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The Education Penalty: Youth, Employment and the Diminishment of Working Conditions

ABSTRACT

Currently dominant human capital and knowledge economy rhetoric hold that education can raise wages, empower workers and enhance working conditions. Education, however, can also have the opposite impact in the workplace and labor market, an impact that has received only limited attention. In this article, we draw together a broad range of literature focusing on youth and entry level employment in order to analyse the different frames of status, process and promise in which education serves not as a “premium” but a “penalty,” used to diminish worker power and claims to good conditions of employment in the present.

KEY WORDS

apprenticeships/education/internships/precarious employment/student employment/
traineeships/workplace learning/youth employment

Introduction

Starting in 2010, a series of reports began to emerge from labor groups in Hong Kong about the use of vocational student workers in manufacturing production throughout

China. These reports noted how employers in industries from electronics to toys to car manufacturing were using student workers as a super-exploited substitute labor force (China Labour Bulletin, 2012; SACOM, 2010; Shumei, 2011). Because student workers, according to Chinese law, are deemed to be students and not workers, they are not subject to labor law protections, and cannot join or form trade unions. They can be paid subminimum wages, hired without having to make social insurance contributions, and employed as a temporary workforce to cover periods of peak demand. Local officials work with employers and schools to arrange mandatory work placements for students that typically offer limited learning opportunities, are unrelated to student programmes of study, and serve, in the first instance, employer demands for cheap labor (Ngai and Chan, 2012; Su, 2011). It is estimated that over eight million vocational students now work on assembly lines across China (Reuters, 2013). Investigations into student employment in China regularly uncover a range of violations of labour laws, including underage workers, unpaid wages, excessive working hours and hazardous working conditions (CCR CSR, 2013; China Labour Bulletin, 2012). Consequently, companies such as Apple, Samsung and Dell have faced international pressure to address the use of student workers by subcontractors making their products in China.

On July 13, 2004, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in the United States issued a decision holding that graduate student teaching and research assistants at private universities were students and not statutory employees, and therefore did not have the right to join or form trade unions (Pollack and Johns, 2004). The NLRB decision was in response to a case brought before it by Brown University, opposing the efforts of 450 graduate student teaching and research assistants at Brown, who had sought to form a Brown Graduate Employees Organisation, as a way to improve their wages and working

conditions (Silverstein and Hong, 2004). The graduate assistants argued that “we are teaching classes, grading papers, advising students, and performing work which is critical to the educational mission of this institution – and we’re entitled to the same rights as any other group of workers” (quoted in Epstein, 2005: 158). But Brown claimed that the work students performed was for their own education and insisted the “relationship that we believe should exist between students and the University ... is an academic relationship.” The NLRB agreed, arguing that there was “a strong likelihood that the collective-bargaining process will be detrimental to the education process” (quoted in Boutilier, 2004). The 2004 ruling put a damper on graduate student worker union organizing efforts at private universities, which to that point had been gathering momentum across the US. Graduate student workers at many public universities in the US have been able to unionize, as they are covered by state not federal law. In 2013, a survey conducted by researchers at Rutgers University found that unionized graduate student workers in the US tended to report better pay, “higher levels of personal and professional support” and “similar perceptions of academic freedom” to non-unionized graduate student workers at comparable public universities (Rogers et al., 2013).

In many respects, these two cases could not be more different. In one, we have some of the planet’s lowest paid workers employed in low skill assembly line production, in what is sometimes dubbed the “workshop of the world.” In the other, we have some of the most highly educated workers to be found anywhere, laboring and learning in one of the world’s most elite universities, at the heart of the global knowledge economy. But in both cases, something fundamentally the same is going on: that is the explicit invocation of educational status, process and promise in order to diminish wages, working conditions and worker power in the present. This use of education in the contemporary

global economy has received insufficient attention, and flies in the face of dominant human capital and knowledge economy rhetoric that education serves to raise wages, empower workers and enhance working conditions (Lauder et al., 2012). It is not just that education, as many critics have pointed out, often doesn't lead to the gains that are widely claimed for it (Brown et al., 2011): it is that education is also directly implicated in enabling precisely the opposite set of consequences to occur. Too often, this phenomenon, when it has been discussed, is looked at narrowly in the context of specific forms of work relevant for particular groups of individuals: for example, the rise of internships for university students and graduates hoping to pursue professional careers (Perlin, 2011).

