"I'll be more prepared than most people": Very young Canadian workers talking about their first jobs

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Abstract:

We report on interviews with very young Canadian workers regarding their first jobs,
with a focus on why they started working, the rewards and risks of their work, and their
familial supports. Our participants were largely positive about their early work
experiences, although they also raised concerns, e.g. about safety. We reflect on three
inter-related themes emerging from their accounts: competence and vulnerability,
independence and dependence, and protection and under-protection.

Many young people in the Global North make economic contributions through work

(Hobbs, Stack, McKechnie, Smillie, 2007). They work in larger and smaller businesses in the

formal work sector (e.g. in chain and independent fast food or retail outlets) and more

informally for pay in and around other people's households (e.g. through babysitting or snow-

shovelling) (Tucker and Turner, 2013). Compared to adults, young workers are relatively

cheap, part-time employees, often engaging in non-unionized, service industry jobs that are considered flexible and precarious (Cohen, 2013; Schissell, 2011; Tucker and Turner, 2013). Currently, much of the research into North American young people's work experiences focuses on the United States, employs quantitative methodologies, addresses formal work settings, concentrates on health and safety, and studies older teens, i.e. above 16 years old, and young adults (e.g. Lee and Orazem, 2010; Lee and Staff, 2007; Runyan and Zakocs, 2000).

This paper augments the existing scholarship on young people and work by reporting on a project involving interviews with Canadian young workers, most of whom were under the age of 16. Also termed "very young workers" (see Grant-Smith and McDonald, 2015), these young people are largely invisible not only in research but also within government and school-based constructions of "young workers." The study aimed to learn about young people's broad range of early experiences working for pay outside their homes, in what they identified as their 'first jobs'. The goal was to learn about how they got their first jobs, what they did in these jobs, and what the work meant to them.

Our participants were largely positive about their early paid work experiences, in ways that are consistent with research suggesting that certain kinds of limited, early work can contribute to young people's well-being and skill development (McKechnie et al., 2014; Levine and Hoffner, 2006; Phillips and Sandstrom, 1990). However, although downplayed by interviewees, their accounts also revealed more challenging aspects about being a young worker that resonate with other research and policy focused on young workers as vulnerable and 'at risk'. We argue that the experiences and meanings of early paid work for our participants echo some of the tensions, and even contradictions, in current dominant

understandings of young people more broadly. With regards to research and policy around early work experiences, these contradictions need greater attention.

Young Workers in the Global North

Young workers are embedded in diverse, often conflicting arguments regarding what it means for them to work. For example, some researchers note that a certain amount of limited, early work is considered acceptable, even desirable, within the Global North, as it is thought by parents, school officials and others to inculcate social capital (McCoy and Smyth, 2007) and character building (Nagengast et al., 2014) through developing a reliable work ethic and/or responsibility (Levine and Hoffner, 2006; Phillips and Sandstrom, 1990) and may provide young people the opportunity to develop work skills for the future (McKechnie et al., 2014; Houshmand et al., 2014). Such discussion reflects a broader focus on young people as 'becoming', or undergoing an unfolding process of development and socialization (James et al., 1998).

A related component of this focus on 'becoming' is the idea that young workers are developing into independent adults, a goal that is particularly important within a broader neo-liberal context that prioritizes individualism, autonomy, flexibility and consumption (Harris, 2004). Resonating with this set of values, various studies examining young people's perspectives on their experience of early paid work note that they have positive feelings about their work (Hobbs et al., 2007) and value their earnings, new skills, and increased confidence, independence and autonomy (Hungerland et al., 2007; Leonard, 2004; Hobbs et al., 2017).

In contrast, young workers are often separately or simultaneously considered vulnerable and 'at risk', due to the potential negative impact of paid work. Indeed, most commentary

about young people and work raises concerns, particularly in terms of workplace health and safety (Hall et al., 2011; Runyan and Zakocs, 2000). For example, many studies have examined risk factors associated with young worker injury, suggesting that inadequate training, job type and power imbalances make young workers more vulnerable to injury than older workers (Barnetson, 2013; Breslin and Smith 2005; Cohen, 2013; Runyan and Zakocs, 2000). Some of the research on this issue points to how neo-liberal cutbacks (Cohen, 2013) and individualization of responsibility may lead young workers to feel uncomfortable raising safety concerns at work. Young workers may feel safety is their responsibility, and injuries are their fault, ideas that are sometimes inadvertently perpetuated by workplace safety curricula that encourage young people to speak up without recognizing unequal power relations in the workplace that make this difficult (Tucker and Turner, 2013).

