



Original Research Article

Engaging disengaged students

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Workplace based learning programs such as internships are designed to reverse the trend of students dropping out and becoming part of the disengaged young adults neither in school nor working. A content analysis was performed for this study to analyze the internship programs at two academies located in one high school facility serving a high risk urban population. The academy programs are designed to provide students with real life experiences and opportunities to develop work related soft skills. Career focus of this kind provide students with experiential learning experiences enabling the development of the skills and attitudes that benefit students not only in post-secondary education but in later careers as well. Student responses regarding the internship experience are discussed and responses analyzed according to soft skills taxonomy. As indicated by this study, real work experiences in high poverty skills motivate students and enable students to develop career soft skills.

Key words: High school internship programs, soft skills development, career training, high risk students, experiential learning.

INTRODUCTION

According to, The Condition of Education report in 2016, the young adults aged between 16-24 years who are neither in school or working nor in school, in other words disconnected, tend to come from poor families. This repeated cycle of poverty is most prevalent in urban areas. In these areas, the rate is higher for minorities and especially blacks, in what is described as segregated communities, with one out of four youth identified as disconnected (Lewis and Burd-Sharps, 2015). The number of young adults aged 18-19 years and are not working or in school is 26% for families in poverty compared to 10% of the population from non-poverty families (Kena et al., 2016). Suggestions for reversing this trend include innovative programs such as internships and apprenticeship for students at risk with developed partnerships between

schools, colleges, and local businesses (Lewis and Burd-Sharps, 2015).

Significance of the Study

Providing a means to reverse this trend of young adult disengagement from work and school is critically important. Disconnected youth are at risk for a number of resulting negative consequences including health issues as a consequence of long term exposure to chronic stress. The disengaged youth are more likely involved in non-healthy behaviors, and have a lower life expectancy (Zimmerman et al., 2015). Traditional school programs provide little opportunities to raise student expectations and provide an understanding of alternative pathways (Alfeld et al., 2013).

Instead students drop out as a result of lack of academic success, behavioral problems, and other life calamities (Washor and Mojkowski, 2014). Approaches commonly used are higher academic standards and high stakes testing which are not targeting the real problem of student disengagement (Crotty, 2013). Obviously more innovative approaches are needed.

Conceptual Framework

A well-rounded education includes more than just academic knowledge. Students completing high school need to be career and college ready. This includes gaining the communication, goal setting, critical thinking skills, decision making along with technical knowledge and skills (Lain et al., 2014). One means of supporting the student, school, and employers is through student internships programs (Leonard et al., 2015). Internships enable students to gain real world work experiences through active participation in industry setting (Dobratz et al., 2014). The involvement by students in the internship program is advantageous for the school, as well as community businesses and organizations (Leonard et al., 2015; Dobratz et al., 2014). Delays in contact with the workforce environment has detrimental effects on youth which include health issues, reduced earnings, and future employment issues (Stefano and Sonnet, 2012). Career readiness and motivation for students in urban area is achieved through the experiential learning experiences in workforce development programs such as studied for this paper. Involvement of the high schools in workforce development programs benefit students, schools, and employers (Holzer and Lerman, 2014; Munger, 2006). Workplace based learning provide opportunities for employers to be engaged with the educational community so there are connections made between learning in the classroom and workplace skills required for career success (Voytek and Zimmerman, 2015).

Literature Review

Experiential Learning has its origins in the work of Dewey, Lewey and Piaget (Bird et al., 2015). Learning is described as a process in which ideas are modified and refined through experiences and knowledge is created. This type of learning is described as holistic and involves ongoing interplay between the individual and the environment (Kolb, 1984). The hands-on experiences offered by workplace development programs provide for holistic learning. Students in the real-world setting are learning the skills and abilities that transfer to other workplace settings. Limited exposure and understanding of workforce related requirements and opportunities along with limited career counseling leads to student unpreparedness for participating in the workforce (Holzer and Lerman, 2014). Employers indicate that internship, especially at the college

level, lead to higher paying jobs.