In this article, we draw together a broad range of literature that focuses on issues of youth and entry level employment in order to analyse the general contours of how education, across a wide range of contexts, serves not as a "premium" but a "penalty," used to undermine claims to good conditions of employment. For, although the use of education to diminish working conditions occurs throughout the labor market, it is most pronounced in youth and entry level employment.

The Studentification of the Youth Labor Market

The research literature on the youth labor market is notable for its diffuse nature. Much of the literature has focused on the problem of youth unemployment, and challenges for young people of transitioning between school and work – and less on conditions and experiences of employment *per se* (Tannock, 2001). The field tends to be fragmented,

such that different types of youth and entry level employment – e.g., apprenticeships, internships, work experience and workfare programmes, high school, undergraduate and graduate student workers – are often discussed separately in discrete literatures. In addition to these different types of work, there is the question of youth itself, of where it begins and ends in terms of age and life stage. As suggested above, there are parallels between forms of graduate student employment and student work involving teenagers in assembly line jobs. Yet, in the case of graduate student workers, we are talking about individuals who are often well into their 20s and even 30s, and may have had extensive work experience prior to entering graduate school.

All of this raises the question of what constitutes “youth employment” or the “youth labor market”? In the youth studies literature, there is often talk of a “collapse” of the youth labor market across many countries of the global North that took place during the 1970s and 1980s (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Prior to this period, the youth labor market had been characterized by a majority of young people leaving formal education at fairly young ages and entering into full-time employment in low skill occupations concentrated in a handful of industries (notably, manufacturing). Much of this was upended with the rise of neoliberal globalization, and consequent disappearance and deterioration of manufacturing and other labor-intensive industries across the global North (Ashton et al., 1982). Youth scholars thus began speaking of the increasingly precarious, nonlinear and individualized nature of youth employment trajectories and transitions from school to work. For many young people, especially those from marginalized social and economic backgrounds, there was a growing experience of bouncing about between different temporary, seasonal, part-time, low wage and low skill jobs, and moving back and forth between periods of work, study, looking for work

and dropping out of the labor market and educational system altogether (MacDonald, 2013). In this context, some scholars argue that there is no longer an “easily identifiable and distinctive youth labour market,” only a generalized experience of precariousness for many young people (Maguire, 2010: 318). Youth labor market experience thus is described in terms of what (allegedly) existed previously but is no longer (Vickerstaff, 2003).

Some of this fragmentation, at least, can be overcome by focusing on one core issue that is common to many of the kinds of work talked about under the umbrella of youth employment: for these are often forms of work that have been organized around the educational lives and student identities of young people in the contemporary global economy. One of the most significant shifts that has occurred since the collapse of the (old) youth labor market in the global North is what some scholars have referred to as the “rise of the student labour market” (Doogan, 2009), or the “studentification” of the youth labor market (Munro et al., 2009). Growing numbers of young people are spending greater amounts of time for longer periods of their lives enrolled in full and part time formal education (UNESCO, 2009); and as they are doing this, they are increasingly employed in the labor force, not in full time and permanent or continuing jobs, but in part time, temporary and seasonal ones that fit in and around periods of educational study. This phenomenon of labour market studentification, which emerged initially in the United States, has spread to become a majority experience for young people in many countries throughout the global North (Hofman and Steijn, 2003; Price et al., 2011). Though still much rarer in the global South, the phenomenon of part-time and seasonal student employment has started to spread among upper and middle class

youth; while use of traineeships and internships can be observed in many countries, as in the example of vocational student workers in China (Kawar, 2011).