Research investigating young people and paid work in the Global North has also tended to focus on negative effects of work on 'delinquency' and schooling (Brame et al., 2004; Lee and Orazem, 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer, 2006). Concerns about delinquency reflect a fear of 'precocious development' where work may increase the likelihood of young people drinking alcohol, engaging in sexual activity, or skipping school (e.g. Bozick, 2006; Institute of Medicine, 1998). Other studies address young workers' experiences of workplace bullying (Keashly, 2012) and workplace inequalities related to gender, sexuality, and race (e.g. see Cohen, 2013; Besen-Cassino, 2008; Entwisle et al., 1999; Willis, 2009). Concerns are also raised about the effects of work on academic performance (Post and Pong, 2009). Much American research supports a "threshold model" (Nagengast et al., 2014) wherein limited working hours are found to fit well with school but longer hours may lead to a drop in grades (e.g. Lee and Orazem, 2010; Stern and Briggs, 2001). However, research by McCoy and

Smyth (2007) and Rokicka (2014) reflects a "zero sum" model, with early work reducing time available for schooling. They contend that in Ireland and the UK respectively, any part-time work can undermine school performance. Also focused on the UK, Nagengast (et al., 2014) found that part-time work had detrimental long-term effects on occupational aspirations. Rokicka suggests these contrasting findings may be linked to regional differences, with early work more prevalent and valued in the United States than in Europe.

Overall, some research on young people and work in the Global North points to positive aspects of young people's early work, particularly when researchers focus on skill development and directly interview young workers themselves. Most research, however, concentrates on concerns, resonating with a broader social discomfort with children working. In this paper, we discuss young people's accounts of their paid work experiences and how they reflect some of these conflicting ideas and findings about young people and work, particularly the tensions between competence and vulnerability, independence and dependence, and being protected and under-protected.

Data collection

In Canada, the definition of a young worker is someone between 15 and 24 years of age; at 15, Statistics Canada begins to collect data on workers. However, specific labour laws indicating when someone can start to work are provincial, and can be lower than 15. In this project we interviewed young workers in the provinces of Ontario and British Columbia. In Ontario, a young person needs to be 14 to begin work in the formal sector, or older for certain kinds of work, e.g. restaurant kitchens (15) and construction (16) (*Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act, 2016*). However, many children are already delivering papers,

babysitting or doing casual jobs before the age of 14. In British Columbia, young people can work in formal settings at 15, although with parental permission and limited hours, children between 12 and 14 can also work. Additionally, a child under 12 can work with permission of the Director of Employment Standards, the parent and the school (*British Columbia Employment Standards Act, 2011*).

Our research involved open-ended interviews conducted with young people from three cities about their first paid jobs[1]. After university ethics board clearance, participants were recruited through passive snowball sampling, word-of-mouth, and flyers, as well as through youth service organizations. As shown in Table 1, we interviewed 32 participants, 23 from two cities in Ontario and 9 from British Columbia. Twelve participants also agreed to participate in a follow up interview involving photo-elicitation (e.g. see Böök and Mykkänen, 2014; Cappello, 2005) in order to deepen the discussion about their jobs. This paper draws on both sets of interviews. We identify our participants as very young workers (Grant-Smith and McDonald, 2015) as 21 of our participants were under 16 years old, although the youngest was 11 and the oldest was 17, and all were enrolled in school full-time. Of the participants – the majority of whom were white – 19 were girls and 13 were boys. Their backgrounds ranged from working class to upper middle class. Our participants were involved in a diverse range of jobs (see Table 1), and many older participants discussed both current and previous jobs.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim.[3] Identical sets of initial transcripts were then independently coded by two of the authors, to create a set of descriptive codes that were then discussed and honed by the research team as a group. The remaining transcripts were then systematically coded by the authors, following this predefined list of 59 codes and using either ATLAS.ti or NVivo qualitative data analysis programs (as we had access to different

software). Finally, identical codes from each research assistant were merged and exported to a summary document. We then identified common patterns within specific codes.

In what follows, we focus on three larger topic areas that were discussed across the interviews, a) why the participants started work, b) rewards and risks of this work, and c) familial supports associated with obtaining and performing such work. We then reflect on how our thematic coding of participants' accounts, across these topic areas, indicated inter-related tensions: between competence and vulnerability, independence and dependence, and protection and under-protection.

