

B170. "The Fast-Food Factories: McJobs are Bad for Kids," The Washington Post (August 24, 1986).

McDonald's is bad for your kids. I do not mean the flat patties and the white-flour buns; I refer to the jobs teen-agers undertake, mass-producing these choice items.

As many as two-thirds of America's high-school juniors and seniors now hold down part-time paying jobs, according to studies. Many of these are in fast-food chains, of which McDonald's is the pioneer, trend-setter and symbol.

At first, such jobs may seem right out of the Founding Fathers' educational manual for how to bring up self-reliant, work-ethic-driven, productive youngsters. But in fact, these jobs undermine school attendance and involvement, impart few skills that will be useful in later life, and simultaneously skew the values of teen-agers -- especially their ideas about the worth of a dollar.

It has been a long-standing American tradition that youngsters ought to get paying jobs. In folklore, few pursuits are more deeply revered than the newspaper route and the sidewalk lemonade stand. Here the youngsters are to learn how sweet are the fruits of labor and self-discipline (papers are delivered early in the morning, rain or shine) and the ways of trade (if you price your lemonade too high or too low. . .).

Roy Rogers, Baskin Robbins, Kentucky Fried Chicken, et al., may at first seem nothing but a vast extension of the lemonade stand. They provide very large numbers of teen jobs, provide regular employment, pay quite well compared to many other teen jobs and, in the modern equivalent of toiling over a hot stove, test one's stamina.

Closer examination, however, finds the McDonald's kind of job highly uneducational in several ways. Far from providing opportunities for entrepreneurship (the lemonade stand) or self-discipline, self-supervision and self-scheduling (the paper route), most teen jobs these days are highly structured -- what social scientists call "highly routinized."

True, you still have to have the gumption to get yourself over to the hamburger stand, but once you don the prescribed uniform, your task is spelled out in minute detail. The franchise prescribes the shape of the coffee cups; the weight, size, shape and color of the patties; and the texture of the napkins (if any). Fresh coffee is to be made every eight minutes. And so on. There is no room for initiative, creativity or even elementary rearrangements. These are breeding grounds for robots working for yesterday's assembly lines, not tomorrow's high-tech posts.

There are very few studies of the matter. One is a 1984 study by Ivan Charner and Bryna Shore Fraser. It relies mainly on what teen-agers write in response to questionnaires rather than actual observations of fast-food jobs. The authors argue that the employees develop many skills, such as how to operate a food-preparation machine and a cash register. However, little attention is paid to how long it takes to acquire such a skill, or what its significance is. What does it matter if you spend 20 minutes learning to use a cash register and then "operate" it? What "skill" have you acquired? It is a long way from learning to work with a lathe or carpenter tools in the olden days or to program computers in the modern age.

A 1980 study by A. V. Harrell and P. W. Wirtz found that, among those students who worked at least 25 hours per week while in school, their unemployment rate four years later was half of that of seniors who did not work. This is an impressive statistic. It must be seen, though,

together with the finding that many who begin as part-time employees in fast-food chains drop out of high school and are gobbled up in the world of low-skill jobs.

Some say that while these jobs are rather unsuited for college-bound, white, middle-class youngsters, they are "ideal" for lower-class, "non-academic", minority youngsters. Indeed, minorities are "over-represented" in these jobs (21 percent of fast-food employees). While it is true that these places provide income, work and even some training to such youngsters, they also tend to perpetuate their disadvantaged status. They provide no career ladders and few marketable skills, and they undermine school attendance and involvement.

The hours are often long. Among those 14 to 17, a third of fast-food employees (including some school drop-outs) labor more than 30 hours per week, according to the Charner-Fraser study. Only 20 percent work 15 hours or less. The rest: between 15 and 30 hours. Often the restaurants close late, and after closing one must clean up and tally up. In affluent Montgomery County, where child labor would not seem to be a widespread economic necessity, 24 percent of the seniors at Walt Whitman High School in 1985 worked as much as five to seven days a week; 27 percent, three to five. There is just no way such amounts of work will not interfere with school work, especially homework. In an informal survey published in the most recent Walt Whitman yearbook, 58 percent of the seniors acknowledged that their jobs interfere with their school work.

