



Internship quality predicts career exploration of high school students

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 December 2012

Available online 4 March 2013

Keywords:

Career exploration

Quality of work experience

Vocational education and training

Vocational development

ABSTRACT

The provision of workplace-based experiences (internship/placement) is an important component of the training program of students attending vocational education courses. Regarding the impact of such experiences on vocational development, research results are not conclusive enough, mainly, if we consider the theoretical expectation that work experiences clearly affect the vocational development of adolescents. The main purpose of this study is to clarify the relationship between work experience quality and students' vocational development. Using a longitudinal design (pre- and post internship), we conducted a study that explores the relationship between perceived qualities of the training experience (autonomy, colleagues feedback, social support, learning opportunities, supervisor training, supervisor support) and the different dimensions of career exploration (beliefs, behaviors, and reactions), in a sample of Portuguese high school students ($N = 346$, twelfth grade). Overall, results suggest that the quality of work experience is relevant for the vocational development of students. With the exception of supervisor training, all other internship qualities were single significant predictors of career exploration over the internship period. Finally, implications for career interventions and for future investigation are offered in light of the results.

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1. Introduction

Workplace learning constitutes an important component in the training program of students attending vocational education courses at a secondary education level. The research results concerning the impact of such experiences on vocational development are not conclusive enough (Creed & Patton, 2003; Frone, 1999; Skorikov & Vondracek, 1997) when we consider the theoretical expectation that work experiences clearly affect the vocational behavior of adolescents (e.g., Dawis, 2005; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996; Savickas, 2005; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986; Vondracek & Porfeli, 2008). Two major reasons for this lack of conclusiveness are as follows: a) the ways the quality of work experiences has been measured. In most cases, these measures have considered only the more quantitative aspects (e.g., the number of hours) (Barling & Kelloway, 1999; Loughlin & Barling, 1998; Mortimer, 2003; Stone & Josiam, 2000; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998), which are known to lack a large differentiating effect on vocational development (e.g., Mortimer & Finch, 1996; Mortimer, Harley, & Staff, 2002; Mortimer & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007); and b) the poor internal validity of some of the previous studies. This poor validity is due to the designs adopted (e.g., cross-sectional studies), which do not allow the attribution of the observed within-subject changes in vocational domains to the participation in work experiences (Brooks, Cornelius, Greefield & Joseph, 1995). The present study aims to overcome this set of limitations and contributes to clarifying the role of internship quality on career exploration outcomes with a longitudinal repeated measures design that includes a multi-dimensional evaluation of the quality of internships and the process of career exploration.

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1.1. Relationship between training experience and vocational development

For students attending Vocational Education and Training courses (VET), learning in workplace contexts implies the mobilization of the competencies that they previously acquired in school, contact with new organizational realities, performance of new roles (e.g., intern), and, frequently, reflections about themselves in relation to these new learning experiences in which they are partaking. For many students, this formal and structured contact with the world of work gives them the opportunity to intentionally and directly explore a reality that, until this point in their careers, had always been mediated by other sources of information (Csikszentmihaly & Schneider, 2000). Authors such as Brooks et al. (1995), Pedro (1984), Super (1957), Vondracek et al. (1986), and Watts (1996) stress the value of direct experiences within workplace contexts, including internships or job shadowing activities. These authors consider these experiences to be the most realistic modalities of career exploration. Spokane (1991) integrated these types of experiences into distal modalities of information gathering. In contrast to more proximal strategies, these distal strategies promote greater complexity and cognitive integration in the process of career choice and adjustment.

On the other hand, Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes, and Shanahan (2002) stress that it is precisely in real work contexts that adolescents can more easily explore the different aspects of their selves, test new roles, and develop social and decision-making skills. Considering this, the importance of training experience for students' vocational development relies largely on the direct interactions they are able to have with the different qualities of work contexts (e.g., social support, learning opportunities) and on the subsequent reflections that aim to organize and integrate these new learning experiences into their experiential repertoires (Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011; Petherbridge, 1996; Watts, 1996).

