

Working Women's Centre

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WORK EXPERIENCE

WHO NEEDS IT ?

School-leavers wishing to enter the workforce for the first time and women wishing to re-enter the workforce after raising families are often not equipped to deal with specific work situations. They lack the kind of information needed to survive in the workforce, i.e. an introduction to the work ethic - how to make the transition from school to work or home to work and how to cope with a boring routine job for 35-40 hours a week.

Work experience programmes can help them to a certain extent. Programmes are conducted through many secondary schools to enable students to obtain practical vocational experience in a variety of different work situations.

OBJECTIVES OF WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAMMES

One of the basic objectives of such programmes should be that students be given the chance to see a broader range of options for themselves in the future. Furthermore the experience should encourage the student to observe, interpret and analyze the multifarious 'social' and political aspects of work. There are many issues which can be brought to the student's attention prior to undertaking work experience, e.g. worker participation, job satisfaction, the role of the union, methods of advertising, environmental and conservation implications etc.

Yet many schools are not preparing people vocationally and are not offering them realistic career choices or marketable skills because education and training have been seen as two separate entities - the States paying for education and employers for training. However, according to Peter Kirby of the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations, (1) "..... the distinction between education and training is in many ways artificial in the sense that both are directed to the broad objective of achieving people's useful participation in and contribution to society. Indeed, the situation in Australia - where many young school-leavers receive no training or only minimal training - contrasts sharply with the practice of other industrialized countries. This is so even though it can be demonstrated that a basic reason for the difficulties of making the transition to working life and for high unemployment among young people is their lack of knowledge, skill and experience, which makes their initial contribution to production inevitably low and even negative."

WOMEN PARTICULARLY NEED WORK EXPERIENCE

The female school-leaver is even worse off than the male. She is not equipped, either personally or with skills, to seek employment - particularly in the traditionally male areas where more job openings occur. A survey of unemployed young people, conducted in September 1975 by the Department of Labour and Immigration, shows that more than one quarter of males and one third of females had had no previous work experience.

Work experience programmes can help overcome the apparent lack of effective career counselling so that students will no longer leave school with little or no realistic knowledge of their employment opportunities and alternatives. Women wishing to return to work are severely hampered by this lack of career counselling and vocational preparation. The Cochrane Report into Labour Market Training states:

"Many women are anxious and uncertain about re-entering employment after a period of absence. Previously learned skills may be out of date or obsolete and may not match new career aspirations. They may need help in assessing their aptitudes and abilities, in deciding between various career possibilities, in techniques of job search and application and in obtaining the remedial education and training to help overcome earlier shortcomings." (3)

FORMS AND EFFECTS OF WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAMMES

Work experience programmes have taken on many different organizational forms as a result of the various 'philosophical' standpoints which individual schools adopt. Some schools may see the work experience programme as another subject in which particular students must engage, these 'particular students' generally being the 'low achievers' and/or the 'disenchanted'. The idea seems to be that a taste of the real world will smarten them up - a bit like the idea that all young males should have a stint in the armed services as this will make men of them. It seems very likely that this organization (despite whatever the school claims to the contrary) would not encourage students to see the exercise as a positive educational experience and it also seems doubtful whether much of the potential social and vocational data obtainable from such an experience would be accumulated and appreciated.

SEXISM AND ROLE-TYPING

Alternatively, schools may organize programmes with the over-riding aim of the student gaining vocational information. These programmes thus could tend to reflect the vocational patterns (job stereo-types) which dominate our society. For, if your rationale is pinned overwhelmingly on 'vocational training', what is the sense in sending a female or academically poor students into occupations where their likelihood of future employment is fairly minimal? A 'vocational training bias may also result in teachers directing these students who are involved in the programme towards acquiring only vocational information. (They may even be assessed on the basis of their 'job knowledge') Such a narrow vocational emphasis may result in students ignoring or overlooking many other areas of enquiry.

Work experience programmes functioning under the extremely narrow objectives of the programme just described are very rare. However the descriptions do serve to illustrate the potential abuse which can be made of such programmes. If our emphasis on particular objectives is too restrictive we may find that some of the work experience programmes running in our schools are "not-so-subtle" forms of racism, sexism and classism where minority-group children, women and poor children are locked into special job areas.

CLASSISM

States which have legislation covering work experience currently provide that students must be paid a minimum of \$3.00 per day whilst gaining such experience. This tends to discriminate particularly against country students because there are few job opportunities in country areas and employers have hitherto had to bear the cost of insuring student workers for workers' compensation. However it now seems likely that the State Governments will accept responsibility for workers' compensation premiums for students on work experience programmes.