Internship programs for high school students tend to involve projects in social media, data entry, and administrative work (SHRM, 2014). According to Littky and Grabelle (2004), internships are defined, as real world projects incorporating related workplace consequences that involve students in actually working in the community and are related to the student stated interests. Apprenticeships are also workforce development initiatives but differ from internships in that they are designed to develop the skills needed for employment in a specific field and ultimately are arranged to lead directly to certification and employment in that field (Holzer and Lerman, 2014). These apprenticeship programs begin in late high school and continue on for three years providing students with experiences in the workplace and classroom learning experiences (Lerman and Packer, 2015).

In countries that have promoted apprenticeship programs such as Austria, Germany, and Switzerland the unemployment rates are lower (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Internships require students to receive coaching in the skills, habits, and professional attitudes required in a workplace. Students also need the development of basic academic skills (Kabocoff et al., 2012). The direct benefits of work-based learning environments for students, especially from high poverty areas, include higher levels of employment, increased graduation rates, and development of 'grit', persistence (Rodriguez et al., 2016).

In order to be effective the following elements are required: connections made between the courses taken and the work place learning experience, students are provided with opportunities to reflect on workplace learning, learning is demonstrated through a project or activity at the culmination of the workplace experience, transportation and time are provided in the school day for students, there is a collaboration between the school staff and the place of employment along with feedback on student progress provided (Alfeld et al., 2013). Successful programs align the education for student job training, the needs in the job market, and provide continued exit support (Ross and Svajlenka (2016). Internship programs tend to be implemented to foster workplace readiness skills as opposed to work training as a career path (Kenny et al., 2016). An internship program requires monitoring by the school as well as by employer. This includes school supervisors visiting the interns on the work site (Bukaliya, 2012). Reflection on the internship by students is a critical component of the process (Gamboa et al., 2014).

Students require the development of two types of skills to prepare for workplace readiness- hard skills and soft skills. The hard skills are defined by the knowledge and competency in for example literacy skills. In addition, soft or what is generally referred to as people skills are required (Shek et al., 2016). Using literacy based discovery approach, Mahasneh and Thabet (2016) developed soft skills

taxonomy. Twelve clusters were identified through the analysis. These include: communication skills, workplace thinking skills, conflict resolution and negotiation, teamwork and collaboration skills, stress management skills, workplace professionalism skills, workplace productivity skills, workplace ethics skills, workplace diversity skills, planning and organization skills, self-intelligence skills, and social intelligence skills.

Communication skills include listening, reading, speaking and writing. Thinking skills are the analytical and conceptual skills required to solve problems and reason. Conflict management are the negotiation and conflict resolution skills. Teamwork involves collaborating, teaching, team building, and collaboration skills. Workplace professional skills involve professional focus and commitment to the organization. Workplace productivity is innovative, achievement, and productivity skills. Workplace ethics is the loyalty and social responsibility, including trustworthiness and honesty. Workplace diversity skills are the cultural awareness and ability to work with diverse groups. Planning and organization are the goal setting and time management skills. Self-intelligence is the enthusiasm and ability to motivate others (Mahasneh and Thabet, 2016). Taxonomy was used to analyze the transcript from a video of students discussing their perceptions of learning from the internship experience.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Content analysis provides a way to uncover, and organize, oral and written communication in order to make inferences based on the analysis of the data (Bengtsson, 2016). The analysis can be either broad as in manifest analysis or latent analysis where deeper meaning is sought. Latent analysis was used for this study to interpret the meaning behind the student responses as they related to a taxonomy framework on career required soft skills. The process of analysis included coding of the data, comparing this to the responses in the transcribed text from the video, compressing into meaningful units and finally uncovering the underlying meaning of the responses (Bengtsson, 2016).

