

CHAPTER 2: WORK EXPERIENCE: RATIONALE AND PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

The schools have one final opportunity to prove their worth to the nation, in perhaps the most challenging undertaking of their history, by dedicating themselves to the preparation of students for the world of work.(1)

Defining Work Experience

Throughout the Commonwealth 'work experience' has been interpreted in many different ways. Described as 'a unique gift to the current educational thought of India', it has been defined there as a method of integrating education with work where the accent is on education and not work: 'Work experience is not just education plus work, nor integration of work with education. Education is the fundamental aim and it has to be integrated with work. In other words, it is education through work.'(2) In some cases work experience is perceived more narrowly as simply 'job sampling', while in others, evaluation of work experience programmes has led to the conclusion that 'on balance this activity seems to be best regarded as social education rather than job sampling.'(3) Others insist that work experience should not be seen simply as job sampling; nor should it be viewed as part of any training for a particular job; and it should certainly not be seen as a means for employers to decide which young people they might like to employ.(4) Work experience has also been defined as: 'the education of the young adult in the differences between one collective institution - the school - with all the human and material supportive agencies that exist for the benefit of the pupils, and another - the factory or firm - which has its own set of supportive agencies, but where personal development of the people involved (i.e. workers) may be only a minor objective of the organisation.'(5)

Interestingly, even within a given Commonwealth country, a variety of interpretations of work experience exists. In Canada, for example, the Constitution Act 1867 gives each of the ten provinces exclusive responsibility for legislation in the field of education. There is thus no single system of education or national ministry of education in Canada as one finds in many developing countries. Thus although the educational provisions in the various provinces have some things in common, they have different characteristics, differences in ways of organisation as well as in structure.(6) In a school district in New Brunswick, for example, work experience is limited to students over 16 years of age and is designed to provide them with 'opportunities to explore areas of occupational in-service and to test their own abilities and interests.'(7) In Nova Scotia, work experience is organised for students of 14 years of age and over and provides them with 'opportunities to learn more about employment, and about the skills and attitudes necessary to obtain and hold a

job.'(8) In Newfoundland and Labrador, 'work experience education' is the term used for a programme in which students participate for school credits; there is close co-ordination between on-the-job experience and in-school experiences and activities. Work experience in Ontario does not earn a student any additional credits, although it may be a required element in a credit course. 'Co-operative education' in Ontario involves an out-of-school component of 200-250 hours and carries secondary school graduation credits for related studies. Examples include programmes in business education, technology studies, translation services (for students of French as a second language), land survey (for maths students), veterinary clinics (for science students) and urban planning organisation (for geography students).

What is apparent from the foregoing is that definitions of work experience raise issues which include distinguishing between 'education' and 'schooling', decisions on what values the school ought to be transmitting - instrumental or intrinsic, determining whether it is the proper business of the school to prepare the young for the 'world of work' or for 'employment' or for a 'career'. All these are linked to the question of whether work experience programmes fit into a framework which is correctly viewed as 'pre-vocational' or 'vocational'.

When a young person in school studies business education and is given two to three weeks' experience (as, for example, a clerk in a business establishment) is the total experience to be viewed as 'pre-vocational' or 'vocational'? King is instructive when he likens 'pre-vocational' to 'orientation' which, he says, emphasises that studies undertaken must not be viewed as 'training for the world of work, since that would be too close to subordination of school to labour market.'(9) The sense conveyed, according to King, is that of offering 'a taste of what the world of work is like without letting the school fall into the category of a vocational or Trade School.' The presumption seems to be that students who have engaged in pre-vocational studies/ experiences will proceed to truly vocational studies/experiences. 'Vocational' implies training for jobs and if this is viewed as the proper business of the school, then the emphasis becomes one of 'schooling' which implies a controlled and contingent set of practices concerned to bring about the intentional acquisition of particular skills which are valued as a means to some other ends (instrumental values).(10)

