

Views and Experiences of Early Work: Report Based on Surveys and Focus Groups in a Southern Ontario High School

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Executive Summary

In December 2018, our research team conducted eight focus groups with sixty-five grade nine students at a high school in a mid-size city in Southern Ontario to learn about their views and experiences of early work. Students completed surveys at the beginning of each focus group, with questions about their current and past work experiences, reasons for working or not, and demographic information. Focus groups involved open-ended questions about their views on work, and what they would do in various workplace scenarios. We coded and analyzed the surveys and focus group transcripts using quantitative and qualitative research software.

Significant patterns in survey data (see infographic below): Half of all the participants had some kind of work experience. Thirty-two percent reported past work experience and 22% reported currently working. Work experience included service jobs (e.g. pumpkin farm), industrial jobs (e.g. autobody shop), odd jobs (e.g. lawn care, snow shoveling), other jobs (e.g. leather work, at parents' work), babysitting, and newspaper delivery. Babysitting was the most frequently reported past and current job.

Most participants reported reasonable working hours, however there were a few cases where students reported very long hours. Hourly wages varied from less than \$5 to more than \$16 per hour, with more than half earning \$10/hour or less. We identified significant gender, race, and class patterns around work experience and reasons for working or not. Although boys were slightly more likely to have worked in the past, girls were over three times more likely to be currently working, largely due to babysitting. Non-white participants were more likely to be currently working than white participants. Working/middle- and middle-class participants were most likely to have ever worked, however participants from precarious/working class and working/middle class families were most likely to be currently working.

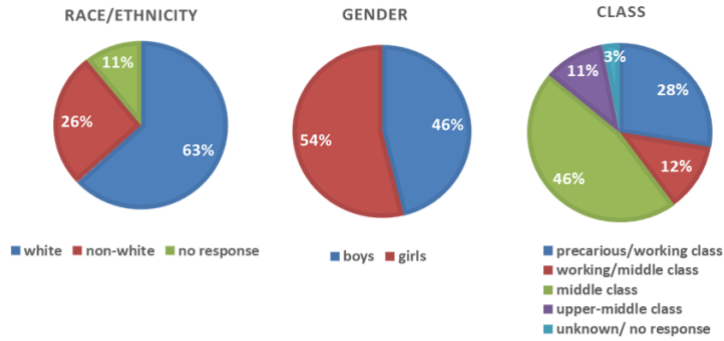
Key themes emerging from focus groups:

- Desire to work: most were interested in working for pay and valued their work experiences, although many were not sure how to get jobs.
- Mixed views on early work: while some saw early work experiences as integral for the future, others felt that in grade nine students should be prioritizing school and extracurriculars. Many framed school as essential for future career success, but it was also noted that families' economic needs might lead some young people to prioritize early work over school.
- Optimism about workplace flexibility: Participants had optimistic views of work, including perceived employer flexibility around scheduling and missing work.
- Mixed knowledge of workplace safety: We were pleased that participants knew they had the right to refuse unsafe work, although they did not have much other knowledge about workplace health and safety issues or worker rights.
- Prioritizing pay: Participants saw level of pay as key in shaping the kinds of jobs they would do, how they would manage workplace conflict and safety risks, and if they would leave their job.

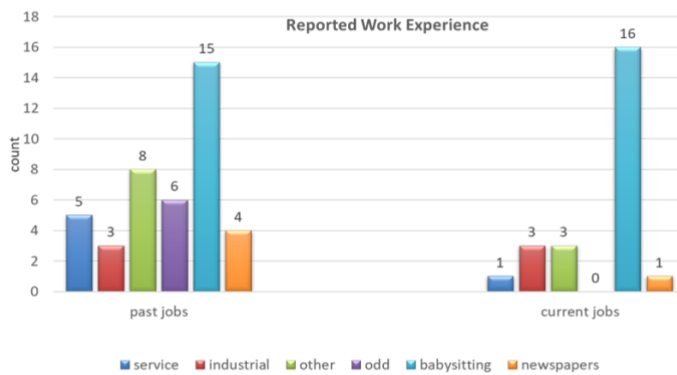
Recommendations:

- It is important to recognize that many students have experience with early work, and that the type and extent of this work is linked to class, race, and gender. Despite only being in grade nine, about half of the students had already worked for pay, outside the home, in some capacity, and one third were working at the time of the focus group.
- Given that some students must work, schools may want to consider how they can best accommodate work (e.g. around deadlines, missed classes).
- While students know they have the right to refuse work, earlier education is needed about workplace health, safety and rights in informal as well as formal contexts.
- We found that students would benefit from guidance on how to find early work, particularly those who do not already have informal connections, and also guidance on what to expect in workplaces.

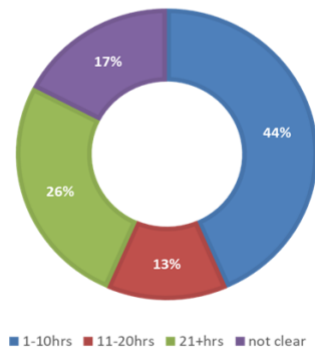
**65 grade nine students participated in the study.
Participants had the following demographics:**



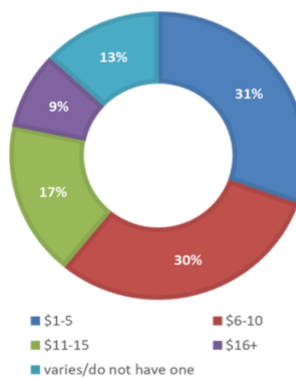
51% of participants had some kind of work experience



MONTHLY HOURS FOR CURRENT JOBS



HOURLY WAGE FOR CURRENT JOBS



Girls were almost 3X more likely to be currently working.

Participants from working class families were most likely to be currently working.

Participants from middle class families were more likely to have ever worked.

Non-white participants were more likely to be currently working.

Full Report

Our research team conducted eight focus groups with grade nine students at a high school in a mid-size city in Southern Ontario in December 2018. We distributed a survey at the beginning of each focus group, with questions asking about current and past work experiences, reasons for working or not, and demographic information. Focus groups then involved open-ended questions about the students' views on, and experiences with, early work. We also discussed what the students would do in a number of workplace scenarios. The surveys were summarized and analyzed, and all of the focus groups were transcribed and coded thematically. In what follows, we first outline significant patterns emerging from the surveys. Next, we report on the emerging themes from the focus groups, specifically: understandings of teen work; balancing work, extracurriculars and school; optimism around work; health and safety; and pay. We conclude with some recommendations around school support for young workers.

The extent of early work

Overall, 65 students participated in the study, 30 (46%) boys and 35 (54%) girls. Forty-one (63%) participants identified as white, 17 (26%) identified as non-white (primarily Black, Asian, Latino/a), and 7 (11%) participants did not respond to the survey question about race and ethnicity. We classified participants' class backgrounds by asking them about their living arrangements, parents'/guardians' highest level of schooling, and parents' occupations. We categorized 18 (28%) students as precarious/working class, 8 (12%) as working/middle class, 30 (46%) as middle class, 7 (11%) as upper-middle class, and 2 (3%) as unknown/no response.

Across participants, 32 (49%) had some kind of experience working for pay outside the home, and 22 (38%) said that they were currently working. Students had the following experience:

Past Jobs:

| | |
|---|----|
| Service (pumpkin farm, nail salon, concessions, cleaning, landscaping, IT support, waterpark) | 5 |
| Industrial (equipment cleaning, autobody shop, building rods) | 3 |
| Other (sports-related, parents' workplace, leather work, denture clinic) | 8 |
| Odd Jobs (lawn care, snow removal, dog walker) | 6 |
| Babysitting | 15 |
| Newspaper delivery | 4 |

Current Jobs:

| | |
|---|----|
| Service (pumpkin farm, nail salon, concessions, cleaning, landscaping, IT support, waterpark) | 1 |
| Industrial (equipment cleaning, autobody shop, building rods) | 3 |
| Other (sports-related, parents' workplace, leather work, denture clinic) | 3 |
| Odd Jobs (lawn care, snow removal, dog walker) | 0 |
| Babysitting | 16 |
| Newspaper delivery | 1 |

We were struck by the range of job experiences students mentioned, and the number that had worked at their parents' places of employment.