In discussions of the rise of precarious employment, it is widely reported that young people constitute one of the largest groups of precarious workers (Shildrick et al., 2012). This is not just because the young have been entering the labor market at a time when such forms of work have been proliferating. More than this, the spread of precarious employment across a wide range of industries has been explicitly organized and legitimated with reference to the educational lives and student identities of the young. As this has developed, such forms of precariousness have come to impact not just those who actually are young and enrolled in formal institutions of education, but individuals of all ages, life stages and educational statuses, whether through labor market displacement and/or the shared experience of laboring under educationally diminished working conditions (Atfield et al., 2011; Hofman and Steijn, 2003; Munro et al., 2009). To recognize this process clearly, we need to look across the full range of different types of youth and entry level employment; and we need to separate out the distinct frames through which education works to diminish working conditions and create greater degrees of precariousness. For though these frames overlap and intersect, they are neither singular nor identical.

Invoking Education as Process: Not Working But Learning

In its 2004 *Brown University* decision, a key argument made by the National Labor Relations Board for denying employee status to graduate student assistants was that

“the role of teaching assistant and research assistant is integral to the education of the graduate student” (Battista et al., 2004: 489). Though recognising that graduate assistants perform work that serves the needs of the university, the NLRB focused on the fact that, at Brown, teaching is commonly a required component of each student’s degree and situated “within their general academic area of interest,” and concluded that “the relationship between Brown’s graduate student assistants and Brown is primarily educational,” not “economic” (pp. 485, 488). This argument – that student workers are “not working but learning,” and thus can be legitimately denied a whole raft of rights, protections and claims to wages and working conditions that are granted to other workers – is not limited to graduate student teaching and research assistants, but is now made across a wide range of industrial and occupational contexts. Most obviously, this occurs in explicitly training types of work situations, such as internships, traineeships, apprenticeships, work experience and workfare placements (Perlin, 2011; Yamada, 2013). In the contemporary global economy, a growing area of the labor market is being redefined as a grey area, within which activities that look like work are defined as not actually being “work” because those doing these activities are doing so in order to learn, and/or are learning through the process of doing them.

The “not working but learning” argument, however, goes far beyond explicit training types of work positions to cover much of entry-level youth employment. For example, when the UK government introduced a national minimum wage in the late 1990s, it initially chose to exclude 16-17 year old workers, and institute a lower “development rate” for 18-20 year old workers, on the grounds that “training and development are particularly important for young people” (Low Pay Commission, 1998: 66). The Low Pay Commission (1998: 68) argued that “if society wants 16 and 17 year olds to pursue

their education and training when they are in work, ... then it is unreasonable to expect employers necessarily to pay them the same rate as they pay their experienced workers.” Similar arguments in support of subminimum youth “training” wages have been made in Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand (e.g., Irwin et al., 2005). In most cases, there is no requirement that evidence be provided that workplace learning is occurring for young workers. Rather, “training wages” tend to be defined categorically with reference to age, such that anyone of the age group in the labor market is ontologically defined as being a learner rather (or more) than a worker. The most immediate effect of such laws is to “legitimise” and “institutionalise ... lower wage floors for younger workers” (Lucas and Keegan, 2008: 386).

The conceptual opposition of “working vs. learning” raises a number of problematic assumptions, the first of which relates to the conceptualization of work. Arguing that an intern or trainee or 16 year old should have reduced claims to good wages and working conditions, and not be considered a “real” worker, because he or she is learning on the job risks implying that work itself is an activity in which learning does not occur. Otherwise, it is not clear why some are denied claims to good wages and working conditions because of the (asserted) presence of learning. Ironically, the internship model that epitomizes such thinking promotes an impoverished vision of work, at the heart of what is ostensibly a knowledge economy. In actuality, many workers do learn extensively on the job. As Fink (2013: 449-450) points out, in his argument against unpaid law student clerkships in the United States:

It is of little or no significance that ... law clerks may ... benefit by way of enhancing their legal practice skills, becoming socialized to the world of the legal workplace, or making

contacts that might lead to future paid employment. In that respect, student law clerks are no different from other employees, who routinely develop occupational skills, gain applicable knowledge, and build professional networks on the job. This accrual of cultural and social capital by employees does not excuse employers from the obligation to pay wages. The FLSA [Fair Labor Standards Act] requires payment of wages in cash (or its equivalent) and does not permit employers to deduct the value of skills, knowledge, or experience that an employee may acquire on the job.