The Charner-Fraser study sees merit in learning teamwork and working under supervision. The authors have a point here. However, it must be noted that such learning is not automatically educational or wholesome. For example, much of the supervision in fast-food places leans toward teaching one the wrong kinds of compliance: blind obedience, or shared alienation with the "boss."

Supervision is often both tight and woefully inappropriate. Today, fast-food chains and other such places of work (record shops, bowling alleys) keep costs down by having teens supervise teens, often with no adult on the premises. There is no father or mother figure with which to identify, to emulate, to provide a role model and guidance. The work-culture varies from one place to another: Sometimes it is a tightly run shop (must keep the cash registers ringing); sometimes a rather loose pot party interrupted by customers. However, only rarely is there a master to learn from, or much worth learning. Indeed, far from being places where solid adult work values are being transmitted, these are places where all too often delinquent teen values dominate. Typically, when my son Oren was dishing out ice cream for Baskin Robbins in upper Manhattan, his fellow teen-workers considered him a sucker for not helping himself to the till. Most youngsters felt they were entitled to \$50 severance "pay" on their last day on the job.

The pay, oddly, is the part of the teen work-world which is most difficult to evaluate. The lemonade stand or paper route money was for your allowance. In the old days, apprentices learning a trade from a master contributed most, if not all, of their income to their parents' household. Today, the teen pay may be low by adult standards, but it is often, especially in the middle class, spent largely or wholly by the teens. That is, the youngsters live free at home, ("after all, they are high school kids") and are left with very substantial sums of money.

Where this money goes is not quite clear. Some use it to support themselves, especially among the poor. More middle class kids set some money aside to help pay for college, or save it for a major purchase -- often a car. But large amounts seem to flow to pay for an early introduction into the most trite aspects of American consumerism: Flimsy punk clothes, trinkets and whatever else is the last fast-moving teen craze.

One may say that this is only fair and square; they are being good American consumers, working and spending their money on what turns them on. At least, a cynic might add, these funds do not go into illicit drugs and booze. On the other hand, an educator might bemoan that these young, yet unformed individuals, so early in life are driven to buy objects of no intrinsic educational, cultural or social merit, learn so quickly the dubious merit of keeping up with the Jones' in ever-changing fads promoted by mass merchandising.

Many teens find the instant reward of money, and the youth status symbols it buys, much more alluring than credits in calculus courses, European history, or foreign languages. No wonder quite a few would rather skip school -- and certainly homework -- and instead work longer at a Burger King. Thus, 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 the consumeristic aspects of adult life.

Thus, ironically, we must add youth employment, not merely unemployment, to our list of social problems. And, like many other social ills, the unfortunate aspects of teen work resist easy correction. Sure, it would be much better if corporations that employ teens would do so in conjunction with high schools and school districts. Educators could help define what is the proper amount of gainful work (not more than "X" hours per school week); how late kids may be employed on school nights (not later than 9 p.m.), encourage employer understanding during exam periods, and insist on proper supervision. However, corporations are extremely unlikely to accept such an approach which, in effect, would curb their ability to draw on a major source of cheap labor. And, in these laissez faire days, Congress is quite disinclined to pass new social legislation forcing corporations to be more attentive to the education needs of the minors they so readily employ.

Schools might extend their own work-study programs (starting their own franchises?!) but, without corporate help, these are unlikely to amount to much. Luckily, few school (less than 10 percent) provide any credit for such work experience. But schools that do should insist that they will provide credit for work only if it meets their educational standards; only if they are consulted on matters such as supervision and on-the-job training; and only if their representatives are allowed to inspect the places of employment. School counselors should guide the youngsters only to those places of work that are willing to pay attention to educational elements of these jobs.

Parents who are still willing to take their role seriously may encourage their youngsters to seek jobs at places that are proper work settings and insist that fast-food chains and other franchises shape up or not employ their kids. Also an agreement should be reached with the youngsters that a significant share of teen earnings should be dedicated to the family, or saved for agreed-upon items.

Above all, parents should look at teen employment not as automatically educational. It is an activity -- like sports -- that can be turned into an educational opportunity. But it can also easily be abused. Youngsters must learn to balance the quest for income with the needs to keep growing and pursue other endeavors which do not pay off instantly -- above all education.

Go back to school.

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