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English 1550

The Working Youth

Amitai Etzioni (1986) stated in his essay, "Working at McDonald's," that "most teen work these days is not providing early lessons in work ethic; it fosters escape from school and responsibilities, quick gratification, and a short cut to consumeristic aspects of adult life." I find his statement filled with half-truths. My experience with work while I was in high school laid the foundation of my work ethic. I was employed at the same place, a pizza shop, from the time I was 14 until I was 19. By the age of 16 I was running the place and had my own set of keys to the building. For Etzioni to infer that teenagers who work while in high school do so mainly for materialistic reasons is just offensive. That most will sacrifice education and do poorly in their studies to gain access to the newest trends and trinkets is a simple-minded judgment. Teenagers rebel in some way or another. It's a rite of passage, an important part of life. It gives them the opportunity to try and find their way in life and most importantly, screw up without it wrecking the rest of their lives. His essay is a generalization; he has his opinion on the matter and no credible studies backing him up. Etzioni's statements are biased to his own beliefs and not hands on experience. Please keep in mind that Etzioni has never held a job at the establishments he describes.

My high school days were filled with mistakes and trouble; the same can be said about everyone and their high school days. I went from enthusiastically trying my best in my classes freshman year to repeating my sophomore year and being unable to attend a day time high school to graduating with my senior class on time. I had ups and downs, but once my priorities were

straight I excelled at school. Let me remind you that I held the same job through it all. My shortcomings had nothing to do with work and everything to do with me. If anything my job and my boss, Claire, were a big reason why I was able to get my life together and focus on what was most important. My experience with work back then was quite positive. Claire was a positive mentor to me in many ways. The job itself taught me many things. Running the pizza shop, I had to be responsible not only for my actions but everyone who worked under me as well. This obligation definitely helped me to prioritize. Claire was involved in my life and without her involvement I may not be where I am today. She was with me through all the ups and downs, and I always sought out her advice. With her flexibility at work and her encouragement I went back to school. Claire and I had a great relationship. This does not reflect what Etzioni writes at all. Each person is unique; therefore, each situation is unique. Etzioni wants to throw us all in the same pot and say we are all affected in the same way. He portrays teen working environments in extremes. Either they are being trained as register ringing robots or left to their own devices that, in his opinion, always lead to some sort of depravity.

A study done by the National Commission on Youth (1980) suggests that part-time work could be the single most important factor of socialization of youth to adulthood, fostering such attributes as independence and responsibility, realistic career decisions, and good work attitudes and habits. This is a critical time in an adolescent's life. This is when they strive for their independence and seek out any opportunity to show they can be relied upon. Urging them to get a job is a great way for them to demonstrate this desire. Every single study I found, positive or negative towards my argument, states that a teenager working 20 hours or less is not negatively affected academically. (Staff, Schulenberg, Bachman, 2010; Ruhm, 1995) This evidence is undeniable.

I believe that every teenager should work at some point during their high school years. It gives them their first dose of reality. Teenagers think they have all the answers. Have them get a job and attend school so they can see how tough life can be. If they succeed and have no issues with balancing school and work, that's great. If by chance they find it's too much to handle all at once, that's an opportunity for their parents to do their job and set limitations. Parents should be involved from the start to help guide the teen through the obstacles of balancing work and school. There is no denying the positive effects of adolescents working. I admit my opinion may be biased, but at least it is based on real life work experience.

Christopher J. Ruhm (1995) writes in the *Journal of Labor Research*, that employment plays an important developmental role for students as they approach the end of high school. In his research he found that "No evidence is uncovered of detrimental effects of low-to-moderate amounts of student employment." Ruhm stated, "High school students who work generally have higher levels of future economic attainment than those who do not." Ruhm discussed at the end of his study that "a tentative but fairly strong conclusion is that light to moderate work commitments provide important net human capital investments and should be encouraged, especially as students approach the end of their high school years."

I often wonder how I would be today if it weren't for that first job of mine. I probably wouldn't have graduated high school, and I definitely wouldn't be in college at this very moment. I had no support from my family. The only support I had came from Claire and my older co-workers. They were the people who made me realize how important that diploma was. Doing well in high school was a personal choice for me, as it is for everyone. Etzioni will have you believe that it's not a choice. He stated the job itself is "detrimental to an adolescent's

success”(Etzioni, 1986). I understand that not all jobs are like the one I had, but there are many things that can be learned from any new environment.

The way the world is today demands a college degree to obtain any kind of worthwhile job. For someone to drop out of school for their job at McDonalds is laying the ground work for one hard life. The parent has the ability to guide their child in the right direction. This two-way conversation will help ensure success. In the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, Keijsers, Branje, VanderValk, Meeus (2010) found that students who have a warm relationship with their parents are at lower risk of becoming involved in problem behavior, i.e. dropping out of school. They stated in the study that the more the parents are involved in their child’s life the more likely their child will seek out their parent’s help and advice.

According to the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, a study done by Mortimer, Finch, Shanahan, Ryu (1992) stated that “the findings presented here argue for some softening of the very negative tone of recent scientific commentary on adolescent employment. Researchers focused on the effects of long work hours, have come to emphasize the negative impacts of employment. However, we found no significant differences on the criteria between students who work longer hours and those who are not employed. Furthermore, adolescents who work at relatively low intensity jobs engage less in alcohol and cigarette use than their non-employed peers. Our findings suggest that the opportunity to develop skills at work, positive work-school linkages, and predictable work may have important benefits.” This study further backs my argument that working while in high school has many positive benefits. Etzioni stated that working teens are more likely to partake in the use of alcohol and drugs; whereas, this actual study found the opposite. Etzioni should have done some research before telling the world teens shouldn’t work. (I know this particular study was done after he wrote his article, I’m just saying

Etzioni should have stated that what he was writing was his opinion; he wrote as if it was fact and it's not.)

I firmly stand by my argument that working while in high school is positive. There are pros and cons to every situation. The circumstances involving each situation are unique and must be treated as such. There is much to be gained from having a job and the responsibilities that come with it. A high school job needn't be looked at as a career but a stepping stone towards adulthood. It's an opportunity for the teenager to learn valuable hands on skills and get a glimpse of what lies ahead. All the research I found is supportive of this argument as well. I'm not suggesting that a job should be a mandatory part of adolescence but it should be looked at as something positive. They will have less time to get into trouble and more time to focus on what's important. Get a job!