Philosophers such as Hirst and Peters, on the other hand, argue that the proper business of schools is to transmit 'education' which is centrally concerned with the development of knowledge and understanding in depth and breadth, such knowledge being valued for its own sake (intrinsic values). If learning in school is centred on preparation for a job or for employment, there is a resulting danger, it is argued, of indoctrinating pupils not educating them. 'Indoctrination' here implies unshakeable belief in certain doctrines, particularly capitalism and the pursuit of material wealth, as well as an adherence to certain methods that promote lack of respect for persons and the development of a slavish labour force which is blindly obedient to the profit motives of others. This explains why in some definitions of 'work experience', authors are at pains to emphasise its educative value and its link with 'careers' because, as Bell rightly indicates, having a career 'implies an organising life interest in which employment is an incidental part.'(11) Likewise, says Bell, 'preparation for the world of work' implies training in those skills and performances fundamental to any preparation whether for work or more

generally for life: basic skills such as numeracy and literacy and a variety of social competencies.'(12)

The implication here is that work experience programmes which are seen as part of the general aim of a school 'to prepare the young for the world of work,' would not limit a student's choice to a particular job. In addition, such programmes would be educative. Herbst, in fact, outlines a thesis that 'education is work rather than labour, and that to educate well is to work, as well as to teach people to work.'(13) Whereas labour is toil, hardship and tending to alienation, Herbst argues, work is pleasure, it has a point and purpose and the worker has a desire to produce a product that meets appropriate standards of excellence. The work process is equally as important as the product of that process. If such a view of work is accepted, then it becomes apparent why self-discipline, a sense of responsibility, conscientiousness, caring and other social attributes feature as objectives of work experience programmes.

A further point made by Bell, however, needs to be borne in mind. He says, 'There is a logical problem however in the use of "experience" as a didactic principle namely that you cannot know where you are going until you have been there. The resultant knowledge by acquaintance constituted by anecdote, impressions and partly formulated views is hardly the basis upon which rational action is justified even when put to the test of vigorous reflection. For, there is always the difficulty of determining to what extent such experience can be generalised. Therefore, a central difficulty with such programmes is determining what their general aims are.'(14) This is not an infrequent criticism of work experience programmes. Anderson, for example, highlights a national survey in Australia which has concluded that 'there was little clarity about objectives'(15) while Sinclair, from her survey of work experience programmes in Third World schools, was critical of the ambitious nature of their objectives.(16)

Objectives of Work-Experience Programmes

In examining more closely the objectives of work experience programmes in secondary schools in the Commonwealth, a distinction has to be drawn at the outset between work experience programmes that are 'out-of-school' (i.e. involving two to three weeks - more or less - of on-the-job experience in business, firms, etc.) and those that are 'in-school'. Typical of the latter are schools in which the central focus is on education with production. Jamaica's Jose Marti Secondary School, for example, has a work study curriculum in which academic work is combined with involvement on the part of all students in an agricultural work programme based at the school. Eradication of the stigma against manual work, the instilling of a healthy work ethic and orientation of the young to jobs other than 'white-collar' ones are cited amongst the objectives of this programme.(17)

The objectives of work experience programmes can be put into three broad categories: philosophical/pedagogic, social, and economic (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: Objectives of Work Experience Programmes in Secondary Schools in the Commonwealth

PHILOSOPHICAL/PEDAGOGIC OBJECTIVES

facilitate transition from school to work
equalise work opportunities for boys and girls
improve the opportunities of the less academically able
improve critical thinking skills through decision-making in
job experiences
acquire practical experience in literacy and numeracy skills
related to specific jobs
motivate youth by making curriculum more relevant and
meaningful to their own experiences
give practical experience in area of vocational choice

SOCIAL OBJECTIVES

develop positive attitudes to practical/manual work
instil healthy work ethic
learn how people earn their living through experience of
varied work processes
enable career choice
instil self-discipline
develop self-confidence/positive self-concept
learn the importance of attributes desirable in good
employees (e.g. punctuality, co-operation)
stem sex-role stereotyping of employment opportunities
learn nature of social relations at work
occupy potential drop-outs/truants
facilitate communication between school, parents and
employers

ECONOMIC OBJECTIVES

increase awareness of employers' expectations
reduce economic costs by keeping young longer in school
preparation for jobs (other than 'white-collar' type)
assist youth in getting permanent employment
enable young people to explore business and industry
sample variety of jobs
preparation of 'low achievers' for low status occupations
develop agricultural basis of national economy
enable school to become partially self-sufficient