Indeed, for professional workers, it is precisely their ability to learn on the job, through seeking out new knowledge and skills and applying old knowledge and skills to new situations, that is used to justify demands for higher wages and levels of workplace autonomy (Young and Muller, 2014). What is used to support enhanced working conditions in some contexts is used to do the opposite in other contexts. More than this, in many ostensible training positions, real learning is limited or absent, as interns, apprentices and trainees find themselves instead burdened with routinized support tasks (Perlin, 2011). Scholars, educators and activists sometimes speak of a “training divide,” in which workers in low wage jobs receive the least amount of training (TUC, 2007). For young (sub)minimum wage workers, then, wages may be suppressed in the name of training that does not occur (Irwin et al., 2005; Lucas and Keegan, 2008).

Alongside this impoverished view of work, the not working but learning argument also promotes a remarkably utopian vision of learning and education. For example, in the United States, one of the core legal arguments for differentiating interns (who don't have to be paid) from employees (who do) is that learning done by interns is primarily for their own and not their employer's benefit. Thus, the US Court of Appeals ruled in

1989 that interns at a snack food distributor were actually employees, since the training provided was “very limited and narrow” and “of little benefit to the trainee,” while the “distributor obtained employees who performed at a higher level” (Bennett, 2011: 306-307). However, questions about who primarily benefits from workplace learning tend to focus narrowly on technical skills that are taught, while ignoring the issue of whose political interests and ideological perspectives are promoted. Such discussions are typically uninformed by the broader social reproduction literature in the sociology of education, that focuses on how education in general reproduces current inequalities of wealth and power, while being shaped and constrained by elite agendas (Collins, 2009). In an era of rampant vocationalization, privatization and corporatization of education in all its forms and levels, it is difficult to find any spaces of education that are not in some way directly tied to serving employer interests – let alone education that is provided by employers themselves on their own premises (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2009).

The “not working but learning” argument further tends to construct imagined spaces of learning in which conflicts of interest – of the sort that are recognized to be endemic in employment situations – are deemed to be absent, and hierarchy and control are considered perfectly legitimate for pedagogical reasons. One of the claims, for example, made by the NLRB in its *Brown University* decision is that in educational settings, “teachers and students have a mutual interest in the advancement of the student’s education, [while] in an employment relationship such mutuality of goals ‘rarely exists’” (Battista et al., 2004: 490). Giving graduate assistants the right to bargain collectively in such a context, the NLRB argued, “would have a deleterious impact on overall educational decisions by the Brown faculty and administration,” and threaten the sanctity of “academic freedom” (*ibid*: 490). Not only are such claims about the alleged

threat posed to academic freedom by unionization contradicted by historical evidence (Lafer, 2003; Rogers et al., 2013); but the argument that educational settings are typically characterized by a perfect “mutuality of goals” between teachers and students is uninformed by a large literature on the sociology of education, while the proposal that education works best when the right of students to speak and act, individually and collectively, in support of their own interests is denied flies in the face of decades of practical and theoretical work on the pedagogical and social importance of democratizing the classroom and education system (Apple and Beane, 2007; Moss, 2007; Sadovnik, 2011).

