A Qualitative Inquiry of the Roles, Responsibilities, and Relationships Within Work-Based Learning Supervision

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Abstract
Although meaningful work experience and the support of caring adults are recognized as factors that promote positive youth development, research has given minimal attention to the role of the work-based learning (WBL) supervisor. Interviews with 12 supervisors, from work sites that were identified as successful by leaders from a Catholic high school known for its high-quality work-study program for low-income adolescents, reveal that the roles, responsibilities, and relationships of WBL supervisors are complex and multifaceted. Supervisors seek to balance the goal-directed demands of managing a productive workplace with a relational commitment to teaching and mentoring young people. The results are discussed in light of relational theories of working and youth mentoring. Implications are explored for strengthening the selection and preparation of WBL supervisors who strive to enhance the life chances for low-income students of color.

Keywords
adolescence, urban youth, work-based learning, mentors

Vocational psychologists have long recognized the value of work experience for career development. Indeed, work experience has been conceptualized as one means to develop, crystallize, and implement career plans (Mortimer, 2003; Super, 1957). As a consequence of the global financial crisis of 2009, opportunities for adolescents to engage in meaningful work experiences have diminished, with the rate of employment among 16- to 24-year-olds being at its lowest since World War II (Annie E. Casey,
The challenges of seeking access to a tight labor market requiring advanced skills are experienced most acutely by youth belonging to low-income families, identifying as a racial or ethnic minority and living in high-poverty communities (Annie E. Casey, 2012). At the same time, funding for federal and state programs designed to help low-income youth to develop work readiness skills has diminished (Ali, 2013). Given the prevailing research evidence indicating that early work experience can be associated with higher career attainment, higher self-concept, lower drug use, and lower unemployment in adult life (Baumeister, Zimmerman, Barnett, & Caldwell, 2007), the need to develop meaningful work experiences for youth that will encourage academic motivation and develop work readiness is vital.

In this context, work-based learning (WBL), including internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, and vocational-specific curricula, is a promising model for offering beneficial work exposure, especially for those low-income youth who have limited access to a variety of career role models (Kenny, 2013). WBL programs are intended to offer learning experiences that connect academic learning to work preparation, foster positive attitudes about academic skills, and enhance goal articulation and motivation for school and career (Kenny, 2013; Visher, Bhandari, & Medrich, 2004).

In support of these positive expectations, some research has documented links between student career development and school motivation and engagement among youth in WBL programs (Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson, & Perry, 2006; Kenny, Walsh-Blair, Blustein, Bempechat, & Seltzer, 2010). Using a national data set, Visher, Bhandari, and Medrich (2004), for example, found that students who participated in a range of WBL programs were more likely to graduate from high school and attend college than comparable students who did not participate in WBL. For business school students, WBL experience is valued in developing communication and problem-solving skills (Falconer and Pettigrew, 2003). Bradby and Dykman (2003), however, presented findings that challenged the positive evaluations of WBL, indicating that time spent away from the classroom in WBL programs can disrupt academic progress. Prior research also revealed that teen employment can have negative consequences when adolescents work long hours and have little opportunity to learn work skills and interact with adults (Mortimer, 2003). Given that the quality of the work experience is integral to its benefits, the quality of interactions with adults in the workplace is also likely key to students’ WBL experiences.

Relational theory and research provide an informative perspective in understanding the potential value of the WBL supervisor. Relational theories have delineated the complex ways that relationships function in providing meaning, support, intimacy, and connections to the broader social world for people in a wide array of contexts, including both school and work (e.g., Blustein, 2011). A significant body of research documents the positive roles filled by nonparental adults, including family members, teachers, and natural and formal mentors, in fostering positive academic and psychosocial functioning among adolescents (Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2011). While quality nonparental adult relationships have been found to be important for all adolescents, they may be especially important for those who have limited access to economic resources and other forms of social capital (Heath, 1994). For youth across racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds, relationships with supportive nonparental adults are associated with a range of positive outcomes (Malecki & Demaray, 2013). These adults may offer social and informational resources that enhance access to education and work opportunities and foster successful transitions into the adult world (Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, & Farruggia, 2010).