1.2. Quality of the training experience and career exploration

Career exploration is a complex psychological process of exploration of the self and of the external environment (Jordaan, 1963; Patton & Porfeli, 2007; Porfeli & Lee, 2012; Taveira, 2001) that ensures career adaptability (Blustein, 1997b; Savickas, 2005; Savickas et al., 2009) and has a particular significance in transitional periods (e.g., school to work transitions) in which individuals are frequently challenged with new roles (Blustein, 1997b; Flum & Blustein, 2000; Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000; Jordaan, 1963; Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998; Pryor & Bright, 2011; Taveira, 2001). Regarding work-based learning (e.g., internships), this activity represents a situation that can give rise to a significant increase in exploratory activity (e.g., Blustein & Flum, 1999; Jordaan, 1963; Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998; Porfeli & Lee, 2012; Taveira & Moreno, 2003) because the adaptation and performance of the students seem to depend on the information that they are able to collect regarding the new learning context.

Given the assumption of the previously explained association, Jordaan (1963) and Blustein (1997a) therefore consider that career exploration can, in fact, constitute a main mechanism in the construction of the new meanings that result from the learning experiences that take place in real work contexts. However, this construction depends not only on the attitudes and competencies of the person exploring, but also on the conditions that the specific context offers him or her (e.g., task diversity, experienced autonomy, supervision, and social relationships) (e.g., Blustein, 1997a; Blustein & Flum, 1999; Blustein, Prezioso, & Schultheiss, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Within the contextual qualities that the literature considers to be essential in promoting career exploration, we begin by highlighting the importance of the relational dimensions found in real work contexts (e.g., Blustein, 2011; Blustein & Noumair, 1996; Blustein et al., 1995; Flum, 2001; Flum & Blustein, 2000). Feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and uncertainty that are frequently felt by young people as they enter an internship can be diminished through the support provided by co-workers, teachers, supervisors, and other employees working in the institutions in which they are interning (e.g., Kenny & Bledsoe, 2005; Nelson & Quick, 1991).

In general, relational and socio-cognitive approaches to career development advocate that proportioned support in work contexts not only assists in reducing anxiety and stress, but also stimulates the search for support, increases confidence in attempting new tasks, and facilitates the sharing of experiences with co-workers (e.g., Blustein, 2011; Blustein et al., 1995; Hirschi, 2009; Kenny & Bledsoe, 2005; Vignoli, Croity-Belz, Chapeland, Fillipis & Garcia, 2005). From this point of view, we can affirm that relational dimensions are vital components in the connection between the student and the social and pedagogical circumstances inherent to workplace learning (e.g., Blustein, 1997a). In this case, it is important to emphasize the role of the supervisor (e.g., Cheung & Arnold, 2010; Creed, Fallon, & Hood, 2009; Kenny & Bledsoe, 2005) because the nature of the provided support should be related to the specificity of the tasks that the student is required to perform (Blustein et al., 1995; Flum, 2001). In other words, the orientation, encouragement, coaching, and feedback that only supervisors and teachers are capable of giving are essential in the student's process of adaptation in the internship context. In fact, if we keep in mind that exploration within work contexts involves a certain openness to experiences (e.g., Blustein, 1997b; Flum, 2001) that is normally accompanied by feelings of vulnerability, we must therefore acknowledge that the support of the supervisor can facilitate self-determination, curiosity, and investment by the student in the accomplishment of learning in workplace contexts.

On the other hand, beyond being supportive, learning contexts should also be challenging, promote autonomy, present an appropriate degree of structure, and allow for the acquisition of new skills (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Lynch, Vansteenkiste, & Deci, 2011). Based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Blustein and Flum (1999) and Flum and Blustein (2000) suggest that type A career exploration (i.e., self-generated exploration) can be promoted in work contexts that have the above features. From this point of view, the extent to which the students explore an internship context depends on the support and autonomy they experience, which, in turn, can have a significant impact on the diversity and quality of existing learning opportunities (e.g., Vianen, Pater, & Preenen, 2008). Given the above, and in line with the relational (e.g., Blustein, 2011; Blustein

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