Accounts of early paid work

Why they started working

Although our participants described a range of reasons for why they started working, the primary motivator was to earn money (see also Hobbs et al., 2017). For some, money was needed for more discretionary activities, such as going out with friends and buying items valued within their peer culture. Alexander, who described himself as having less disposable income than his friends explained that he started to work because: "I felt that you needed money to fit in." Some participants wanted to contribute toward covering their basic expenses, even in a financially secure family. Additionally, many participants discussed saving money for short and longer term goals (e.g. school trips, a car, post-secondary tuition).

A smaller number of participants described their income as important not only to themselves, but also their households, due to their family's limited financial capacity. For Bob, earning money meant that "it's a lot easier on my parents." He explained that "a lot of my friends, they're like 'mom lend me $20'," but this did not feel like an option for him,

especially "if it's like close at Christmas season, [because] it's kinda hard [for my parents] to be forking out $20 here and there." In general, similar to previous research noting the relevance of class (e.g. Cohen, 2013; Entwisle et al., 2000; Purtell and McLoyd, 2013), we found that participants from working class backgrounds were more likely to hold multiple jobs and work across formal and informal settings, and were less likely to leave a job if it interfered with school.

Many said it was their independent decision to look for a job, but others said they worked because their parents believed they *should* work (to keep busy, to gain skills, and/or to earn money), because a job was offered, and/or because they were inspired to do so by working siblings or friends. Charlotte, for example, described how she was prodded to start work by her mom, but that she also wanted to fill her free time:

> My mom mostly told me it's time… And I kind of wanted a job […] , I needed things, like I needed something to keep me busy (right) it was like, that in-between stage when you have like, homework and you have stuff to do, but at the same time […] I've always found myself free on weekends…

Charlotte's story about getting her job also allowed her to talk about how work facilitated her independence and demonstrated her capabilities, and how her mother's doubts about her ability to get a job further motivated her to find work. She proudly described how she found a job within a week of starting to look: "I was planning [to] hand out more resumes and they called me within like three days (wow) they called me, they're like 'yeah, we want to set up an interview' […] so I was like yes, I *did* get a job!" Other participants also noted a similar sense of competence with regards to getting and having a job.

As found in Hungerland et al. (2007), most of our participants were grateful to be hired and, echoing both Hobbs et al. (2007) and Besen-Cassino (2008), were generally positive about their work. They enjoyed buying things for themselves and in some cases their friends; and for some contributing to their own expenses was important. Participants felt that they enjoyed increased social status among their peers because they worked in popular places, were seen as more mature, and/or had money to spend. Those working in more collective work environments also appreciated opportunities to joke around and develop friendships with coworkers. Angela, who worked in an ice cream store, explained:

> …it's a family here, like, we, there's no bad shifts, like I don't look at the schedule and
>
> I'm like, "oh I have to work with this person," I'm like "yes! [interviewer laughs], I get to
>
> talk to this person about this" or something like that (yeah) cuz everyone is so different…

This pattern is supported by Besen-Cassino's research with American teenage workers; many of her middle class participants were drawn to part-time, service industry jobs more to socialize than to make money. Besen-Cassino (2014) argues that a dearth of public settings for young people to 'hang out' was leading them to create such spaces in some workplaces.

Long term benefits of work

As part of the positive experiences of working, participants embraced the idea that their work was preparing them for the future. Many suggested, for example, that their job(s) demonstrated their work ethic, and/or provided them with the opportunity to gain maturity and work skills (see also Hobbs et al., 2017; Hobbs et al,. 2007; Besen, 2006; Leonard, 2004; Green, 1990;). Mia and Violet both talked about the benefits of babysitting, noting that it

developed communication skills, responsibility and maturity. Mia even felt that all young

people should work:

> …it's a good idea to work at our age because it starts teaching how to be responsible, how
>
> to save money, how to spend money [...] I think that every person... every kid my age
>
> should work, even if it's volunteer, because it teaches you about the real world when you
>
> grow up.