A small body of research has examined students’ perceptions of the WBL supervisor in relation to student outcomes. Bennett (2007), for example, found that urban high school student reports of receiving informational support, encouragement, and mentoring from WBL supervisors were associated with positive attitudes toward future work. Linnehan (2001, 2003) found that urban youth, who were engaged in WBL programs with positive workplace adult mentoring over the course of an entire academic year, demonstrated gains in self-esteem, increased understanding of the relevance of school, and improved school attendance and academic grade point averages. Among ethnically diverse youth
engaged in WBL, Kenny, Walsh-Blair, Blustein, Bempechat, and Seltzer (2010) identified a positive relationship between students’ attitudes towards school and career planning and their perceptions of WBL mentors as supportive and promoting student autonomy. Students report, furthermore, that they value the experienced WBL supervisor as a source for instrumental and emotional support that promotes their personal responsibility and social maturity (Bempechat, Kenny, Blustein, & Seltzer, 2014).

Given the value of early work experience and relational support, this study seeks to illuminate the understanding of the supervisory relationship within WBL programs through interviews with experienced supervisors. This study builds on research from the student perspective and is designed to provide unique insights with regard to how WBL supervisors manage their roles, responsibilities, and relationships. This understanding will augment research that seeks to map the relational landscape of working, with the potential to advance theory and practice related to the selection and preparation of supervisors for WBL and other settings that seek to promote positive work experiences for youth.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants included 12 work supervisors (3 men and 9 women) from nine different public and private corporate work sites. The work sites were partners in a corporate work-study program with a high school that is part of a national network of Catholic secondary schools that serves youth from low-income families. The schools are recognized for combining rigorous college-preparatory academics and Catholic social teaching with 1 day of WBL per week. The WBL model at this school includes student preparation for the work setting, quarterly student evaluations by work supervisors, and job sharing by four students in full-time entry-level positions in corporate and nonprofit settings. Students participate in WBL for 1 day per week across each of the 4 years of high school, with many students remaining at the same placement across several years. The sponsoring high school enrolls an ethnically and racially diverse student population from a large northeastern city and surrounding urban communities and collaborates with over 100 corporate sponsors. Over the past 5 years, all graduates of this high school have been accepted to 4-year colleges. The research team also engaged with the students, alumni, and teachers at this school as part of a longitudinal study of student motivation and achievement.

The corporate work sites involved in this study were selected based upon their identification by the school leaders as having participated successfully as sponsors for 2 or more years, including regular communication with the school and in-depth reporting on student progress. Supervisor age, race, and education were reported through a self-report demographic questionnaire and through responses to interview questions. Table 1 presents supervisor characteristics and workplace descriptions. Across the work sites involved in this study, students were engaged in clerical activities, such as filing, data entry, mail services, and recordkeeping, and customer service tasks, such as working in a gift shop and checking out and setting up equipment.

**Interviews**

A semistructured interview was designed to gain knowledge related to the work environment and the role and responsibilities of the WBL supervisor. Supervisors were asked to describe their work setting and the roles of students at their work site. They were asked about their relationships with students, perceptions and philosophy of the supervisory role, perceptions of the high school WBL program, and to provide examples of effective and ineffective supervisors. (The interview protocol can be found in the Appendix).
Recruitment and data collection. The principal at the high school was asked to provide names and contact information of 10 work sites and supervisors, with whom the school had worked successfully for 2 or more years. Recruitment was conducted purposefully to better understand the roles, responsibilities, and relationships of supervisors in settings that had been involved with the WBL program over a sustained period. Nine of the 10 work supervisors contacted by the researchers agreed to participate. Three of the supervisors recommended an additional supervisor at their site to be interviewed. The interview team completed a total of 10 interviews, with 12 supervisors (2 of the interviews had 2 supervisors present) from nine different work sites. The interviews took about 1 hr to complete and were audiotaped with participant consent and transcribed for later coding.

Research Team

Interviewers. The interviews were conducted by three women: one White woman who is a faculty member in developmental psychology, one White woman who is a faculty member in teacher education, and an Asian American woman who is a doctoral student in counseling psychology.

Coding team. The team that coded the data was comprised of an Asian American doctoral student in counseling psychology, who had also served as an interviewer, a White master’s student in higher education, two White doctoral students in counseling psychology, and an African American doctoral student in applied developmental psychology.

