



Fostering employability among youth at-risk in a multi-cultural context: Insights from a pilot intervention program



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ABSTRACT

Recent studies indicate that the transition from school to work is a critical juncture in shaping the professional future of youth at risk. This period may thus serve as a window of opportunities for fostering employability among these youths and, thereby, for promoting their social mobility. However, systematic evaluations of intervention programs aimed at fostering employability among at-risk adolescents—and especially in a multi-cultural context—are relatively few. The current study describes the strengths and weaknesses of a pilot, nation-wide, multi-cultural, holistic intervention program, aimed at fostering employability among at-risk adolescents before they actually enter the labor market. The program integrated efforts in three main domains: cultivating work-related skills, fostering personal and interpersonal skills, and providing a supportive personal and group climate. During the years 2011–2013, the program was operated in 40 localities in Israel and in three culturally different sectors: The Jewish-Israeli majority sector in the periphery, the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish minority sector, and the Israeli-Arab (Muslim) minority sector. The current study describes the results of an evaluation study that accompanied the implementation of the program in nine representative localities (117 adolescents, ages 14–19) during 2012.

Overall, the functioning of the adolescents (as evaluated by the professional program instructors) improved in all examined work-related domains: personal-emotional functioning, work-related functioning, CV writing ability, and future education prospects. Regression analyses highlighted several factors as predictive of improvement in the different employability-related domains, most notably, having a working father, being active in group meetings, having no Internet connection at home, helping other participants in the program, and being involved in selecting the topics of a professional course. Importantly, this improvement was linked with the cultural affiliation of the participants, and participants from the different sectors indicated different factors as contributing to their advancement.

The results of this evaluation study suggest that intervention programs for promoting employability among at-risk adolescents should integrate a holistic and flexible national model with adaptations by local steering committees, whose members are from the same cultural group as the participating adolescents. Such a strategy will enable each unique community to tailor the local operation of the program to the culturespecific needs of—and to maximally utilize the resources available for—the different sectors in a multi-cultural society, while establishing a dialogue and reciprocal learning in national forums. A dilemma has been identified, however, with respect to increasing the local involvement of the national committee to provide the local committees with different viewpoints.

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1. Background

1.1. Introduction

One of the main challenges that youth face is the transition from school to work – a critical juncture with long-term significance, not only for their emotional and social development, but also for their

professional future (Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 2013; Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Sparkes, 2013; Vuolo, Staff, & Mortimer, 2012; Zeng, 2012). High quality integration into the labor force is especially important for youth in situations of risk, as it is a means of achieving normative integration into society, gaining economic independence, and preventing social exclusion (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; ILO, 2011a; Lahusen, Schulz, & Graziano, 2013; Ling & O'Brien, 2013). However, at-risk adolescents cannot always rely on communal and family resources to achieve this goal (Galster, Santiago, & Lucero, 2014), and negative experiences during their school years often impair their self-

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efficacy and the formation of career identity and aspirations (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Gerard & Booth, 2015; Ling & O'Brien, 2013; Negru-Subtirica & Pop, 2016). Moreover, as educational levels are closely linked to the rates and quality of integration into the labor force (Apple, 2013; Ball, 2013; ILO, 2011a; OECD, 2015; Wang, 2012), an incomplete high school education negatively affects their subsequent integration into the labor force and may render them more dependent on the welfare system (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Ling & O'Brien, 2013). Several means and approaches have been suggested to promote the employability of at-risk adolescents at this critical juncture in their lives (Blustein, 2013; Gerard & Booth, 2015; Vuolo et al., 2012; Wang, 2012); the present study discusses the strengths and weaknesses of an Israeli pilot program aimed at achieving this goal.

1.2. Employability among at-risk adolescents

Adolescence is an important window of opportunities for youth in situations of risk, as it marks the beginning of the process of shaping one's vocational self-identity (Holland, 1997; Michael, Cinamon, & Most, 2015). Accordingly, it has been suggested that participating in designated intervention programs during adolescence can help at-risk youth in better integrating into the labor force, widen their social mobility and range of opportunities, and lay the foundations for planning a meaningful career (Cinamon & Rich, 2013; Hynes & Hirsch, 2012; ILO, 2011a, 2012; Kahan-Strawczynski, Levi, & Konstantinov, 2010; Lahusen et al., 2013; OECD, 2013; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013; Plank, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2008; Porfeli & Lee, 2012; Vuolo, Mortimer, & Staff, 2014). In the 21st century, fostering employability—namely, the skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance a worker's ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work, and cope with change (Brewer, 2013, p. 6)—appears to be key for integrating adolescents into the labor force at a later period of their lives (ILO, 2011b, 2012; OECD, 2013; Perry & Wallace, 2012; Reyes, Elias, Parker, & Rosenblatt, 2013; Thijssen, Van der Heijden, & Rocco, 2008). For at-risk adolescents, fostering employability appears to reinforce reliance on internal-individual sources and resources and to encourage a sense of control and independence (Akos, Lambie, Milsom, & Gilbert, 2007; Plank et al., 2008), thereby promoting their economic independence, social inclusion, and escape from the cycle of poverty (Blundell, Dias, Meghir, & Reenen, 2004; Pavoni, Setty, & Violante, 2016). Investment in this field is consistent with the “welfare-to-work” trend, which has emerged over the past two decades in many western countries, including Israel (Danziger, Danziger, Seefeldt, & Shaefer, 2016).