Ginger similarly highlighted the benefits of babysitting for the future: "…it also kind of

teaches me a bit about responsibility and taking care of kids which [pause] is important even if

you don't want kids because responsibility is important in most job areas…"

Participants spoke at length about gaining skills at work, both specific to their jobs, but

also more broadly. Mark, for example, emphasized what he learned at work: "I get knowledge,

how to put stuff together, how to take stuff apart, how to clean up. I learned just this summer

how to do a bunch of stuff…" Participants also sometimes talked about how they took on

leadership roles (e.g. training to be an assistant manager). Many felt that they were mastering a

wide range of tasks, including successfully organizing and handling their time. Challenging

the zero-sum understanding of early work (McCoy and Smyth, 2007), Charlotte felt that her

job helped with time management at school, and others mentioned that they were learning how

to balance the demands of school, friendships, family, and extra-curricular activities.

Participants also offered rich descriptions of managing their earnings.

Some contended that this skill development was linked to getting an early edge over other

young people. Alexander, a 14-year-old newspaper carrier who also worked at a pumpkin

patch seasonally, had ambitions to work at a fast food outlet (identified by interviewees as the

next 'step up' from babysitting or newspaper delivery) and spoke to this perceived edge:

> I feel that compared to my friends who have no experience (mhmm) in the workforce, like if it was me or my friend applying to The Donut Shop I feel that I'd be chosen because I have a much more diverse like, work experience compared to him, which would be empty.

Work was thus important in the present, but was also about individualized competition for future jobs, with some of our participants explaining that they were being smart and strategic in finding early work.

Finally, gender played a role in participants' narratives about valuing early work experiences. Girls suggested that they are more likely to be early workers and linked this to stereotypically gendered traits, such as girls' alleged maturity and initiative. Amanda highlighted these beliefs:

> Like, I know a lot of my friends who are boys do work, but like, I would say it's definitely more girls who work (right) cuz, like we're like, go getters, like we just want to get everything done, like we want to have money for university. Boys are like, more laid back and chill and they're like (right), I'll make money when I need to, like I want to enjoy (right), like my high school experience.

Mia focused more on the idea that boys felt a kind of entitlement, saying that the boys in her grade: "seem to think that things just ... need to be handed to them. And that they don't need to work hard for it." In our interviews we heard a variety of similar stories, with girls feeling that boys were more likely than girls to relax and make money only when needed. These observations may offer support to the argument made by Australian researcher Anita Harris (2004) who suggests that a 'can-do' identity has become associated with girls, who have been held up as ideal global citizens and workers as they struggle to get ahead within a context of

on-going gender inequality. She contends that this is a vision of girlhood that interpellates girls, but is also elusive for many girls for various reasons, including class and racial inequality. At the same time, however, some of the boys we interviewed also portrayed themselves as "go-getters" who had a competitive edge due to starting work very young and in some cases, working multiple jobs.

Risks of Work

Along with participants' emphasis on the positive aspects of work, many also spoke about more negative experiences, especially when talking about past jobs, or explaining the finer details of their jobs. Reflecting concerns raised by scholars (e.g. Rokicka 2014; Lee and Orazem, 2010; McCoy and Smyth, 2007), some participants complained about long hours of work affecting their education. While some were proud of being able to juggle school and paid work, even suggesting that they had become better at managing their time, others found the school-work balance difficult, as Amanda explained:

> … like I got all 90s for grade 9 except for one 89 in like, my one class (right). But then I got a job, and like, now I'm getting like, 80s, but like, I'm redoing stuff to try and get back up to my 90s average. And I just failed a test in math (oh no), I got 40% on it, and I think it's cuz I didn't have time to study cuz I was at work (right).

Significantly, Amanda did not consider quitting work, particularly because her single mom worked hard as a cleaner to support her children. In contrast, middle-class participants like Zach and Mariah had recently left their jobs because they felt their work was undermining their academic performance. As indicated above, some researchers have argued that a certain

threshold number of work hours negatively impacts schooling; class clearly plays a role in whether a student feels able to leave their job when the hours become too heavy.

Some participants also talked about concerns emerging from a lack of training, particularly around specific tasks they might be asked to take on when workplaces got busy. Michelle described how this occurred in a previous job when a supervisor asked her to do work she had not been trained for:

> …she was like "okay so Michelle, you can go on sandwiches", and I was like "uhhh, I don't know how to do sandwiches" [and] she's like "well you have to go on it." I was like "I don't know how to do sandwiches" (right) and then they're yelling at me because the service times are high. I'm like well what'd you expect?