Research questions include

1. How are the programs designed at the academies to provide career and college offerings for students?
2. What evidence is found in support of the academies meeting the criteria for work based learning programs?
3. What are student perceptions of their growth in work related skills, identified in the work skills taxonomy, as a result of participation in an internship program at The Young Men's Christian Association "YMCA"?

Analysis Approach

A content analysis approach was used for this an exploratory study of an internship program conducted at two academies at a high school in the southern portion of the United States. Explored were documents from the school web site posted online and a content analysis of a YMCA produced video. The video also published on the school site contained comments by students concerning involvement in the YMCA and school sponsored internship program. Permission was granted by the YMCA to use the student comments from the video for the study.

The findings from the program posted guidelines were further analyzed based on the recommendations identified as a result of a study by Alfeld et al. (2013). Areas sought were: connections between staff and place of employment; collaboration and support during the internship for the student intern; culmination of the experience with exit support or evaluation through culminating activity; provisions in the program for transportation and time provided during the school day; alignment of the training with job market needs; time provided during the internship for student reflection on learning.

Findings School Program Highlights

There are six academies in the study site housed in a single building. Two of the academies are highlighted in this study. The focuses of the academies are distinct. Academy A is an executive leadership and entrepreneurial development academy while Academy B is an academy of arts and technology. Internship programs at Academy A are intended to provide opportunities in hospitality and banking. An attempt is made in the academy to match student interests, abilities, and talents to the companies' needs. Opportunities are provided for students to use their 21st century skills such as social skills and teamwork in a real-world business setting.

The purpose of the academy of arts and technology internship program is to ensure students are career and college ready, allow students to participate in job shadowing and real world experience, as well as to connect students and permit networking with business professionals. A YMCA internship program was held at the academy of the arts and technology.

The vision of Academy A is to have students graduate on-time prepared to excel socially and academically in all post-secondary settings as they make positive contributions to our ever-changing world. According to the academy, the mission is to prepares 21st century learners with the skills necessary to become global leaders in the fields of international business, finance, hospitality, and tourism. Academy A offers a variety of business-related courses such as Accounting, Principles of Business, and Microsoft Academy. In addition, this school offers after-school

programs such as Robotics and Traveling. Finally, the academy offers work-based opportunities such as job shadowing opportunities in a variety of business sectors like Engineering, Health Care, and Technology.

The purpose of Academy B is to ensure that all learners are career and college ready and to connect students with business professionals. As part of the vision the academy deliberately approach all of the subject areas with the arts, humanities, and technology in view. Visual and performing arts are used across the curriculum as tools for teaching. The mission is to provide students with a challenging and creative education that produce career and college ready learners while equipping students with the tools they need for academic, personal and social achievements. Different pathways are offered for students such as Computer Programming, Network Administration, and Web Page Design.

In order to establish a connection between students and the business world, Academy B offers a variety of work-based opportunities such as Mayors Youth Employment Program, Charlotte Works Internship partnership, Career Fair, and guest speakers within the IT sector to the students. Students are given an opportunity to participate in different work-based opportunities and go through the stage of completing an application, submitting a resume, and interviewing for the internship. Additionally, the school offers a variety of opportunities for students to participate in various after-school programs. The purpose of providing different after-school programs is to allow students to participate in different programs based on their interest and to network with professionals in the Instructional Technology "IT" field. A mixture of extra-curriculum activities is offered for the students such as University of North Carolina at Charlotte "UNCC" Code Academy, Lenovo Mobile App Program where students learn MIT Apps Inventor to create mobile apps, and for gaming. Finally, the academy offers a variety of enrichment programs such as Network Administration in Fortinet Cybersecurity. After completing this enrichment program, students will be given an opportunity to take and pass the Fortinet Cybersecurity certification exam for official recognition.