One concerning consequence of defining growing segments of the workforce as learners rather than workers, is that these individuals are excluded from legal protections set up apply to workers in the workplace. In 2010, the presidents of thirteen US universities wrote to the US Secretary of Labor to express concern over the “Department of Labor’s apparent recent shift toward the regulation of internships,” which they argued are “a powerful way to learn” and “viewed as a huge success by educators, employers, and students alike” (Aoun et al., 2010). Yet, what exactly were these university leaders defending? Interns and trainees in the US, as in other countries, exist in a “legal void,” as “they are not technically ‘employees’ ... and therefore receive no protection against discrimination and harassment in the workplace” (Fredericksen, 2013: 246, 247). Interns who suffer sexual harassment, racial discrimination, injury or punitive behavior in the workplace can find themselves without legal recourse. In 2008, a PhD psychology student intern in Wisconsin named Asma Masri had her medical college internship terminated after she spoke out against perceived ethical violations within the college (Yamada, 2013). The courts, however, determined that Masri had no protection from

employer retaliation against whistle blowing as she had not been an “employee” who was provided with the “tangible benefit” of a wage, but an “intern” who was given the “intangible benefit” of “education, experience and opportunities for professional development” (Fine, Kessler and Brennan, 2013: 8). The education and learning frame, in this and other such cases, serves not as an opportunity or benefit, but as a penalty or liability that is levied upon the individual learner.

Invoking Education as Status: Not Workers But Students

In both the China manufacturing and Brown University cases, a second argument that leads to the diminishment of working conditions is that student-workers are considered to be students and not workers. “Under China’s Education Law,” write Ngai and Chan (2012: 391), “students who carry out internships organized by their schools maintain a student identity at all times.” The NLRB, in its *Brown University* decision, similarly focuses on the enrollment status and relative time commitments of graduate student assistants:

We emphasize the simple, undisputed fact that all the petitioned-for individuals are students and must first be enrolled at Brown to be awarded a [teaching or research assistantship].... Further, students serving as graduate student assistants spend only a limited number of hours performing their duties, and it is beyond dispute that their principal time commitment at Brown is focused on obtaining a degree and, thus, being a student. (Battista et al., 2004: 488)

Here, it is not (just) the issue that learning is occurring that is used to deny student-workers rights, protections and privileges accorded other workers, but the assertion that their student identity and status is primary: because student-workers are students in the first instance, claims based on the status of being a worker are deemed to be irrelevant and inappropriate. This argument is not new. In the 1950s, for example, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the United States promoted the term “student athlete” in order to limit its liability to worker compensation claims made by injured players on university sports teams. “The threat,” according to the NCAA Executive Director at the time, “was the dreaded notion that NCAA athletes could be identified as *employees* by state industrial commissions and the courts” (quoted in McCormick, 2006: 84).

Invocation of student over worker status may be done through direct state intervention. One significant example is the setting of minimum and subminimum wage levels, in which the student status of the young is often invoked to justify wage suppression. Here, the argument is made not just that young people are students, but that they should be students. Thus, in the UK in the 1990s, the Low Pay Commission (1998: 3, 68) argued for excluding young teenagers from the national minimum wage by insisting that:

16 and 17 year olds should not be regarded as full participants in the labour market; they should be in education or training.... We do not wish to encourage these young people to enter the labour market too early by establishing their legal entitlement to a certain level of wage.

Young people are commonly told that to get a well paid job they need an education; but at the same time, their education is used by the state and others to justify keeping wages in vast swathes of the labor market low. The OECD (2008: 116), for example, similarly argues in a report on the youth labor market in Canada that:

As a principle, increasing the minimum wage may run counter to the government efforts to prioritise education over work for young people at risk of dropping out, as young people may choose to enter the labour market in response to the higher minimum wage instead of continuing their studies.

The relationship between increases in the minimum wage and school completion rates has been extensively studied, and collectively, research has found no clear pattern of effects (Crawford et al., 2011; Warren and Hamrock, 2010). As Warren and Hamrock (2010: 1390) argue, claims of a direct causal effect between minimum wage levels and school completion rates fail to recognise a large body of educational research that has documented “the complex developmental, social and institutional factors that ‘push’ or ‘pull’ students out of school.”