Similarly, Zack, speaking about a job that he had recently left, said his training did not meet his expectations or needs: "[My training] was a bit short and I didn't learn much from it. I kind of just had to teach myself how to do stuff as I went along…" Safety risks at work are a consistent concern among those studying children's earliest work, and Hobbs et al. (2009) indicate that accident rates are often higher than presumed. These risks have been linked to young people working in fast-paced jobs where they receive little training (Institute of Medicine, 1998; Runyan and Zakocs, 2000). Hobbs et al. (2009) also suggest that the chance of accidents is higher when young workers have a low perception of risk (see also Cohen, 2013). Our participants' generally positive orientation to work seemed to prevent them from seeing some potential risk, although many spoke of safety fears at work and a few spoke directly about safety and injuries, notably in fast food restaurants. For example, Patrick described how he got burned while grilling chicken near the end of a busy dinner rush: "I pressed my skin up against it [the steam cooker] for like a second […] and then I pulled it off

and it [...] already you could see like a huge bubble just forming." Patrick then described how they were short of workers so he was not allowed to go home, but was moved to a different station. Additionally, consistent with the literature on sexual harassment and young workers (Fineran and Gruber, 2009; Cohen, 2013), some of the girls we interviewed reported cases of sexual harassment from customers or other staff members.

Familial support

Finally, many of our participants also talked about how their parents, especially mothers, and even some grandparents, supported them in their work (see also Runyan et al., 2011). This support included helping them get a job (see also Hobbs et al., 2007), driving them to and from work, and offering advice about navigating work, including decisions about whether to stay or leave particular jobs due to education or safety issues.

In terms of getting jobs, Zack described how his mother helped him and his brother get paper routes: "I honestly think my mom did it (right), or not did it but she like called them like 'my sons want a paper route' and then this person actually came to our house for like, this like, pseudo-interview type thing." Other participants, like Angela, explained how they got their jobs through family and community connections:

> …At Fruity Freeze they like knowing who they're hiring (right) so they ask, like, "does anyone know this person?" […] like they want nice people, and like people that they can trust (right). So I got [the job] from my sister, and [she's] like "my sister really wants a job, she's going to put her application in, like take her if you want", so [they're] like "okay, yeah."

Interviewees also had siblings help them manage their jobs. Taylor, for instance, described how she and her sister would take turns babysitting: "It's usually, well first of all it's who's free (right), and then if we're both free it's whoever did it last or the other person." Jacob explained how his older sister helped him with the second of his two paper routes: "we do it really quickly [...] one of my sisters will drive me from house to house to drop off the paper." Siblings and other family members, including grandparents, frequently drove participants to and from work. Across their varied class backgrounds, this kind of support was often essential in the face of limited public transport. Finally, sometimes parents helped their children complete their work, particularly in the case of paper routes. As Bond explained: "sometimes I'd drive in a car with my dad cuz it was quicker... it took like an hour with him, without him it'd take like two hours, three hours...".

Analysis: tensions in the position of young workers

Through our analysis of the participants' interviews about their jobs, we identified various recurring themes that reflect ambivalence about young workers in the Global North: between competence and vulnerability, independence and dependence, and being protected and under-protected.

Competence and vulnerability

The young workers in our study presented themselves as competent across a range of activities. They spoke of learning and mastering a wide range of skills, from specific work skills to money and time management. Our participants were generally happy to be making money, proud of their work, and valued the maturity, independence and imagined future

employment success they felt their jobs provided. These sentiments reflect research highlighting how work adds to young people's sense of competence, independence and autonomy (e.g. Green, 1990; Hungerland et al., 2007; Hobbs et al., 2007; Leonard, 2004).

As indicated, however, the interviews also pointed to ways in which participants' accounts revealed degrees of vulnerability for young workers due to inexperience, inadequate training, and lack of awareness of their rights as workers. Participants talked about challenges including late hours and insufficient training, but were uncomfortable communicating these concerns at work. For some, keeping silent about issues of concern seemed linked to their feelings of gratitude to be working in the first place, and to being younger and less experienced than other employees. These findings reflect the dominant focus on risk in research literature (e.g. Grant-Smith and McDonald, 2015; Runyan and Zakocs, 2000; Institute of Medicine, 1998) and in school curricula about the workplace (Chin et al., 2010). Young women may also face added risk at work, including sexual harassment and the injustice of unequal pay (Cohen, 2013; Besen-Cassino, 2008). Given that some girls in our study talked about embracing work and its benefits more strongly than boys, these gendered dimensions of early work require special attention in the future. What is striking however, and may exacerbate vulnerability, is the degree to which many participants felt that workplace risks were less significant than the rewards.