The district studied offers a variety of work based experiences for high school students including, business field trips to acquaint students with the businesses in the area, internships, job shadowing, apprenticeships, and school based enterprise. A school based enterprise is a mobile kiosk or product sales within the school setting, which provides real world experience for students in management, supervisory, and leadership skills. The initiative for the schools are sponsored by DECA, the primary supporter of school based enterprise. The internship experience is developed to prepare the students for a variety of careers. Expectations for students, include, demonstrating teamwork, punctuality, accountability, responsibility, and enhanced soft skills.

Typically, internships are scheduled for 20 hours per week but there is flexibility build in due to student circumstances. The total length of the internship is 135 hours. The program is based on identifying key local industry sectors in need of talent and initiating strategic partnership with them to provide workplace experiences for students. An advisory board made up of key business leaders oversee the internship program in the schools. Students are expected to perform authentic real work tasks normally performed in the workplace and expected by the employer. Types of internship programs include: Red Ventures (coding using Python Programming and C# Programming; YMCA (counseling and tutoring of middle school youth); TopGolf (customer service). Discussed below are the student perceptions of the YMCA program.

The YMCA sponsors an internship program for high school students at the academy. Travel for the high school students in this program is not a problem since the program is held at the academy. Young students being tutored through the YMCA program and YMCA staff are bussed to the school site where the high school students serve as interns. This alleviates instructional release issues and travel constraints for the high school students and makes the time commitment required doable. The goals of the YMCA internship are to cultivate healthy living, social responsibility, and teamwork, in the entry level work program for high school students

Criteria used for the analysis is based on recommendations from a five-year study on work based learning conducted by Alfeld, Charner, Johnson and Watts in 2013. There are eight areas that form the basis for the analysis. Summarized below are the findings for the two academies based on the identified criteria.

Support Through Workplace Pre-Training for Student Intern.

Academy B- Intern pre-training prior to the work experience includes career readiness training, resume writing, and mock job interviews. Training specific to the job is provided by the on-the-job supervisor who works directly with the student intern.

Connection between School Staff and Place of Employment

(connections made between the courses taken and the work place learning experience)

Academy A - At the end of the internship the employers and student interns complete an online survey about the internship experience. Student interns are assigned a manager at the job site who is responsible for the interns' direct supervision and training. At the school site, students meet weekly with the supervisor.

Academy B - There is ongoing collaboration with the

employer. Gaps are identified in the program and suggestions are sought for program improvement. The supervisor collaborates with the on-the-job supervisor of the student interns on an ongoing basis.

Collaboration and Support During the Internship for Student Interns

(students are provided opportunities to reflect on the workplace learning),

Academy A – supervisor meets weekly with the student interns to coach them and answer and questions they may have. Reports are filed monthly on student progress in the internship database. A buddy system is established to align with the interns and provide support before, during, and after the intern completes the program.

Academy B – students receive support during the career readiness training phase of the internship.

Culminating the Workplace Experience

(learning is demonstrated through a project or activity at the culmination of the workplace experience)

Academy B – Time for reflection after the internship is provided for the intern within the school setting after the completion of the program.

Time Provided During the School Day

(transportation and time are provided in the school day for students.)

In Academy A the program comes to the school so there are not release time and transportation issues for student interns.

Feedback on Student Progress-

(feedback on student progress is provided)

Academy A- surveys are completed at the end of the internship experience.

Academy B – school staff meet with the students at the end of the internship program.

Alignment of Student Training with the Needs of the Job Market

(alignment of the education for student job training and the needs in the job market as well as continued exit support)

Academy B – the career training readiness for the interns is based on feedback from the employers as to what exactly is meant by career readiness.

Reflection on Workplace Experiences

Academy A - At the end of the internship the employers and student interns complete an online survey about the

internship experience

Academy B- The school staff meet the intern at the end of the internship program for a time of reflection on the experience.

In order to address this question, an analysis was conducted on student responses in a video produced by the YMCA. Criteria selected for the analysis was based on the soft skills taxonomy developed by Mahasneh and Thabet in 2016. Table 1 below summarizes the findings according to the taxonomy categories.