More often, the (re)shaping of work around student identities is informally organized. Over the past decades, employers throughout the global North have organized their workplaces and work processes around the availability of student labor. From call centres to manufacturing plants, employers have set up locations close to university and college campuses to be better able to recruit student labor, advertised jobs directly to students on campus, and framed jobs explicitly as being “student jobs” (Purcell, 2010). An entire industry of matching student workers with student jobs has emerged, ranging

from campus job shops to student employment websites. In Louisville, Kentucky, UPS has set up a partnership with the local university and community college to employ students at its distribution warehouse as part of their financial aid package (Bousquet, 2009). In part, employers are seeking the perceived higher skills and abilities of student workers; but often their interest in student labor has little or nothing to do with skill or learning. Rather, employers are attracted by the low cost, limited temporal availability and perceived flexibility of student labor (Canny, 2002; Johnson and Lucas, 2002; Lashley, 2011; Smith and Patton, 2013). Because students are enrolled in formal education and focused on their identity as students, they are often willing to accept part-time, irregular, temporary and seasonal employment, and defer demands for meaningful, rewarding, empowering, well-paid, long-term and secure forms of work to the jobs they anticipate getting upon completion of their degrees.

Some scholars, employers and policy makers speak of there being a “coincidence of needs” or “synchronisation of interests” between students and employers over the development of flexible and what would usually be considered precarious forms of low wage, low skill, part-time and temporary employment (Curtis and Lucas, 2001; Smith and Patton, 2007). Such affinities should not be overstated. Research with student workers regularly uncovers a wide range of grievances, including: concerns with low pay and unpaid wages; lack of working hours, pressure to work more hours than wanted, scheduling conflicts with schoolwork, and scheduling insecurity; workplace discrimination and harassment from customers, co-workers and managers; and health and safety risks that tend to afflict young workers more than older workers in the workplace (Cohen, 2013; Price et al., 2011; Tannock, 2001; Tannock and Flocks, 2003). The participation of student workers in unionization drives and community campaigns

to raise wages and improve workplace conditions further suggests that the interests of student workers and employers are not always that well synchronised at all (Forman, 2013; Tannock, 2001; UNITE, 2014; Young Workers United, 2009).

As growing segments of the labor market are (re)organized around the recruitment of student workers, there is a risk that non-student workers may be displaced and/or find their own working conditions diminished (Atfield et al., 2011; Hofman and Steijn, 2003). As Munro, Turok and Livingstone (2009: 1817) write:

The ready availability of a supply of students willing to accept short-term contracts, intensive work practices, and nonstandard routines may enable employers to change the way they manage their workforce, including having fewer permanent full-time staff and more temporary part-timers. This may make it easier for firms to ... save some of the costs of redundancy, sick pay, and other statutory entitlements of permanent staff.

Research on the motivations of student employers for hiring students consistently finds that many employers see students as an essential way to casualise their workforces, by lowering labor costs, increasing staffing flexibility and control, and avoiding long term commitments to workers (Canny, 2002; Curtis and Lucas, 2001; Lashley, 2011; Purcell, 2010; Su, 2011). This can become a vicious circle: deterioration of working conditions pushes young people and others into formal education, where they take on employment as student workers to support themselves during their studies; but the growth in numbers of student workers leads to continuing deterioration of working conditions across growing numbers of jobs, so that fewer good jobs are available for individuals at the completion of their education degrees.

Student labor is organized not just locally and nationally, but internationally. In August 2011, four hundred foreign student workers “from countries including China, Nigeria, Romania and Ukraine” walked off their job at a Hershey’s chocolate factory in Pennsylvania in protest over poor working conditions, low wages and excessive paycheck deductions for rent (Preston, 2011). The students were in the US on a Summer Work Travel Program run by the Department of State, that every year brings in over 100,000 university students from around the world during their summer breaks. Officially, the program is billed as an opportunity for cultural and educational exchange, a chance “to experience and be exposed to the people and way of life in the United States” (Department of State, 2014). But many critics argue that the program effectively provides employers with low wage, vulnerable, temporary and seasonal labor, for which they do not have to pay social insurance taxes (Sukthankar, 2012). Other countries have similar programs. In East Asia, for example, Japan and Korea have run international trainee and internship programs that are presented as opportunities for learning and development, but in the eyes of many critics, serve as a source of low wage, temporary foreign labor. By billing these programs as being about learning not working, employers are able to circumvent labor laws and legitimate low wage levels; and by framing participants in these programs as being students on a designated “study period,” employers and the state are able to legitimate the use of temporary migrant labor, while seeking to avoid the perceived risks and costs of long term migrant settlement in their country (China Labour Bulletin, 2011; Satoshi, 2008).