Independence and dependence

There is also tension between young workers being both independent and dependent. On the one hand, participants felt independent by making, spending and saving money, sometimes transporting themselves to and from work, representing themselves with their employers (and

customers), and making decisions about whether to stay in their jobs or not. On the other hand, their ongoing dependence was pronounced, particularly with family in terms of both guidance and more concrete support, such as transportation and help doing their jobs. Another way to think about this pattern is that they had a self-concept of independence but they were also deeply socially enmeshed. The young workers we talked to reflected a neo-liberal discourse of themselves as entrepreneurial and independent becoming-adults, a self-concept that was reinforced materially, through what they were doing and earning. And yet, their work opportunities, experiences and supports illustrate that they were located within broader social systems of inequality and, for many, privilege (Harris, 2004; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997).

This tension is also evident in how they were thinking about their future trajectory. Many of our participants imagined a competitive future for which they needed to individually prepare by honing their work skills and saving money (even sometimes to the detriment of their education – see Staff and Schulenberg, 2010; McCoy and Smyth, 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer, 2006). Yet they were also frequently embedded in social support systems that helped them to get, perform and enjoy their jobs, contributing to this imagined future trajectory. Much of their work reflected family, and especially maternal, labour that is not as evident in neoliberal discourses of individual workplace success, nor in most research about young people's early jobs.

Both protected and underprotected

Finally, young workers can be seen as both protected and underprotected. On the one hand, there are significant protections in place governing when a young person can begin formal work and under what conditions, in both Ontario and British Columbia. Furthermore,

in both provinces, students learn about workplace safety in school (although generally not until grade ten[4]). Some might even argue that some of these workers are over-protected, or at least over-dependent, when their parents are the ones getting, or even doing their jobs for them. In our research, one school board was also unwilling to let us seek participants for this research by putting up posters in some schools, in the name of their protection.[5]

On the other hand, as argued by others (e.g. Cohen, 2014; Schissel, 2011; Hobbs et al, 2007), young people are also under-protected. Governmental protections, e.g. through education about health and safety at work, does not generally happen for these younger workers until they are fifteen – later than the age when young people can legally work in both Ontario and British Columbia. Educational curricula also focus more on health and safety than the vulnerability of younger workers to more exploitative practices in the workplace, an issue raised by young workers in Leonard's research in Northern Ireland (2004). More broadly, government protections, even if legislated, are not always implemented or enforced, and rarely emphasize young workers' rights (Hobbs et al., 2017; Montani and Perry, 2013)[6]. These tensions between the protection and under-protection of young workers in turn link back to the concomitant, dominant understandings of young people as vulnerable and at risk, developing and becoming, and autonomous and independent.

Conclusion

We have sought to understand young workers' experiences through interviews with 32 very young Canadian workers about their first jobs. In this paper, we focused on why they started working, the risks and rewards of work, and the ways their families supported their work. Our analysis outlines how young workers' accounts of their first jobs reproduce

dominant, often contradictory, beliefs and practices relating to young people and paid work in the Global North – notably those that invoke the vulnerable, developing, and/or the autonomous young person. For the most part, across a wide range of jobs, our participants valued having the opportunity to work and being able to earn money; they also spoke positively about their experiences, seeing them as personally beneficial in the present and future. These positive views are important to recognize, and they are echoed in other research directly talking to young workers (e.g. Hungerland et al., 2007; Hobbs et al., 2007; Leonard, 2004). However, participants' narratives also outlined familiar challenges faced by young workers, e.g. regarding safety, rights and the effects of work on education.

Our findings do not resolve the tension between perspectives that focus on the positive development of social capital through work and those that see early work as unsafe and detrimental (often to schooling and health in particular), but they do foreground the subjective experiences of young people themselves. These experiences are a reminder that there are many valuable reasons why young people embrace early part-time work, such as earning money, gaining skills, feeling confident, gaining independence, and building friendships, and indicate reasons why young people may be especially vulnerable at work as they are grateful for their jobs and view them positively. These experiences also suggest ways that young workers can be better supported.