Auditor. A White woman, who is a counseling psychology faculty member, served as the “auditor” to provide an independent check on the coding procedure. The auditor reviewed the data across each stage of the data analytic process, offering suggestions that were discussed by the team and incorporated into the final construction of major themes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was completed following procedures of consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, 2012). Coding team members read and discussed the literature on CQR methods and identified their
own biases as they embarked upon each phase of the project. Team members acknowledged potential biases related to participation in other research at this high school and ways in which their own age, gender, education, and race/ethnicity may have biased their perspective. They also discussed means for reducing these biases (i.e., by bracketing their values and opinions) before moving forward with the data analysis.

Coding was completed following CQR guidelines, including (a) the identification of domains or general themes; (b) the construction of core ideas or the more specific aspects of a given domain; and (c) a cross-analysis, including the creation of categories from the core ideas and determining the frequency of domains and categories across all interviews. Consistent with CQR practice, when differences occurred during the coding process, coders discussed their respective views until consensus was reached. For example, the initial set of categories identified in many domains was larger than the final set. When coders met to discuss the categories, they noted where categories were overlapping and refined inclusion and exclusion criteria until there was agreement on the delineation of categories.

**Domain Coding.** The coding team developed a start list of 12 domains based upon the interview protocol. Each interview was independently coded by two members who rotated pairings to vary coder teams across interviews. Through a process of consensual decision making, the broad domains were refined to yield six domains that better accounted for the themes emerging from the data. Content related to supervisor background and the work setting was included in the description of study participants and work sites. The team members coded the interview data according to the six revised domains, discussing any disparities and returning repeatedly to the raw data to confirm the representativeness of the domains.

**Constructing Core Ideas.** The team members next wrote abstracts describing the core ideas for the quotes assigned to each domain and reviewed the comprehensiveness of the domain coding in the process. Consistent with the domain coding, the team members abstracted documents independently and met to compare and discuss their work.

**Cross-analysis.** After reaching consensus on the core ideas, the coding team identified categories that reflected themes within the domains. Team members independently applied the identified categories across interviews, which were revised through team discussion to consolidate overlapping categories and to add others as needed. Once the final list of categories was developed, frequency labels were applied. In accordance with CQR guidelines (Hill, 2012), a category that was mentioned by all, or all but one of the participants, was labeled as general. Those mentioned by more than 50%, but less than the cutoff for general, were considered typical, with those mentioned by at least two, but less than 50% of participants described as variant. Any domain or category consisting of only one participant response was considered rare and was dropped from further consideration.

**Results**

The six domains and 14 categories (see Table 2) that emerged from the analysis of the interviews are described below, along with representative supervisor quotes.

**Workplace Communication Domain**

The team coded all responses in which the workplace supervisors described work-related communication with students and their high school representatives as Workplace Communication, a domain mentioned across all 10 interviews. One general category and one variant category were identified. The general category, labeled Communication about Workplace Expectations, included both verbal and nonverbal communication with the student, such as modeling, verbal explanations of work site expectations, and constructive criticism and correction. Communication about workplace expectations...
and behavior generally occurred on a daily basis through informal interactions and formal conversations, such as discussion of the quarterly evaluations.

The following quotes exemplify the ongoing verbal coaching provided by supervisors to teach workplace expectations. For example, Susan (all names are pseudonyms) stated:

“You know, we tried to tell them as they’re following around and they’re tag-teaming at first, ‘Say good morning. Let people know who you are. Don’t put your head down. Hold your head up. Say good morning. Be receptive to people.’”

Another supervisor, Robert, explained how he coached his peers to support the students:

“The kid comes with a question, and you don’t just give an answer or instruction. Give the answer and then explain why you are giving that answer. Don’t just say, put it on that shelf. Say put it on that shelf because when customers come, the first place they are going to look is the shelf.”

The variant category, which the team labeled as Communication between Work Site and High School, included communication about recruitment of prospective students, program logistics, and performance of current students. Communication between the school and the work site starts before the student begins the placement. Robert described, “They send us a bio, and it talks about what their interests are in school and outside of school, what their long-term goals are, and what they want to be in life.” Evaluations of students are completed quarterly, but communication with the school might also be initiated any time students are not meeting workplace expectations. James stated, “You can’t be afraid to go to the school and work with the system to curb bad behavior of the student if that’s happening. It’s emotionally draining to do that, but it’s the best thing for everyone involved.”