Philosophical/Pedagogic Objectives

An egalitarian ideal underpins most work experience programmes, particularly those of the 'in-school' type which have been put in place by governments that subscribe to a democratic socialist ideology. Musa, then Minister of Education in Belize, in delivering a paper on national education policy said:

The Belizean child must be given an education which will promote his history and culture, and enable him, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop his abilities, his individual judgement and sense of moral and social responsibility. In order to accomplish this, education must effectively integrate the world of study with the world of work.(18)

This philosophy underpinned the Rural Education and Agriculture Programme (REAP), which was implemented in the Belizean rural school system in 1976. The idea was that by involvement in a curriculum built around agricultural knowledge and experiences, rural school leavers in Belize would not only be prepared for a more rewarding life in the countryside but would be able to undertake self-employment projects in agriculture. They would thus be better able to help their country to become self-sufficient in food production, thereby participating in the development of the agricultural basis of the national economy.(19) Essentially, however, REAP was designed to improve the lot of rural children in relation to their urban counterparts.

When the Jamaican government in 1974 extended the life of junior secondary schools by two years (thereby creating the New Secondary schools) and introduced a work experience component into the grade 10-11 curriculum,(20) a major aim was to equalise the opportunities in the world of work for the New Secondary school graduates in relation to their high school counterparts who, because of the high social currency accorded the academic curriculum to which they were exposed, tended to be favoured by employers. The reasoning was that work experience would give the New Secondary school leavers employable skills that would make them more attractive to employers.

The students who go to the New Secondary schools in Jamaica are those from the lower social classes who have not passed the common entrance (CEE) or the 11 plus examination.(21) Not surprisingly, the work experience programme which was implemented in these schools tends to be associated only with the less academically able. This is not peculiar to Jamaica. In other Commonwealth countries (e.g. Australia) work experience is reserved for those youngsters who are considered less academically able. In some countries (e.g. Canada), work experience was initially mainly for special education students. In Saskatchewan, for example, these programmes were initiated 'to provide an opportunity for educable mentally handicapped students to combine school attendance with on-the-job training...'(22) The target population for these programmes gradually widened to include potential drop-outs and other students who were not responding to the regular school programme. In New Zealand, work experience units in state secondary schools cater for 'the need of students of very limited academic ability during their first two years of secondary schooling. Their programmes of study are specially devised for non-achievers, and the work experience they have is normally in places of

work where the levels of skills are not high.'(23). The Department of Education and Science in Britain, however, has insisted that work experience 'should be provided for the whole ability range of pupils, not just those considered to be non academic.'(24) This practice applies in Guyana where students between the ages of 14-18 in community high schools and multilateral schools participate in what is referred to there as 'work study.'

To 'improve critical thinking skills by making observations and drawing conclusions about job site experience,' and to 'acquire practical experience by writing, speaking, listening and in mathematics as these relate to specific jobs'(25) are among the objectives cited for work experience programmes in Canadian school districts.

Social Objectives

Many developing countries with a history of negative attitudes towards practical/manual work have the development of positive attitudes towards physical/manual work and the attainment of a healthy work ethic as objectives of their work experience programmes. The programmes in Jamaica's New Secondary schools, Guyana's community high and multilateral schools, and Solarin's 'Mayflower' school in Nigeria are but a few examples. Giving young people a chance to find out what it is to be at work, to see how different workplaces are organised, what the work processes are, and to learn the nature of social relations at work and the role of trade unions at the workplace, feature as objectives of work experience particularly in the more developed countries. The development of acceptable work habits and attributes is stressed amongst the objectives of work experience programmes in both developed and developing countries. In Guyana 'work study teaches the students how to behave in a work setting. The student learns the importance of time, respect for authority and working desirably alongside his/her fellows,'(26) while in Nova Scotia, students on work experience are expected 'to learn the importance of punctuality, honesty, courtesy, responsibility, reliability, co-operation and other such attributes desirable in a good employee.'(27) Because in some countries, work experience programmes are implemented in schools to which society accords a lower social status, promoting more healthy self-concepts and developing self-confidence in the young people become important social objectives. It is mainly in developed countries, however, that work experience programmes serve a more custodial function, either by providing an alternative means of occupation for youngsters prone to truancy or by becoming a repository for disruptive youths.