We noticed some gender, race and class differences around patterns of work. Boys were slightly more likely to have worked in the past. However, girls (81%) were almost three times more likely than boys (28%) to be currently working, largely due to their ongoing employment as babysitters. While they were almost equally likely to have been involved in past work, participants who self-identified as non-white were more likely than those self-identified as white to currently be working. While working/middle- and middle-class participants were most likely to have ever worked, participants from precarious/working class and working/middle class families were most likely to be currently working. While only three participants came from very economically precarious family situations, it is notable that all three of them reported that they were currently working.

Overall, most participants spoke positively about their early work experiences, although some also discussed more challenging aspects, e.g. managing difficult customers, negotiating hours, and balancing demands (see below).

Varied hours of work and rates of pay

Of those currently working, 23 reported on their monthly hours. Most were working under 20 hours a month, although six were working over 21 hours. Four said that their hours depended on circumstances. While overall the number of hours worked seemed reasonable, there were a few significant exceptions where students were working quite long hours. Participants with past work experience had a similar range in monthly hours worked.

Of those currently working, 23 reported an hourly wage. Hourly wages were quite variable: seven at \$1-\$5, seven at \$6-10, four at \$11-\$15, two earning over \$16, and three saying that it varies. Notably, the majority (61%) that reported an hourly wage were earning \$10 or less, and 30% were earning for very low pay, at \$5/hour or less. Most with past work experiences reported that they did not have a set hourly wage as they were paid per task or day, and these earnings varied based on circumstance, suggesting very casual work.

From earning money to gaining job skills: reasons for working

Overwhelmingly, participants wanted to work. Of those who had work experience, the most common reasons for working were to earn spending money (27 respondents), to save for specific consumer items (e.g. a car) (27), to gain job skills (18), to save for post-secondary education (13), and to keep busy (9). Two respondents reported working to help their families financially. Repeatedly, participants saw pay as the most advantageous part of work, which may reflect immediate financial need, a consumer culture, and/or saving for the future.

Boys were more likely than girls to say that they worked to gain job skills, which may be linked to the kinds of jobs that boys and girls were doing. Specifically, girls were overrepresented as babysitters, a job often assumed to provide fewer work-related skills. We also noted that participants from precarious/working class and working/middle class families were more likely to be currently working to save for post-secondary education while participants that were characterized as coming from upper-middle class families all reported working to gain job skills.

Unable to find work or busy with other things: reasons for not working

The most common reason for not working was being unable to find a job (21 respondents), underscoring a desire to work, and the lack of opportunities to do so. Some participants noted that they expected to lean on family and friends to learn about where and how to apply for a job, which reflects the pattern where many who were working found work through family contacts. A number of participants also talked about being too busy with sports (12) and school (8).

Notably, participants who self-identified as non-white were more likely to mention not working because they were not able to find work, while participants who self-identified as white were particularly likely to be busy with other things, such as extracurriculars. Similarly, participants from precarious/working class and working/middle class families were more likely to not be working because they could not find a job, while participants from middle class and upper-middle class families were more likely to not be working because they were busy with other things like extracurriculars.

These findings suggest that more marginalized students, in terms of class and race, are likely to be wanting work but are facing challenges finding work, perhaps due to discrimination and/or fewer social connections that make such work possible.