### Table 2. Domains and Categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workplace Communication Domain (N = 10)</th>
<th>Developmental Process Domain (N = 10)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Communication about Workplace</td>
<td>• Internship as a Means for Student Growth (G)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Expectations (G)</td>
<td>• Supervisor Growth (V)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Communication Between the Work Site and the School (V)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Investment of Time and Effort Domain (N = 10)</th>
<th>Relationship Quality Domain (N = 10)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Mentoring for WBL Success (G)</td>
<td>• Nurturance and Care for Students (G)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mentoring for Future Academic and Career Success (G)</td>
<td>• Emotional Effect of Relationship on the Supervisor (T)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Interest in Student Beyond Intern Role (T)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Managing the Work Environment Domain (N = 10)</th>
<th>Recognition of Background Domain (N = 6)</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Supervisor Managerial Style (G)</td>
<td>• Comparison between Supervisors and Students and Life Context (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Managing Systems and Structures of the Workplace (T)</td>
<td>• Diversity in systems and structures of the workplace (V)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cognitive, Affective and Pragmatic Challenges (T)</td>
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Note. G = general (9–10 cases); T = typical (6–8 cases); V = variant (2–5 cases).
**Developmental Process Domain**

Developmental Process includes mention of WBL as an activity or process that promotes the development of the student or the supervisor, encompassing personal and social growth and the development of responsibility. This domain, which was mentioned in all 10 interviews, included one general and one variant category. Supervisor statements about the Internship as a Means for Student Growth comprised the general category. Supervisors described the internship as promoting student development in workplace behavior, maturity, self-confidence, and social skills. Susan describes advances in student capacity with supervisor support:

> Trying to give them time to build up their confidence in what they are doing. And then as we feel they’ve been here for a few months, we feel as though they should begin to know the routine and take on more responsibility and do a little bit more. But there is always someone there, helping them, monitoring them, being there for questions . . . .

Supervisor Growth was a variant category that describes supervision as an ongoing development process, involving gains in self-knowledge, understanding of students, and improvement in supervisor practice. These statements reflect supervisors’ evolving understandings of students’ strengths and commitment to their internship. Patricia reflected:

> I think where we faltered most was giving them less—they can take on more. A lot of time we kept telling ourselves “These students are only 15 years old” and you know that sort of thing. And they’re very capable of doing a lot—much more than we initially gave them. That is what we learned most the first year and to keep them engaged and keep them interested and really let them become a part of our firm and a part of our responsibilities.

**Investment of Time and Effort Domain**

Investment, a domain identified in all 10 interviews, captures the time and effort invested by supervisors in providing support and guidance, which often goes beyond the typical supervisory relationship. The analysis revealed two general and one typical category. The first general category, Mentoring for WBL Success, describes the time and effort supervisors devote to orienting and training students for their new responsibilities. This may include Workplace Communication, but the focus is on the time and effort involved. Although training is required for all new employees, supervisors viewed the time investment as more intensive with student interns. Michael noted that the time to do this may be more than doing the work oneself:

> You first look at it and you’re like, “I could do this myself in two seconds and it’s going to take me an hour to explain it.” You have to stop that and you need to remember the investment you make in the beginning is going to outweigh itself in the end.

The second general category, Mentoring for Future Academic and Career Success, includes offering information and guidance, discussing goals, promoting networking, and writing recommendations with a focus on school and career success beyond the WBL site. Deborah described how members of the whole department invest in discussions of college and life planning:

> I, along with our whole department, took an interest in what their life and career goals were. So in addition to the responsibilities they were given here, you know the project management type responsibilities and you know strategic things they were able to do in regard to their peers, there was definitely time spent talking about college preparation and goals and things of that nature which I think was a benefit.
Supervisors encouraged students to think about and take action regarding their future goals. Patricia explained:

So we certainly take time to have conversations with the students about what their goals are, what direction they want to go in, and how—what are some steps to look at to get there. And we make them do some research, you know, it’s like, “What does that involve? Have you talked to your guidance counselor? Where does this make sense?”