Invoking Education as Promise: Not Collective Power But Individual Skill

Alongside claims about learning and student identity exists a third claim: that the way for workers to ensure good wages and working conditions lies not through mobilizing collective worker power to make changes in the present, but by acquiring individual skills through education and training to achieve transformations of status in the future (Keep, 2013; Lafer, 2002). This has been the core promise of education since the rise of mass schooling: that education serves to enable individual social mobility through a pre-existing social and economic structure, rather than enhance collective capabilities to transform this structure (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011). The claim comes in two modalities. In some cases, it draws on the model of apprenticeship, in which learning and working are combined in the workplace on a trajectory that moves each trainee or apprentice from being a novice to a master of a specialized craft. In other cases, it is based on the premise that enrolling in full-time education, while delaying entrance to full-time employment will provide young people with better opportunities, by increasing their knowledge and skill that will enable them to access good jobs in the future. “If you want to turn your passion into a dream career, don’t stop here!,” the UK government’s *Aimhigher* program used to tell school leavers, as it exhorted them to continue in education: “The better qualifications you have, the more chances you’ll have of getting a career that you love!” (Scottish Executive, 2005). Whatever jobs students have in the present are seen as playing a supportive, subsidizing role for future goals that are to be realized elsewhere.

Part of the problem with these models is that there is no guarantee to stand behind the promise. In the case of vocational student workers in China, for example, student work placements used to lead to guaranteed employment in state industries, in the context of

a centrally planned economy; as China marketized its economy, these future guarantees disappeared, leaving vocational schools to become providers of exploited, temporary, low-wage labor in the present (Su, 2011). In the case of graduate student assistants at Brown and other universities, the likelihood of PhD completion leading to secure academic employment has likewise decreased, as tenured jobs in academia have been substituted by adjunct faculty positions, as well as by graduate student employment itself (Krause et al., 2008). Lafer (2003: 157) argues that in US universities today, “the real job market is for graduate student labor, not for PhDs,” and “continuing to think of graduate employment as part of a ‘training’ process aimed at a future career is anachronistic and self-deluding.” In general, few studentships or traineeships in the contemporary global economy lead to guaranteed secure or permanent employment opportunities in the future. Consequently, there is a widespread risk of misrecognizing the nature and significance of education in the workplace and labor market. Rather than offering a genuine future premium or opportunity, it often serves as a penalty or liability, in which the illusion of opportunity is used to justify diminished working conditions in the present.

These models can also become collectively self-defeating. Generations are being taught that, when confronted with poor quality employment, the solution is to seek further education and training in order to access better quality employment elsewhere. This can create what Brown (2003) calls an “opportunity trap,” as excess numbers of graduates chase a limited number of high quality, graduate jobs. Combined with the economic incentives that employers and educational institutions have for maintaining or increasing the traineeships, internships and studentships they offer, regardless of whether these positions all lead to high quality, secure employment in the future, there

is a tendency toward a chronic state of underemployment and making of unrealizable educational promises (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011; Livingstone, 1999). In this context, not only are individuals pushed to access even more education, but employers and policy makers call for education to be driven by the imperatives of “employability,” by becoming tied ever more closely to employers’ needs and interests (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013). In turn, this can contribute to the further erosion of alternative approaches to improving the quality of work through building collective power to transform the workplace and labor market. For the more that education becomes tied to the demand for employability, the more the space that exists for fostering the kinds of critical learning necessary for transforming the current economic system disappears. The constant invocation of education as status, process and promise can lead to a “cultural production of ignorance,” in both the school and worksite, about what what would be required to improve working conditions for all (Proctor, 2008).

