical education bemoaned to me the lack of on-the-job training opportunities, such as internships, for vocational students.

Outside of schools, the United States has long relied on private sector employment for high school students as an informal system for providing work experience.[12] The vast majority of teenagers (80 to 90 percent) are employed at some point during the high school years, increasingly in the retail sector.[13] Part-time work can generate positive outcomes for youth, including increased confidence and time management ability, enhanced academic success, and later life advantages that spring from expanded networks.[14] Teenage work can increase wages, employment, and occupational status up to ten years later.[15] Among minority youth, those who do not work at all during high school are at the highest risk of dropping out.[16] For youth from low-income families, jobs can offer an alternative to patterns of neighborhood crime and unemployment and enable them to obtain skills and resources that may apply to better jobs in the future.[17] Jobs that are more challenging and develop skills are the most valuable, though many jobs for young people do not provide these types of experiences.[18]

Employment opportunities are not as readily available to low-income, urban youth, who are the focus of this book.[19] Young people who obtain such jobs as are available may also become subject to the ridicule of peers for working in some of these settings, such as fast food establishments.[20] Moreover, the jobs are designed to maximize the profits of firms rather than the training of youth.

[11] Bowles & Gintis (1976) is probably the best known of these critiques. Symonds, Schwarz, & Ferguson (2011) note that "For all its potential, CTE [Career and Technical Education] is often demeaned and disparaged, especially among the nation's elites." [p. 28].
[12] This is especially true in comparing the United States to other countries (e.g., Zemsky, 2003).
[13] Staff, Messersmith, & Schulenberg (2009). An excellent overview of adolescent work experiences is provided by Mortimer (2003).
[14] Mortimer (2003); Mortimer et al. (1996).
[15] Carr, Wright, & Brody (1996); Ruhm (1997).
[16] Tienda & Ahituv (1996).
[17] Newman (1999).
[18] Greenberger & Steinberg (1986); Mortimer (2003).
[19] Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson (2000); Newman (1999).
[20] Newman (1999).

Given the value attached to working, there have been a number of efforts by the federal government to improve workforce development of young people. Large sums were committed to such programs from 1977 to 1981, during the Carter presidency, under the Youth Employment and Demonstration Projects Act (YEDPA) of 1977. Programs ranged widely, including occupational skills training, labor market preparation (e.g., career exploration, job search assistance), temporary jobs, and job placement. Substantial funds were also dedicated to research and evaluation. A National Research Council study concluded that too much was implemented too soon:

> The YEDPA legislation created a program that combined too short a time schedule with too many different program elements and objectives. The demand to quickly implement the full range of elements impaired the quality of many of the programs. In addition, the pressure to obtain a wide range of research results on those programs within a short time compounded the problem and resulted, in many cases, in poor research on hastily constructed programs. It may be that the lack of proven effectiveness of many programs is due as much to the instability of the system as to the inherent nature of the programs.[21]

YEDPA expired once Ronald Reagan became president.

The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994, an initiative of President Bill Clinton that was enacted into law with bipartisan support, was another major effort to rethink youth workforce development.[22] This act sought to make high school education more work based. It sought to promote the integration of school- and work-based learning, career majors, and internships or apprenticeships in firms. The legislation, by design, sunset (expired) in 2001. Given the time limits, restrained federal funding, and implementation problems, accomplishments were modest. Most efforts were limited, involving activities such as career awareness fairs and one-day job shadowing. More ambitious goals that involved participation in a comprehensive school-to-work program had minimal enrollments: only 2 percent in 1996 and 3 percent in 1998.

Whereas previous vocational initiatives had elicited criticism from the political left, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act became subject to severe criticism by the political right. A 1998 op-ed column in *The*

[21] Betsey, Hollister, & Papageorgiou (1985), p. 5. The quote was underlined in the original.
[22] This section has been informed by a series of excellent papers collected by Stull & Sanders (2003); see especially chapters by Stull; Hershey; Schug & Western; Rosenbaum; Lerman; and Kazis & Pennington For a review of a wider range of employment related programs for low-income youth, see Edelman, Holzer, & Offner (2006), chapter 3.

New York Times by conservative intellectual Lynne Cheney, who had previously served as Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, took the school-to-work movement to task.[23] Dr. Cheney began innocently enough:

> Almost everyone agrees that schools need to do a better job of preparing students for the workplace. So the "school to work" programs now up and running in 37 states should be uncontroversial. Keeping employer needs in mind and preparing students to meet them, as these programs intend, seem sensible things for schools to do.