Strategies for promoting employability among at-risk adolescents should regard four central arenas, which can be integrated into holistic intervention programs to effectively use available resources (Alexander & Hirsch, 2012; Brewer, 2013; Cavanaugh & Giesen, 2012; Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Hynes & Hirsch, 2012; ILO, 2011b, 2011c; Jayaram, 2015; Karpur, Brewer, & Golden, 2013; Ling & O'Brien, 2013; Mekinda, 2012; OECD, 2013; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013; Perry & Wallace, 2012; Salamon, 2012; Schmid, 2015; Travkina, Froy, & Pyne, 2013; Wang, 2012): (a) **the national arena**, i.e., pooling economic resources and professional knowledge of relevant government ministries, parliamentary committees, and other national institutions; (b) **the regional arena**, i.e., encouraging cooperation with relevant municipal departments; (c) **the civil society arena**, i.e., increasing the awareness, willingness, and cooperation of civil organizations, businesses, and clients; and (d) **the personal arena**, i.e., fostering skills and perceptions that may facilitate quality integration into the labor force, including life (“soft”) skills (C. Cheung & Ngai, 2010; Ibarraran, Ripani, Taboada, Villa, & Garcia, 2014; ILO, 2011c; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013; Reyes et al., 2013), cognitive skills (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013), digital literacy (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013; Wang, 2012), employment aspirations and expectations (Sulimani-Aidan & Benbenishty, 2011), verbal self-guidance and management (Brown, Hillier, & Warren, 2010), work values (Anlezark & Lim, 2011; Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015; Greene & Staff, 2012;

Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013; Sorthaix, Chow, & Salmela-Aro, 2015), and others (ILO, 2011c). In addition, several activities have been suggested to promote employability, including part-time employment experiences (Anlezark & Lim, 2011; Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015; Greene & Staff, 2012; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013), business initiatives (Hynes & Hirsch, 2012; Jennings, Shore, Strohming, & Allison, 2015; OECD, 2013), “job shopping” (Biemann, Zacher, & Feldman, 2012; Doll, 1989; A. V. Kelly, 2009; Shiller, 2009), and short vocational trainings (Shemesh & Shemesh, 2014; Wang, 2012).

1.3. Adolescents at risk in Israel

In Israel, about 15% of adolescents are defined as being in situations of risk (Grupper, Romi, & Salkovsky, 2014; Szabo-Lael & Hasin, 2011). The vast majority of these adolescents belong to one of three sectors (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008, 2014; Fass, Rotem, & Ben-Rabi, 2011; Grupper et al., 2014; Lahav, 2014; Schmid, 2007; Szabo-Lael & Hasin, 2011): the Israeli-Jewish (IJ) majority sector in areas with particularly low socioeconomic characteristics; the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish (UOJ) minority sector; and the Israeli-Arab (IA) minority sector. These sectors are not only ranked in the lowest socio-economic clusters in Israel, they also demonstrate the highest rates of unemployment and poverty in Israel. To exacerbate matters, the budgets of their local authorities are usually limited (mostly due to a low level of collections from the residents and local businesses, and due to low funding by the state), and their social services receive low funding from both the state and the local councils (Asher Ben-Arieh, 2010a, 2010b; Endeweld, Barkali, Gottlieb, & Heller, 2016; Hasson, 2014; Rudnitzky, 2015; Schmid, 2007; Swirski & Dagan-Buzaglo, 2013; Swirski & Konor-Atias, 2014). The UOJ and IA populations, in particular, are traditional minorities whose members strictly adhere to a conservative religious lifestyle (Jewish or Muslim, respectively); in modern western societies like the Israeli society, such minorities tend to integrate into the local labor force through non-professional and low-paying jobs, which are often insufficient to respectfully provide for their families and do not maximize their ability to contribute to and take part in economic growth (Arneil, 2006; Bekerman & Kopelowitz, 2008; S. Y. Cheung, 2014; Heath & Cheung, 2007; Khattab, 2009; Novis-Deutsch & Lifshitz, 2016). Finally, although military service of at least 2–3 years is generally mandatory in Israel at the age of 18, youth from the UOJ and IA sectors are generally exempt from military service (due to ideological and lifestyle mismatches) and youth from the IJ sector in areas with low socioeconomic characteristics have low motivation and small chance of integrating and persisting in the military framework, especially in prestigious tracks (intelligence, computers, etc.), often due to a low level of education (Rabinovich, 2009). As the military service provides vocational and personal experiences that later contribute to integrating within the civilian labor force, young people from the three above-mentioned sectors are often ‘left behind’ in these aspects. For these reasons, adolescents from the three above-mentioned sectors served as the target population for the pilot intervention program described in this study; a more detailed overview of each of these populations is presented below.

1.3.1. Adolescents from the Israeli-Jewish majority sector in areas with particularly low socioeconomic characteristics

The IJ population forms the majority group in Israel; within this group, at-risk adolescents generally reside in peripheral communities from low socioeconomic clusters (usually clusters 4–5, out of 10 clusters), which are characterized by negative immigration, high unemployment rates [about 15%, as compared with 5% in most IJ communities (Swirski, Konor-Atias, & Zelingher, 2015)], low income and education levels (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008), and low government funding (Swirski & Konor-Atias, 2014). The education systems in these communities typically lack sufficient resources (due to the inability of local authorities to give it support and the inability—or lack of awareness—of the parents to invest in this field), and programs for under-achieving

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