The typical category reflects a broad interest in students’ personal lives and social and extracurricular activities, which the team labeled Interest in Student beyond Intern Role. This category reflects interest in current activities outside of the workplace, without regard for preparation for future school or work success. As John described, “I ask them... what sports they’re doing or what activities, like drama or stuff they’re doing after school. I mean, you don’t really have those conversations with the regular employees.”

This category also includes supervisor time invested beyond work hours or outside of the workplace, such as attending athletic and social events. Patricia explains how she made time to engage with students in informal social activities:

We like to celebrate things in their lives, you know birthdays, and we certainly try to get to know them as people as well, and their families. What is going on in their lives. They are invested in us and so the more we share with them, the more willing they are to share with us. We feel as though kind of having that partnership makes them want to help us more. It’s kind of a give and take.

**Relationship Quality Domain**

Relationship Quality, a domain mentioned in all interviews, captures the quality of the student—supervisor relationship, with a focus on personal and affective dimensions. One general and one typical category were identified. The general category, Nurturance and Care for students, included reference to the level of emotional support, caring, and nurturance supervisors offered to students. Whereas the Investment domain focused on time and effort, the focus here is on the affective component of the relationship. Supervisors expressed an understanding that genuine caring is the basis for their relationship with students, as reflected by Mary:

Basically, the supervisors who work with the teens care a lot about them. They know right from the start that they’re going to be with them for the whole school year, hopefully... We don’t like it when they have to leave. We actually call the school and ask them to not take them.

Similarly, Robert stated, “While the kid’s here, I want to make sure that they’re secure being here, and that we care about them,” and John added, “We have really grown fond of these kids. It’s great to watch these kids grow up. It really is, and how much they’ve changed.”

The typical category, Emotional Effect of Relationship on Supervisor, describes the emotional salience of the relationship. Although this was generally described in positive terms, such as rewarding and valuable, supervisors also mentioned the emotional toll that can result when students do not meet expectations. James, for example, described both the emotional highs and lows that accompany his role as supervisor:

When there’s a problem with a student, that something’s not right, it is a little bit stressful. They are important to me as an individual, and the relationship is important to me. So I want to make it a priority to turn this around. It’s always emotional to make a decision to terminate a student.
Later in the interview, James continued:

When we won the award [for being a top work site], and one of students gave a speech, it brought me to tears, and it was just so touching the things that she said. It was a big part of that speech, coming here and feeling included, and how much they appreciated me.

Managing the Work Environment

The role of the supervisor in managing the structural, organizational, and operational dimensions of the work environment for the benefit of the students and overall productivity and harmony of the workplace was another domain common across all interviews. This domain encompassed one general category and two typical categories

The general category, Supervisor Managerial Style, encompasses supervision of students and other employees. Supervisors described approaches that were effective for the workplace overall and for students, in particular. Some sites used a team approach to provide comprehensive supervision that did not rely on a single employee, as Nancy stated:

... the fact that you can share responsibilities of managing and supervising people, at least that’s what had worked for us. ... So Tracey knowing what her role is, Mariela being a backup if Tracey is caught up and them ultimately knowing that I’m there as a manager has just been helpful.

Supervision of other employees regarding interactions with and expectations of students was also included in this category. As James described, supervisors recognized the importance of helping employees to manage their expectations of students.

You have to be able to work with your employees to help them to manage expectations, and to know what can be asked of them and what can’t—or what they’ve been taught to do and what they haven’t. And just to kind of help the employees to understand that these people [students] are a part of the team, part of the environment, part of the culture, and that it is important, and that they are contributing members and all of that.

A typical category, which the team labeled Managing Systems and Structures in the Workplace, describes how supervisors organize and implement systems for overall employee management and for student scheduling and evaluation. Karen, for example, commented on the routine established to accommodate students and school requirements:

I would honestly say that we’ve got a routine going, and we know what is expected. We’ve got great supervisors in place that are very comfortable with the process and they know what they have to do. They know they have to fill out evaluations. They know that they need the help, so I think it comes very easy for us. I don’t think it’s a challenge, that first year it was like, “ok what do we do, what do we need to do?”