Anderson refers to research on Australian adolescence in which it was found that problem behaviour was greater amongst unemployed out-of-school youth. Some work experience programmes are designed to compensate for the social disadvantage that predisposed these youths to unemployment.

Improving communication between the school, the home and the workplace is an objective of many work experience programmes such as that in Seychelles where there is a drive 'to promote communication between schools, employers, parents and students and others with an interest in worker education, such as the unions and employment services.'(28)

Economic Objectives

Some schools in New Zealand have received grants to assist them in setting up work experience schemes for 'reluctant returners' i.e. young New Zealanders who return to school because they are unable to find employment. In cases like this, Nash argues, 'work experience schemes do help to keep children in school which is less costly and arguably better all round than their being unemployed.'(29) Since some work experience programmes are implemented only in lower status schools with an intake from amongst the less academically able in the society, it has been argued by some that what these programmes succeed in doing is prepare these young people for low skilled or unskilled jobs. There is a tendency for the work experience programme in Jamaica's New Secondary schools to be viewed in this light. In Ontario, where vocational courses involving work experience are offered in regular comprehensive schools, in the case of the majority of students who take these courses, 'their attitude toward work and experience obtained in real work situation tends to prepare them quite well for low status occupations.'(30) In Newfoundland and Labrador, some work experience programmes are viewed as 'exploratory' in that they provide 'an opportunity to observe and sample systematically a variety of conditions of work for the purpose of ascertaining one's interest, aptitude and suitability for particular occupations.'(31) Getting to know what employers expect of workers, permitting employers to participate in the educational process 'by inviting their suggestions as to how the school curriculum might be infused with greater relevance to the world of work,'(32) and providing young people with an opportunity to obtain permanent employment, are also cited as objectives of work experience programmes. Finally, 'in-school' work experience programmes, such as in the Jose Marti Secondary School in Jamaica, usually have as an objective the task of making the school at least partially self-sufficient, so that reliance on government funds can be reduced. The policy is well established in Guyana where 'in keeping with the national policy of increased agricultural production, the school's agriculture programme has taken on a new character in which production is one of the major goals. While there is no intention to degrade achievement in academic subjects, adequate exposure to, and mastery of, skill areas such as agriculture and the related fields of home economics, industrial arts and business education are now given high priority. Of importance too is the socialisation purpose, introducing work into schools we are building appropriate habits among our students and preparing them for production which is a direct contribution to the nation's food security. It is also a means of generating funds that guarantee development of education despite the prevailing economic crisis.'(33)

Summary of Main Points

1. Work experience has been interpreted in a variety of ways ranging from 'job sampling' to 'social education' to learning the differences between the school and the workplace as organisations. Increasingly, its educative aspect is stressed.
2. Historically, work experience programmes have tended to be associated with the less academically able, but gradually over time in both developed and developing countries, the ability range for these programmes has widened.

3. Work experience programmes have a range of objectives that fall into three broad categories: philosophical/pedagogical, social, and economic.
4. Philosophical/pedagogical objectives relate to ideals of equalising opportunities, facilitating the transition from school to work, and the motivation of young people through the study of curricula which are relevant to their experiences.
5. In some developed countries, the curbing of disruptive youths, and engaging the interest of potential drop-outs of truants feature among the social objectives of work experience programmes.
6. The development of positive attitudes towards physical/manual work features as an important social objective in work experience programmes in many developing countries. Learning the nature of social relations at work, and the nurturing of desirable attributes in good employees (e.g. punctuality, co-operation) are other social objectives of these programmes.
7. Some 'in-school' work experience programmes are designed to enable the school to become partially self-sufficient.
8. Economic objectives of work experience programmes range from facilitating youths in getting permanent employment, awareness of employers' expectations, and exploration of business and industry to assisting in the development of the agricultural basis of a developing country's economy.
9. In this study, work experience is understood as 'Opportunities on a compulsory or voluntary basis for full-time secondary school students to engage in work as part of their education programme even though they may not have as yet chosen a particular career.'