Differing views on teen work

“Hmm, I would say fourteen [is a good age to begin working] only because like, sometimes I babysit my baby cousin and if I am able to take care of a child alone, I should be able to like, work [in other settings].” -Alessia¹

In the focus group discussions, participants shared their thinking about work in general, and whether young people should work. Overall, participants had positive views of teen work, seeing it as an opportunity to gain job skills, responsibility and independence, and to earn money for leisurely spending and post-secondary plans. However, participants were split on the question of whether work should be a part of their current lives. As noted above, many wanted to be working, however others said that as grade nine students they should be most focused on schooling and extracurriculars, and that later in high school their priorities can shift to work. Some also observed that grade nine is a difficult transition year into high school and that ideally, they would find summer jobs at the end of grade nine (although they were unsure about how they would go about finding this summer work).

Participants also commented on what jobs they thought were suitable for young people. Some suggested that jobs for teens should be easy, seasonal and involve little commitment or responsibility. On the one hand, this was an important recognition that the early teen years should not be a time for hard, heavy work (“like construction”) but on the other hand, these comments could be seen to undermine the responsibilities associated with the kind of work that many young teens were already doing, such as babysitting.

Indeed, babysitting was the most commonly reported past and current job among the participants and some participants argued that babysitting was an ideal early job, constructing it as easy and

¹All names are pseudonyms.

flexible. Others, like Alessia, quoted above, thought that babysitting was challenging, and proof that young people can do more difficult jobs.

Comments on balancing work, extracurricular activities and school

“...unless you have a job at fourteen, which I doubt you will be able to hold on to for the rest of your life and make steady income to have a house, family, and be able to keep up with the family. [...] school would come first, but probably again a bit of a balance. [It] shouldn't be like 'alright, I gotta get this essay done like three weeks before it's due so let's skip all of my work this week.'”
-André

As part of the focus group interviews, participants were presented with various scenarios about young people's experiences with work, including balancing school, work and friends, managing interactions with bosses and managers, and dealing with health and safety issues. For each scenario, participants were asked to share what they would do in that specific situation.

Scenarios on balancing school and work:

Participants were split about whether or not they would prioritize work. Some participants, like André, thought school should be the top priority in young people's lives because it is necessary for future educational and career success. However, others saw value in immediate work and associated income, and some participants offered the critical insight that there may be young people who need to prioritize work over extracurriculars and school based on their families' economic needs.

Scenarios on balancing school and extracurriculars:

The scenarios that involved young people managing their extracurricular and work schedules inspired heated debates among the participants. Some were confident that they would prioritize work, even in the face of being asked to play in a last-minute championship-qualifying baseball game, while others solidly favoured the baseball game. Overall, we noticed that girls were more likely to prioritize the babysitting commitment, and boys were more likely to break the babysitting commitment in order to play baseball. Participants who were non-white were also more likely to maintain their babysitting commitment. Various participants also came up with creative solutions, such as taking the children they were babysitting to the game, suggesting an optimism that we saw more generally when talking about workplace flexibility.

Optimism around work

“Hmm, I would ask to work on shifts on certain times and certain days, because like you could have a Family Friday. Then you don't work that Friday [...]. Or like spending time Sunday, you can work for an hour on Sunday and then go home and spend time with family.” - Caro

Most students had little knowledge of many aspects of work, including how to get a job, what happens in an interview, and what labour laws say around pay and hours. Nonetheless, they tended to be optimistic – some might say overly optimistic – about various aspects of work, such as the ease of getting a new job after quitting one, being able to easily speak up about injustices, successfully and asking for raises. Participants also held positive beliefs around work schedules, for example, thinking that they could easily request certain days off, and/or switch shifts with co-workers to accommodate their other commitments, e.g. to extracurriculars.

Health and safety

“You fill out your WHMIS and your MSDS. It’s supposed to disclose of anything that’s unsafe. So, I’d just like say there’s something unsafe that was not disclosed [...] when I filled out my WHMIS.” - Kendall

One scenario we discussed was about being asked to work with a broken meat slicer. Although students seemed to know less about other aspects of work, we were pleased to learn that most knew that they have the right to refuse unsafe work, which they had learned from a school assembly. A small number of students, like Kendall, shared more detailed information about workers’ rights and health and safety. A few students said they had further knowledge about workers’ rights from class assignments, although they also suggested that their class lessons and assignments did not provide much detail around young workers’ rights.