Another typical category describes Cognitive, Affective, and Pragmatic Challenges in managing both students and employees in the work site. Supervisory decision making demands patience and sensitivity, sometimes evokes doubt, and can be both draining and rewarding. Susan reflected on the challenge of balancing student, employee, and company needs:

You don’t always know if you have the right answers or if you can make things happen for people, the way you want to, and the needs that they have in their life. Because you’re constantly wanting to be sensitive to your employee, but you have to remember your responsibilities to the company...
So, sometimes it’s very draining because sometimes you just have hard decisions to make and you have to make them.

**Recognition of Background**

The Recognition of Background domain, which documents awareness of the familial and social contexts of the participants and the work supervisors, was identified in six of the interviews. The team coded this domain to include any statements that gave recognition to the students’ family background, culture, community, race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status, similarities and differences with regard to the experiences of students and supervisors, and diversity in the workplace. This domain includes one typical and one variant category. The typical category, which we labeled Comparison between Supervisors and Students and Life Context, reflected supervisor awareness of differences between employees and students both within and outside of the work setting and the differential opportunities associated with those statuses.

Mary discussed gender and social class and the challenges that difference may present for students and supervisors in the workplace:

... one of the things that we lack here, and I’ll admit it, is that most of our students are male and most of the staff here are female. And most of the staff, with very few exceptions, come from a really, like, white, middle class background. Not all of the staff, but, that is something that, I think for the teens, can be a little bit hard sometimes to kind of open up or to see the staff as somebody that can be helpful to you.

Patricia noted how students might share information about their lives. “D. was coming in and telling us about people that got shot... that sort of thing.” She went on, “...they talk about their neighborhoods or their families... but they’re not complaining or asking for assistance or anything like that. It’s more of a—just sharing information.” Cynthia noted how similarity in background helped her to relate to students, “...since I worked since I was a kid it was easier for me to relate to her...” Cynthia continued, “I know what it’s like working in a company as a kid and there’s a lot of professionals that haven’t worked with kids or didn’t work as a kid.”

Deborah explained how background differences in the workplace can also provide opportunities for students to learn about race and class:

They [students] were able to take note of some class differences...understanding what resources were available to young people from suburban schools coming through here on a regular basis and saying “gosh, I don’t really see a lot of people like me coming here.”

The variant category, Diversity in Systems and Structures of the Workplace, reflected supervisors’ awareness of the importance of diversity in the workforce and their organizations’ commitment to diversity. Linda explained:

Just for them to see that part of what we do is work with or we’re responsible for overseeing or advocating the diversity initiative for the company. Making sure that everything that we do is inclusive and really advocating strongly for more inclusion in our programs and products and our visitors and collection and all of that. They [students] knew that going into it because the school does a really good job of orienting them and telling them about company’s mission and our department’s mission and our goals and all that. So, seeing a staff of people who reflected that I think is really important. Instead of it being just a bunch of White people, I think it wouldn’t have as much value.
Discussion

The interviews with WBL supervisors contribute unique insights into the nature of supervisory roles, responsibilities, and relationships in work settings intended to promote positive youth development. The identified roles and relationships are multifaceted, balancing the demands of managing a productive workplace environment with a commitment to teaching and mentoring young people. The traditional authoritative roles of employer and teacher are evident, along with dimensions that are aligned with a mentor role (Rhodes, 2004). Each of the distinct dimensions that emerged through the interviews adds incrementally to illuminating the complexities of the supervisory position; however, when considered collectively, they provide a deeper understanding of how relational and managerial priorities are interrelated and addressed by supervisors committed to the value of meaningful work for youth development. Overall, our findings affirm the important role the workplace supervisor can play in the lives of urban high school students, especially among low-income adolescents. These results thereby provide additional support for the value of WBL as a form of early substantive work experience, which can provide students with consistent access to adult mentors who may be resources in negotiating the challenging tasks of adolescence.