The goal of the YMCA internship program is to help the high school students learn and personally grow from the internship experiences as well as apply the learning to other settings.

As part of the experience, the interns helped in the tutoring of middle school students. The student interns discussed their experiences in the video.

Comments from the interns indicated that the interns enjoyed playing games with the middle school students. The interns described how the games brought out their ‘inner child’ and helped them engage with the students. Planning was also fun because “you got to try them out first and then showed it to them”. The experience was described as cool and contrasted to fast food work because “you are not behind a stove” but instead interacting and it was fun. Working in the internship program also allowed the interns to see “how involved the school was in the community”. The interns were planning to- “recommend it (the internship program) to the people at my school and just friends that I know just so they can gain some of these lessons and values that I learnt.”

As noted only eight of the 12 skills listed in the taxonomy were addressed in student’s discussion about the program. Some skills such as conflict resolution were not mentioned in the student conversations. However, major emerging themes were the development of communication, collaborative, and teamwork skills. The experience was positive for the interns and involved learnings that could easily be transferred to other settings. As noted by Shek et al. (2016) these are the types of skills that promote ‘holistic learning’. Soft skills include communication skills such as involved in listening, reading, speaking and writing. Thinking skill are the analytical and conceptual skills required to solve problems and reason. Conflict management is the negotiation and conflict resolution skills. Teamwork involves collaborating, teaching, team building, and collaboration skills. Workplace professional skills involve professional focus and commitment to the organization. Workplace productivity is innovative, achievement, and productivity skills. Workplace ethics is the loyalty and social responsibility, including trustworthiness and honesty. Workplace diversity skills are the cultural awareness and ability to work with diverse groups. Planning and organization are the goal setting and time management skills. Self-intelligence is the enthusiasm and ability to

Table 1. Taxonomy Skills Related to Intern Perceptions of Growth and Learning

Taxonomy	High School Student	Comments
Workplace Thinking Skills	Mason – learned to think for himself	I used to ask a lot of questions but as I watched Lorenzo work I picked up his vibes and how to move with the kids
	Cheryl –learned to make decisions	I make better decisions in a shorter period of time
	Cherise- became more confident in the decision-making process	I am more confident in my decisions
Workplace Professional Skills	Arielle- has gained a professional focus and commitment to what is best for the program	Make decisions on what is based on what is best not for me but for everyone
	Jacqueline-has developed an organizational focus	Come out of your comfort zone and not really think about yourself
Workplace Diversity Skills	Cherise-is developing the ability to work with diverse groups Workplace diversity skills are the cultural awareness and ability to work with diverse group	Like in the real work it is like a melting pot of like these different people and I feel like I have gotten a taste of that already so I can apply that to my life
	Mason – is developing workplace diversity skills including cultural awareness and ability to work with diverse group	I have learned how to talk to an older group of people and how to carry myself and how to adjust like to different environments
	Cheryl – is learning how to work with diverse groups of people	It works the same with kids and adults. It teaches you a lot about how to work with different people
	Giovanna- is learning diversity skills	Helps me be more considerate of other people's feelings and look at different view
Workplace Communication Skills	Mandy – is learning oral communication skills	I learned communicating with little kids and my coworkers- just communicating in general
	Lisa – I learned to communicate ideas	I have learned the way we communicate like the way you would explain things
	Mason – has learned the importance of communication	Communication is key
Workplace Teamwork Skills	Crystal- is learning team building, and collaboration skills	We are like a team so we have to listen to each other to reach a common goal
	Arielle – is learning teaching and collaboration skills	We are teachers like we don't only watch these kids to make sure they are doing what they are supposed to be doing but we teach them a lot of stuff like we are looking at life
Self-intelligence Skills	Arielle – is learning how to motivate others and foster collaboration	Not only are you a team player with your coworkers and like making sure that you and your other counselors you are working indirectly with are on the same page in terms of your kids. You are a team player with your kids and get them to cooperate because if you are not working with them, they will not work with you
Workplace Ethic Skills	Cheryl – is learning social responsibility	Our administrators and our bosses they teach us to instill core values that involve the mind, body, and spirit into the kids the we council-
	Mandy – is learning to be a role model	I have made new friends with my coworkers. I have become a mentor to some of these kids that needs someone to look up to
Workplace Productivity Skills	Cheryl – is learning achievement and productivity skills	I have learned to have a lot more confidence bouncing back when situations do not go your way
	Cheryl – is learning innovation, and achievement skills	I have learned to think outside the box and share ideas all the time