She then attacks the law for overinclusiveness, government intrusiveness, and foreclosing ambitions at too early an age,

> Instead of focusing on students in vocational education … school-to-work programs, by law, include all students. And in practice, the programs assume unwarranted authority over their children's lives.… Redirecting schools to prepare students for jobs that central planners recommend does not guarantee the economic well-being of those students, and can even be a hindrance. A student whose high school career focuses on specific jobs in one field may discover in college that another area is more interesting and therefore more likely to inspire high achievement. But early specialization leaves such a student unprepared to take the courses that his or her more mature aspirations require.

Cheney concludes with an endorsement of the liberal arts and their value, as opposed to a vocational thrust,

> Schools prepare citizens as well as workers, and they do so best when students are encouraged to read literature and history not merely for what they tell about the workplace, but for their insights into the human condition.

This op-ed is cited by some of those in the school-to-work field as being highly influential in undermining support for the movement. In the years to come, Dr. Cheney would achieve considerable visibility as the wife of Dick Cheney, vice president of the United States under George W. Bush.

In the years since the expiration of the act, the government has increasingly focused on promoting college for all. Nevertheless, many young people do not go to college. There is a very high dropout rate in community colleges, a frequent destination of urban minority youth.[24] Recent reports

[23] Cheney (1998). It has been noted that the German system also imposes a number of constraints on youth (Mortimer & Kruger, 2000).
[24] Rosenbaum (2001).

by the Consortium for Chicago School Research indicate just how few youth from low-income urban settings actually obtain a college degree. Their initial estimate, in 2006, was that only 8 percent of students who began high school in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) district earn a four-year degree by the time they are in their mid-twenties. A more recent, 2014 estimate upped this figure to 14 percent, reflecting in large part an increase in the high school graduation rate.[25] Despite this gain, the problem of preparing youth for the workforce has clearly not gone away. Given the real and perceived shortcomings of vocational schools and majors, and the disappointment over the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, where will we find new possibilities to help promote youth workforce development, especially among the low-income minority groups who experience the most unemployment?

NEW PROGRAM DIRECTIONS

Various nonprofit organizations have initiated after-school programs in the United States that may help to address this gap. These programs received a considerable boost with federal funding of 21st Century Community Learning Centers during the Clinton presidency. The legislation itself was originally authored by Republicans and has received continued bipartisan support. Most after-school programs serve elementary and middle school children, but there has been increased attention to high school youth, particularly in urban areas. To make them attractive to adolescents, these new programs have increasingly focused on job-related skills and experiences, consistent with an emphasis on positive youth development. Youth can participate in these work-oriented after-school programs while still pursuing a college preparatory course of study, countering objections from both the right and the left to vocational tracks in school.

Chicago's After School Matters (ASM) is widely considered the flagship program for developing job skills among high school youth and is being emulated in several cities across the country. Targeted at students in CPS, ASM enrolled approximately 7,500 youth each semester in 2009 and is thought to be the largest program of its kind in the country. The program

[25] The first report actually gave a rate of 6 percent (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Allensworth, 2006), but more complete data from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign led to a recalculation that put the estimate at 8 percent (Allensworth, 2006). The 2014 estimate is provided by Healey, Nagaoka, & Michelman (2014). It should be noted that the Consortium calculates high school graduation rates slightly differently than does CPS, given differences in coding out-of-district transfers.

takes place in school, after the conclusion of the regular school day. It is rare for sessions to take place at work sites, though it happens occasionally (Chapter 4). During the time of our research, youth were paid a stipend equivalent to $5 per hour if they met program attendance criteria.

ASM began as gallery37 in 1991, at which time it focused on the arts. In 2000, it began offering experiences in a much wider array of fields and changed its name to After School Matters. ASM had been found promising in a quasi-experimental study of academic outcomes, as well as in qualitative studies of a more diverse set of outcomes by leading researchers on after-school programs.[26]

The program offers ten-week experiences per semester (three hours per day, three days per week) in what are termed "apprenticeships." These are project-based experiences centered on the development and utilization of trade or artistic skills. Each apprenticeship is organized around a particular enterprise, which ranges widely in focus. Examples include apprenticeships focused exclusively on technology, such as Web design or computer repair; others that combine technology and art, such as producing social documentaries; still others that are primarily artistic, such as improvisational theater groups or dance; and finally ones that have a sports orientation, such as lifeguard training or learning how to teach young children to play soccer. Each apprenticeship session involves work in the designated area, learning and making use of relevant skills to accomplish specified tasks. Instructors provide information, guidance, and feedback and introduce students to the standards, language, and culture of that line of work.[27] The apprenticeship culminates in a final product or performance, which involves some public presentation.