MALE/FEMALE STEREO-TYPE ROLES

Teachers, vocational counsellors and parents should encourage students to choose their occupations on the basis of their abilities and interests - not according to their sex. However many students, both male and female, determinedly resist any suggestion that they are adopting stereo-typed roles. Both groups often agree that boys should not engage in nursing or secretarial work experience (despite the fact that men do work in their occupations) and that girls should not express any interest in motor mechanics. This is very depressing for any teacher who is genuinely concerned with the idea that every child ought to feel free to develop his or her potential and that all children should be capable of viewing every experience offered them on its merits and not on some predetermined value system derived from conformity to a sex-role stereotype.

One approach to this problem is of course to keep raising the issue and to foster discussion about sexist practices. Both girls and boys need to question their assumptions and examine their attitudes towards the roles which they see males and females adopting in the workforce. To this end students could be given a type of checklist which would focus their attention on the composition of the workforce they encounter and the divisions of labour between males and females. Some obvious aspects which could be examined are:

- * What proportion of the 'bosses' are female ?
- * Are there fewer females in any job areas ? Why ?
- * What sort of jobs do the men do ? What sort of jobs do women do ?
- * Are there opportunities for women to advance higher within the organization ?

- * What sort of questions did the women have to answer at a job interview ?
Were they the same as the men had to answer ?
- * Is there any discrimination between the wages of males and females doing the same job ?
- * Are there differences in work rules between the males and females ?
- * Who does the 'domestic' duties, e.g. gets cups of tea, takes lunch orders ?
- * Are there any differences in things such as retirement age, insurance and superannuation between males and females ?
- * Can employees get maternity and paternity leave ?
- * If women leave to give birth is there any chance that they will get back their jobs if they want them ?
- * Are there any facilities which assist women with children to gain employment, e.g. flexible working hours, creches ?
- * Are there any rules relating to appearance and dress ? Do these discriminate between women and men ?
- * How do male employees feel that women are treated ?
- * How do women feel women are treated ?
- * How are jobs advertised ? Do they set out the task to be done or do they stipulate that the job is only open to a person of a particular sex, e.g. salesman or male clerk ?
- * If discrimination appears to exist, how is it justified ?

Surveys of job areas chosen by boys and girls during work experience show that occupational choice is still subject to a considerable degree of demarcation between the sexes - boys selecting traditional "men's jobs" and girls "women's work". (4) The following table covers the ten most popular occupations among participants in work experience programmes in order of preference.

<u>Boys</u>	<u>Girls</u>
1. Motor Mechanic	1. Primary Teacher
2. Aviation Trades	2. Kindergarten teacher
3. Electrician	3. Children's nurse
4. Baker	4. Shop Assistant
5. Laboratory Assistant	5. Ladies's hairdresser
6. Armed Forces	6. Clerical worker
7. Photographer	7. Medical services
8. Punch card/Comp. operator	8. Veterinary assistant
9. Draftsman	9. Window Dresser
10. Shop assistant	10. Travel agency assistant

WHAT CAN UNIONS DO ?

As many union members and potential union members are actively involved in work experience programmes it is important that unions take up the issue of sexism within the programmes to try and open up new opportunities for girls and to facilitate a smooth transition from school to work or from home to work. They should:

1. Seek opportunities to talk to students about how the union works and encourage them to join the union when they get to a job.
2. Encourage more effective vocational preparation in realistic employment areas.
3. Pressure the Federal and State Governments for more effective job market forecasts so that areas for further education can be identified.
4. Be aware of the structural changes in the workforce and the continuing decline in the employment growth in manufacturing industry.
5. Consider the possibility of optional payment for limited work experience periods to encourage small employers to provide such opportunities.

"If it is part of the role of education to promote the development of young people to fill adult roles that are beneficial to themselves and to society, then clearly the inadequacy in the arrangements that prevent many young people moving smoothly to employment are a serious shortcoming in education policy. No less are the shortcomings in manpower policies.... Only by providing a mixture of work experience, education and training are the problems of adequate preparation for work..... likely to be overcome." (5)

- REFERENCES: (1), (2), (5) Kirby, P. "when will they ever learn ?". Paper presented to TAFE Conference June 1976.
 (3) Cochrane Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Training 1974.
 (4) The Status of Women in Sweden. Report to United Nations 1968.

This paper was prepared in close collaboration with Peter Cole of the Curriculum Advisory Board of the Victorian Education Department.