motivate others (Mahasneh and Thabet, 2016).

Listed below are the high school student perceptions of their growth and learning after participating in the YMCA program according to the 12 taxonomies by Mahasneh and Thabet. Real names are not used for the students.

DISCUSSION

As our economy continues to shift from an industrial model to a global economy service based model the need for workers skilled in not only hard skills but soft skills dramatically increase. Soft skills are directly linked to the skills required for employment. Nevertheless, there is little evidence of the direct teaching and development of these skills in schools as part of the academic program (Shek et al., 2016).

However, there is a change in process as schools begin to slowly implement an academy model that includes a focus on career and workforce development Work based learning programs such as internships, when effectively implemented, develop student soft skills in communication, goal, setting, critical thinking, and decision making. The skills are considered 'people skills' (Lain et al., 2014). Soft skills needed for success in the marketplace include: collaboration, communication and interpersonal skills, problem-solving, time management, and leadership. Internships enhance many of these skills including communication and interpersonal skills. The experiential aspect of the internship helps to build problem-solving skills. (Shek et al., 2016).

Illustrated in this study was the growth in these soft skills for the YMCA interns. Comments by the student interns after participation in the internship program further confirm this growth. Student intern comments highlight the development of the soft skills such as: learning to thinking out of the box, making better decisions, working with the team on achieving goals. All of these remarks provide evidence of growth in soft skills areas. Student YMCA interns as a direct result of participating in the program are developing career ready and 21st century marketable skills that will serve the students throughout their lives.

The important connections between school learning and workplace requirements are beginning to be developed through the school internship programs and other programs initiated at the two academy sites. This connection increases student motivation and engagement in learning. Especially noteworthy in the findings of this study is the growing coalition between the business community and the academies to provide extensive opportunities for students.

Conclusions

Career pathways need to be explored earlier than high

school to help stem student disengagement from their learning. Too often the focus of learning in the classroom is on increasing tested area skills and competencies, which as a sole focus, is disadvantageous for students. Integrating the career focus in middle school classes as part of the curriculum will help improve student outcomes. By increasing student involvement in the workplace, as part of their learning in high school student, disengagement is decreased and students are more motivated to learn plus more likely to seek post-secondary education opportunities (Jacobson, 2017). However, even among college graduates, employers are seeing a lack of skills including collaborative and problem solving skills (Jaschik, 2015). There is a distinction between career training and job training. Career training involves the soft and hard skills needed for success in the workplace. Skills include: collaboration with peers in diverse environments; highly developed technology current skill; ability to research (locate, organize, evaluate information); verbal and written communication skills; problem solving using creative thinking; and ability to apply knowledge.

Our current traditional system of education is not sufficiently preparing students for future career placement. According to an intern supervisor concerning education in schools, "The lack of return on investment exists for millennials in America. There is a lack of focus on career readiness. Obviously, when looking at the key data point, our system fails to serve the needs of America's youth and its economy." High school models for education in American are outdated and instead of centering on accountability only need to emphasize internships and work-based learning for teens. This type of career initiative focus needs to be a national standard for every child and especially for those college bound so they have a clear career path instead of just the accumulation of debt after four years of study. This will help ensure that our youth are successful and choose career pathways that lead to prosperity.

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