While provincial labour laws in Canada include guidelines for how much a young person can work, at what age and during which hours, some of our participants found their workplaces to be unsupportive of their efforts to balance work and school. They were either overscheduled or scheduled at difficult hours, and limited notice or flexibility around work shifts made it hard for them to plan ahead, pointing to the need for greater regulation and

predictability around the scheduling. Furthermore, workplaces were not always sufficiently attentive to health and safety: participants reported being asked to do work they had not yet learned about, and seemed to feel that they needed to handle issues of safety, including sexual harassment, on their own. In terms of government oversight, a number of our participants did not have a lot of health, safety or rights training either through school or work; for some this training seemed to come too late, after they had already been working for some time. Further, while educational curricula in these two provinces importantly focus on health and safety, they seem to pay little attention to worker rights (see also Leonard, 2004; Montani and Perry, 2013).

In terms of limitations, the majority of our participants were white, middle class individuals who worked in fast-food restaurants, as newspaper carriers, or as babysitters in three populous regions of Canada, making it difficult to attend to the relevance of race, class and geography in young people's early experiences of work. We also rely on the subjective reporting of our participants, which is valuable data in itself but does not inform us about actual hours worked, risks taken, grades affected, etc. In future research that similarly prioritizes young people's experiences, more focus should be on gendered, classed and racialized differences and inequalities and on longitudinal qualitative research that allows us to see how participants' views change over time.

It is often only the dangers and deprivations of early work that are highlighted in research. By listening to young worker's experiences and understandings of their first jobs, our study illustrates how these experiences may include risks, but also how young workers largely value and embrace their work. We contend that the current lack of recognition and support of very young workers is linked to contradictions in how young people are constructed more

generally, as alternatively vulnerable and at risk, developing and becoming, and as autonomous and independent – contradictions that are also complicated by race, gender and class. These tensions, as they manifest in adults' ambivalence around young people's early work experiences, may limit acknowledgement of the complex realities of young people's work from the varied reasons they work to the need for education about safety and rights.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

1. Some participants included informal work such as newspaper delivery in their definition of "first jobs", while others only 'counted' more formal work, e.g. in fast food or retail outlets. For these latter individuals, we asked them about their first formal job, and any previous informal work. Many were also doing more than one kind of paid first job at a time.

2. Photographs related to participants' work, but not of their formal workplaces.

3. Non-verbal interruptions were indicated via square parentheses. Moments when either the interviewer or participant spoke over the other person were indicated with round parentheses.

4. In B.C. students are introduced to workplace safety in grade 8 and then take a focused course on employment safety and standards in grade 10 (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016). In Ontario, an optional course, Discovering the Workplace, is available in grade 10 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006).

5. Others have raised concerns that school and university ethics boards prioritize young people's protection over their right to participate in research (e.g. Allen, 2009; Balen et al., 2006).

6. As Moskowitz (2003) notes in reference to the American context, "remarkably, in a society which claims to highly value children, both federal and state labor laws regulating minors in the workplace are tragically weak" (p. 22).

Table 1: Participants

Ontario

Participant Name	Age	Job
Amanda	15	Busser
Angela	15	Ice cream store & babysitting
Michelle	16	Drug store, fast food, co-op placement in a school.
Ginger	16	Babysitting, studio hand
Billy Pilgrim	14	Babysitting
Taylor	14	Newspapers, babysitting
Charlotte	16	Newspapers, babysitting, fast food
Alexander	14	Newspapers, pumpkin patch
Mariah	16	Coffee shop
Olivia	16	Dishwasher, babysitting, pumpkin patch
Zack	16	Newspapers, fast food
Emma	14	Babysitting
Mia	14	Babysitting
Patricia	12	Babysitting, youth centre day camp
Legend	14	Newspapers, youth centre peer mentor
Katelyn	14	Youth centre peer mentor
Bob Marley	17	Retail, youth centre peer mentor
Patrick	15	Fast food
Bob	14	Odd jobs (e.g. lawn mowing)
Marco	16	Landscaping, youth centre peer mentor

April	13	Babysitting
Violet	16	Babysitting
Mark Smith	14	Odd jobs (e.g. lawn mowing)

British Columbia

Participant Name	Age	Work
Riverstone	11	Actor
Rainforest	14	Actor
Trevor	14	Newspapers, referee, restaurant host
Julia	16	Newspapers, referee, hostess
Rose	14	Babysitting, house cleaning
Lana	14	Restaurant, referee
Jacob	14	Newspapers
Jane	17	Lemonade stand, newspapers, fast food, unionized grocery store
Bond	13	Newspapers, referee

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