Two paid instructors direct each apprenticeship. The instructors (who are typically not teachers) have expertise in – and in many instances earn their livelihood through – the activity that is the focus of the apprenticeship. ASM provides both beginning and advanced training sessions for instructors. Because after-school programs are not subject to school curricular requirements, the instructors have the flexibility to spend much more time on projects than is available in schools, potentially facilitating deep learning, a major goal of educational reformers. ASM experiences bear a familial-like resemblance to other apprenticeship-type interventions that

[26] The quasi-experimental study was by Goerge et al. (2007). The qualitative studies were by Halpern (2006) and Larson (2007). A more detailed account of these earlier studies is provided in Appendix 1.
[27] Halpern (2006).

provide exposure to work skills or environments in a particular occupation. They do not, however, provide the kind of intensive, on-the-job training in technical trade skills such as is found in Germany.[28]

ASM apprenticeships, in theory, reflect a number of design principles that are consistent with project-based learning. Youth work on authentic tasks that have meaning in the "real world," and they learn by doing.[29] The tasks are challenging in that they are often slightly beyond the youth's present ability yet manageable with assistance, what the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky would refer to as the zone of proximal development.[30] Instructors provide scaffolding and guided feedback.[31] Youth are encouraged to take initiative, make decisions, and be creative, and they are provided opportunities to teach or share what they have learned with their peers.[32] Finally, tasks and skills are developed sequentially so that proximal goals map logically onto distal objectives, and the final product/performance demands consideration of everything (or almost everything) that the youth have learned.[33]

This book reports a series of research investigations that began with a random assignment evaluation of ASM and culminated in the development of a job interview training program that was implemented in CPS. The findings that are reported in the book focus on ASM's ability to provide effective youth workforce development. There are several distinct strengths of the evaluation that are reflected in this book.

First, the ASM research involved a true experimental evaluation (otherwise known as a randomized controlled trial), which is rare in either evaluations of workforce development or after-school programs, particularly for programs involving youth who are still in high school.[34] Randomization is the best procedure for guarding against selection effects in which youth more likely to improve over time are disproportionately located in the treatment group. In that event, it is impossible to sort out whether effects are due to selection (who got into the program) or the program itself (the experiences of youth while in the program). This is why randomized controlled trials are typically considered the "gold standard" in evaluation research.

[28] See Hamilton (1990) for an account of German apprenticeships.
[29] Edelson (2001); Schank (1995).
[30] Vygotsky (1978).
[31] Jackson, Krajcik, & Soloway (1998); Rogoff, 1990).
[32] Barron (1998); Brown & Campione (1996).
[33] Brown & Campione (1996).
[34] Mekinda (2014).

Second, the assessment of youth's marketable job skills was centered on a mock job interview created for this research. The interview was administered, for enhanced credibility, by experienced human resource (HR) professionals (the interview is discussed in detail in Chapter 2).

Third, a mixed-methods approach was utilized, with extensive analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data from the mock job interview were analyzed using advanced statistical procedures (hierarchical linear modeling). In terms of qualitative data, we observed each apprenticeship once a week (three hours) and detailed fieldnotes were taken by our trained observers (who were mostly graduate students). We have approximately 2,400 pages of fieldnotes; in addition, the observer of each apprenticeship completed an extensive case study of that apprenticeship. Anchored by quantitative findings on hiring rates from the mock job interview, the qualitative data enabled us to shed light on the "black box" of what happened in the programs. We consider these fieldnotes in Chapter 3, where we contrast the two best- and the two worst-performing apprenticeships as defined by youth hiring rates versus their control groups on the mock job interview. The fieldnotes are also analyzed in Chapter 4, where we consider two of ASM's best apprenticeships; these two implemented the overall ASM approach differently, and we consider which is most likely to be successfully implemented by other programs. Thus, we use the qualitative data to learn much more from our evaluation of ASM than would be available exclusively from the quantitative data.

Finally, I should note that although most evaluation studies are at best weakly tied to developmental theory, this was not the case with our studies. The research drew on cultural and ecological approaches to adolescent development. I have taught graduate courses on adolescent development for more than twenty years. A developmental approach enables us to situate and understand the findings in terms of the tasks, knowledge, competencies, and relationships of adolescents, and the types of supports that facilitate development.

In the remainder of this chapter, I provide more specifics about two new program directions. The first part provides more detail about ASM and, especially, about our evaluation methodology. The second part introduces a new program that we developed that grew out of what our HR professionals told us about how youth performed in the mock job interview (the HR findings are presented in Chapter 5 and the new program is presented in Chapter 6). These insights pertain particularly to how youth can more effectively recognize and communicate the relevance of their accomplishments in job interviews. The insights address a major developmental skill