Conclusion: What Are the Alternatives?

In an article on the “educationalization of social problems,” Labaree (2008) notes that the most common solution offered today for all kinds of individual and collective social and economic problems is to recommend the acquisition of more education. Yet, here education is itself part of the problem, and is leading to greater precariousness and the diminishment of working conditions. Calling for more education is not an answer. There are three dimensions for thinking about alternatives. First, one of the primary factors used to diminish working conditions in the workplace today is the invocation of education as status, process and promise. There needs to be an extension of worker

identity and granting of workplace rights and protections to all individuals in the workplace, regardless of their differential engagements in formal education and/or informal processes of learning. Student-workers should have rights like all other kinds of workers (Epstein, 2005; Perlin, 2011). If student-workers cannot be used as a cheap and disposable workforce, there is a fear that employers will no longer offer learning opportunities, or be willing to hire young students. However, employers often aren't offering extensive learning opportunities currently, particularly to low wage workers. Demands need to be placed on employers, therefore, to offer more training to all workers, young and old, junior and senior alike. Further, creating opportunities for the young should not require discriminating against them or positioning them as a super-exploited, cheap and disposable workforce. Doing so not only harms them, but can drag down working conditions and opportunities for all workers, of all ages and life stages.

Second, there is a need to rethink the nature and purpose of education in contemporary society. Currently, the emphasis is on education for employability, individual mobility, and a set of narrowly and apolitically defined vocational purposes. This narrowing and hollowing out of education removes vital spaces for critical learning that are essential for addressing some of the problems identified here (Fielding and Moss, 2011; Giroux, 2003). This includes embracing the longstanding theoretical and practical traditions of democratic education, that have emphasized the social and pedagogical importance of embedding democratic practice and purpose in all forms of learning, in all learning sites. It entails critical reflection on the political interests and ideological viewpoints that education is serving and should be serving (Avis, 2011). "Learning to work," as Gorz (1989: 86) once argued, all too often "means unlearning how to find, or even to look for, a meaning to non-instrumental relations with the surrounding environment and with

other people.” It involves recognizing the contradictions and limitations that come with the embrace of individual social mobility as the frame for defining educational justice (Brown, 2013; Payne, 2012). It requires, too, undertaking the project of learning not just how to access good jobs, but how to transform bad jobs into good ones: in particular, by reflecting on the historical legacies and future possibilities of mobilizing collective worker and community power to fundamentally transform the conditions of employment for all (Asimakopoulos, 2007).

Third and finally, there is a need to rethink the relationship between education and inequality in the workplace and labor market. Underlying all the arguments presented here is the belief that education is a legitimate basis on which to ground inequality in working conditions and wages. This is the belief that those who have high levels of education and skill have an appropriate claim to good wages and working conditions, in a way that those who have low levels of education and skill, or are in the process of acquiring education and skill do not. This is the premise of knowledge economy, human capital and meritocratic theory (Kalleberg, 2013). As long as education is used to stratify the workplace and labor market, it is likely that the inequalities and injustices discussed here will persist. There is a need, therefore, for a broader conversation about how education can be separated from the legislation of inequality in contemporary society. In the world of the workplace, this entails arguing for universal rights to good wages and working conditions for all workers, regardless of their education and skill; it involves, too, recognising the importance of all forms of work for societal well-being, not just work that today is the highest status and best paid (Beck, 2008). In the realm of education, it means arguing for a genuinely public form of education that is used not to create divisions and inequalities among learners and graduates, but rather a sense of

collective equality and solidarity – or, as Dewey (1916: 155) once wrote, a democratic form of education that “makes the ties which bind persons together more perceptible” and “breaks down the barriers of distance between them.”

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