Our findings, which identify emotional caring, instrumental support, guidance, and a focus on growth as key qualities of the WBL supervisor, are consistent with existing research from the student perspective that portrayed the supervisor as a type of mentor (Bennett, 2007; Linnehan, 2001, 2003). Consistent with prior research on important adults in school and WBL settings (Malecki & Demaray, 2003), supervisors offer varied types of support, including emotional, informational, instrumental, and evaluative support. The narratives of our workplace supervisors underscore core assumptions of the relational theory of working—that work is inherently relational and that supportive relationships are multifaceted and facilitate psychological growth (Blustein, 2011). Moreover, supervisors’ descriptions of their relationships with students were consistent with the mentoring literature that identifies relationship quality and caring as key to the success and sustainability of mentoring initiatives (Rhodes, 2004). Supervisors described these relationships as bidirectional, mirroring the growing awareness that the mentor both teaches and learns from the mentee (Blustein, 2011).

The extent to which these WBL supervisors go beyond the typical supervisor role in providing informational and instrumental support is evident in the Investment of Time and Effort domain. The supervisors’ investment is high from the outset and clearly entails levels of time and effort that exceed the typical employer–employee relationship. This level of investment is similar to what has been noted in the mentoring literature as important for developing and sustaining mentoring relationships (Pryce, 2012). Many of the supervisors in our study invested time in discussing college and life planning. Most supervisors had completed higher education, which provided them with a particular type of expertise that is not prevalent among families with no college experience (Chang et al., 2010). In this way, these supervisors were able to share social capital, providing a “bridge” (Chang et al., 2010; Rhodes, 2004) or “border zone” that links youth with the adult world and mainstream culture (Heath, 1994). Supervisor investment, as described in our study, was the most atypical of traditional employer–employee relationships when it extended beyond the work setting to social and personal activities, such as attending students’ sporting events.

Remarks within the Managing the Work Environment domain highlighted the efforts of the supervisor to organize the work setting and prepare other employees to accommodate and benefit the high school students, while also being concerned about the overall productivity of the workplace and staff well-being. Managing the work environment is a typical supervisory responsibility, but these supervisors do so in a way explicitly intended to promote student development. The Workplace Communication domain also reflected many components of teaching and training that resemble the typical preparation of new employees but are modified by the WBL context. Supervisors noted that communication can be challenging when trying to simultaneously correct behavior and offer support.
The integration of support with information sharing and feedback in the narratives of our workplace supervisors is reflective of what has been understood in the mentoring literature as relational and goal-directed foci (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010). While relationship quality has long been recognized as central to mentoring success, the importance of goal-directed activity and evaluative feedback is increasingly recognized as integral to successful mentoring, especially among older adolescents. The integration and interplay between relational and goal-directed activities were reflected across varied domains. For example, the supervisors were attentive to student growth in terms of both goal-directed and relational outcomes and invested their time in both instrumental (e.g., guiding students to meet work requirements and writing recommendations) and social activities, while simultaneously managing instrumental and relational dimensions of the work environment.

Differences between important nonparental adults and youth in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, and educational background, such as those observed in the work settings we studied, are not unusual, given the imbalance of social capital in our society (Haddad et al., 2011). Prior research, however, indicates that the quality of the relationships that develop reciprocally between youth and adults is inevitably influenced by attention to age, race, culture, and worldview (Pryce, 2012), warranting attention to mentor and mentee characteristics. Some, but not all, supervisors in our study, acknowledged the gender, racial, and social class differences between many supervisors and students. Beyond acknowledgment of these differences, a few supervisors in our study reflected more deeply on the complex interaction of social identities in the mentoring process. Some supervisors who shared a commonality of experience with the students felt this added to their empathy and understanding of students and students’ willingness to be open and trusting. Others spoke about their efforts to be sensitive, and several expressed an awareness of how race, gender, and social class intersect with educational and career opportunity. A few expressed knowledge of how the work setting can teach youth about the race and social class in our society.

While our interviews with supervisors offer important insights into the dimensions and complexities of the WBL supervisor roles and relationships, the findings must be considered with recognition of several limitations. The supervisors were recruited from one school program and were recommended by school officials, with the applicability of the findings to other supervisors and WBL settings being unclear. The extent to which the perceptions of these work supervisors are typical of other experienced WBL supervisors is unknown and how their views might compare with supervisors from sites who are considered less successful by partnering schools is also unknown. Although the sites were identified as successful, their actual effectiveness in facilitating positive student outcomes was not assessed. Information on the students supervised and the students’ perceptions of the supervisors was not considered in this study. Also unknown are the processes through which these supervisors developed their capacities to handle the complexities of their role. Additionally, the importance of institutional factors (e.g., commitment to program success at the corporate executive level) that allow work supervisors to manage their responsibilities effectively was not explored.