In the face of unsafe work, some participants said they would likely quit or request a different workplace task. Others pointed to some of the challenges of addressing unsafe work. For instance, a small number of students recognized that financial hardship and young age could make it harder to speak up at work about safety issues. We were also struck by the handful of participants who suggested that they would work with unsafe machinery if their manager was willing to pay them more to do so. This response might have been a show of bravado in a focus group setting, but also raises concerns that some young employees might place financial need or gain above their own safety.

Comments on earnings

“I have [a paper route] right now and it doesn’t pay enough, like you get say \$100 a month for having a whole lot of, like doing a whole lot and then my parents they want me to put half away so that I can save for something like university [...] or college. So, I only get, say, \$50 a month, and if I had an actual job, I’d be making like twice or three times of that, so I could purchase more things that I wouldn’t be able to with a smaller job like a paper route.” - Scott

Like the participants who would work unsafely for more pay, in many cases, participants saw their wages as key in shaping their decisions around what jobs to do, whether or not they could miss work or quit, and how they would manage conflict in the workplace. For example, one participant thought they would continue to babysit late on school nights, even when it started to affect their schooling, if they received a raise. Further, a few participants thought they would be more likely to challenge unsafe work, or request changes to workplace conditions, if they were in a well-paid job, whereas if they were in a lower paying job they would simply quit.

Most of the participants that reported an hourly wage on the surveys received less than \$10 per hour for their work. In the focus group discussions, while most seemed to accept their level of pay, some, like Scott, expressed frustration with low pay and limited early work opportunities.

Notably, many participants who worked in more informal jobs, such as odd jobs and babysitting, or who worked for their family, shared that they did not have a set hourly wage at all, and that their pay varied. The participants that reported the lowest and most unpredictable hourly wages worked as babysitters.

Recommendations

“...because like nowadays students have a lot more stress and mental health issues that are being recognized and so that might be a lot to deal with on top of like schoolwork and actual work and maybe stuff at home.” - Daniella

- *Recognizing that many students have experience with early work:* Despite only being in grade nine, it is noteworthy that about half of the students had already worked for pay, outside the home, in some capacity, and one third were working at the time of the focus group. It is important to recognize that many students have experience with early work, and that the type and extent of this work is linked to class, race, and gender.
- *Balancing school and work:* Students were aware of the challenges of balancing school and work, and the overall importance of focusing on the longer-term rewards of school. For many, this challenge led them to delay working until they had acclimatized to high school. It was also noted, however, that some students must work, suggesting that schools need to consider how to best accommodate early work (e.g. around deadlines, missed classes).
- *Educating students about safety and rights at work:* Most of the participants’ work experience was informal, including working for neighbours, extended family, and in parents’ workplaces, but it still involved responsibility, attention to safety, and sometimes the commitment of significant amounts of time. Currently, most students do not receive dedicated, work-focused education until Grade 10, so we were very pleased to learn that the participants had known about their right to refuse unsafe work. Based on our findings, it seems very clear that young people need much more of this early education about workplace safety, rights, and expectations, for both informal and formal work contexts.
- *Providing guidance around getting and keeping work:* We learned that there is a need for guidance for young people around early work in terms of getting and navigating a job. For example, students were unsure about where to find jobs, how to apply to jobs, how to make resumes and cover letters, how to do an interview, and how to self-advocate at work. Instead they relied on informal channels, which worked well for some students, but others – often working class and non-white participants – did not have the needed connections. The informality of their earliest job experiences is in part what allows most of these young people to work at all, but it also privileges some students over others and may foster expectations of arbitrary workplace practices around things like pay and employer flexibility.