Future research will be important to understand how the ways in which supervisors manage their roles and responsibilities and establish relationships relate to student learning at the workplace, in school, and in their school and work futures. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine the long-term effects of WBL supervisor practices with regard to student outcomes. Research focusing on the relationship of supervisor selection and preparation to how supervisors manage their roles and their effect on students is also needed.

Despite the limitations of the current study and the need for further research, the findings, when interpreted in conjunction with the youth mentoring literature, have important implications for the selection and preparation of WBL supervisors in developing meaningful work experiences for youth. Drawing from the mentoring literature, Rhodes (2004) notes the importance of recruiting and training adults as mentors who can effectively balance competing demands and promote structures and processes that support both relational and goal-directed outcomes. Research has also suggested that
mentor training should foster realistic mentor expectations and cultural competencies that enable mentors to recognize the strengths of culturally different youth (Liang & Grossman, 2007). While the supervisors in our study recognized the complexity of their roles and relationships and the strengths as well as growth needs of the students, many did not directly address race and class issues. More explicit attention and preparation for working with diverse youth may be needed as part of the preparation of WBL supervisors.

This study makes a unique contribution in identifying the dimensions of youth supervision and mentoring in work settings, with particular insights for WBL programs that strive to enhance the life outcomes for low-income students of color. We add to the growing body of research on the relational theory of working and processes of youth mentoring, which has largely neglected adolescents in the work setting. The findings affirm the complexity of the supervisor role and the ways in which the work supervisor and the setting need to accommodate and support both goal-directed and relational outcomes, as the supervisor balances shifting and sometimes competing priorities. Given the paucity of quality work experiences for low-income youth of color and the potentially important roles fulfilled by caring nonparental adults, further research on the value of WBL experiences with attention to the selection and preparation of WBL supervisors is warranted.

Appendix

Supervisor Interview Guide

I. Background information: Educational and professional history
   1. If you could, please start by telling me a bit about your job here, how long you’ve been at this job, and how long you’ve been with the company. Also, tell me a bit about your background, any training, or school experiences you’ve had in the past.
   2. What preparation did you receive from the high school in preparation for participating as a supervisor? What type of training or additional training or preparation do you think would be helpful?

II. Work setting
   1. Please describe, in your own words, the types of work in general, done at (insert name of company, etc.) Tell me a bit about your responsibilities and the responsibilities that students are assigned in their position at (company name).
   2. What makes this a good place for students to work?

III. Perceptions of student/supervisor relationship
   1. Please describe your working relationship with the students.
   2. Are you aware of student’s goals (immediate or long term) or hopes for the future? If yes, tell me more about those goals or hopes.
   3. The work environment is often a place where varied groups of persons interact. For example, differences in age, race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc., among workers are common. When you think about this particular work environment at (company name), what are some of the similarities and differences you notice between you and the students?
   4. What are some of the benefits and challenges to the similarities and differences you observe?
   5. Tell me how other coworkers in your office interact with the students. What observations you have made? What comments have you heard about students in reference to their work?

IV. Perceptions of supervisor role
   1. Thinking about your work as a supervisor in the corporate work-study program, how easy or difficult would you say it is to be a supervisor? How easy or challenging do you feel it is to supervise students? What are some things that make it easy or challenging?
2. Again, thinking about your work here, please describe for me the characteristics of an excellent WBL supervisor. Describe the characteristics of an ineffective WBL supervisor.

3. What personal philosophy do you have about supervising students? What are some techniques/approaches that you use that you feel are successful? In your work, when do you feel successful as a supervisor?

4. Would you please describe for me an example of what you would say is a personal “less-than-successful” story with respect to your efforts as a supervisor?

V. Perceptions of the work-based learning program

1. What are your impressions of the program? Do you perceive specific benefits?

2. Do you perceive specific drawbacks? Is there anything else we didn’t discuss that you would like to add?

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