Working for a Future

Equity and Access in Work-Based Learning for Young People

Lisette Nieves · Noel S. Anderson
Becca Huntting

Working for a Future

"In an increasingly complex world, the false dichotomy of working and learning is becoming more apparent. Nieves, Anderson and Huntting expertly demonstrate that this new world will require a greater emphasis on equity and increasing opportunities that expand learning and working for all. The ultimate success of today's young learner-workers will indelibly impact their life outcomes—and our shared well-being."

—Jamie Merisotis, President & CEO, *Lumina Foundation, USA*

"In this book, we witness the transformative power of work-integrated education in unlocking doors of opportunity for young people. This book serves as a roadmap for policymakers and practitioners, illuminating pathways to dismantle systemic barriers and cultivate inclusive environments where every young person can realize their potential."

—Maria Flynn, President & CEO, *Jobs for the Future, USA*

"The chapter on Native Hawaiians is relevant and captures the essence of the contemporary Hawaiian as they deal with historical trauma but strives to survive and excel in service to their community and family in their homeland—Hawaiʻi."

—Lui Hokoana, Chancellor and CEO, *University of Hawaiʻi Maui College, USA*

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Introduction

Most of us did not enter the workforce thinking in terms of finding a "calling" or a vocation. Instead we thought of work as a way to make money. Many of us started our work lives early and we worked to buy school books or needed or desired clothing.

—bell hooks, "Work Makes Life Sweet" in Sisters of the Yam

The global workforce is rapidly changing both in its demographics and in terms of jobs and skills required for economic stability or mobility. Further, emerging markets—such as those in China, India, and Africa—are fostering urgent conversations and actions to address increased competition. Traditional education, credentialing, and mechanisms for workforce development have not adjusted to these demands, causing shortages in trained workers while college access and employment stratification by race and socioeconomic status continue to ring equity alarms. Further, automation and job elimination have been put into overdrive during the COVID-19 pandemic, and young people are being edged out of employment opportunities necessary for financial stability as they move through school toward valuable employment.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning are changing the nature of work, eliminating the need for employees to perform certain tasks easily replaced by new technology, but raising the need for proficiency in high-skilled and human-centered work that cannot be done by a machine (Fleming et al., 2019). For these competencies, wages are also increasing, and employers are placing a higher value on professional skills such as design, critical thinking, and strategic communication (Fleming et al., 2019). While the AI conversation has centered around job elimination, which has occurred particularly in lower-waged occupations, AI and machine learning are also creating and reshaping jobs across the wage spectrum, necessitating mastery in new skills that will require additional training as technology continues to advance (Relihan, 2018).

Although we know which skills will be most valued in the decade ahead, large-scale training for these skills has not kept pace, nor have industries adjusted the talent recruitment and development strategies necessary to sustain the new face of work both in terms of new jobs and workforce demographics. During the next decade, the US workforce will become increasingly diverse with new immigrants, Black workers, Asian workers, and Latinx workers constituting the largest proportional growth in labor force representation (DeSilver, 2017; U.S. Bureau of Labor

Statistics, 2017). These communities, especially young immigrants, will be the backbone of domestic industries currently reliant on an aging, predominantly white worker population.

However, across industries, current employment rates by race illustrate significant occupational segregation, with workers of color, immigrants, and workers experiencing poverty disproportionately holding lower-wage, service-oriented jobs. Black and Latinx workers are grossly underrepresented in high-paying occupations, such as surgeons and lawyers, but are overrepresented in lower-paying jobs in the same industries (e.g., more than 37% of home-health aides are Black and more than 25% are Latinx) (Bahn & Sanchez Cumming, 2020). In high tech, nearly 70% of workers are white, while just 7.4% and 8% are Black and Latinx, respectively (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2015). Just 5.9% of chief executives are Black and only 6.8% are Latinx, but in service industries, workers of color are overrepresented (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). This occupational segregation creates lifelong wage stagnation, contributing to both racial and economic inequalities across the country. This situation compounds with discriminatory practices workers of color experience across fields, including a racial pay gap and unequal hiring practices (Patten, 2016; Quillian et al., 2017).

Objectives and outputs in education have not adjusted to this reality despite the widening scope of education and credentialing as well as the need to support underrepresented communities in school and work. Young people (ages 16–24) are schooled more than ever before and pursue postsecondary education at greater rates across demographics, but there are still alarming gaps in completion rates by race.

The US has an 87% high-school graduation rate nationally, but the rate is only 83% for Latinx students, 81% for Black students, and only 75% for American Indians/Alaska Natives (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Even as college enrollment rates are steadily increasing across demographics, and especially among Latinx students, completion rates for students of color drop significantly in postsecondary institutions; only 54% of Latinx students who enroll at a four-year institution will graduate within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This rate is only 40% for Black students and 39% for American Indians/Alaska Natives. At two-year colleges, the graduation rate is only 30% for Latinx students, 27% for American Indians, and 23% for Black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Without a degree, and oftentimes with piling debt, young people of color disproportionately enter the workforce in fields with lower earning power and fewer opportunities for advancement, widening inequalities that persist throughout a lifetime.

Educational attainment may open the door to more opportunities to access good jobs, but the work does not start and end there. Young people need meaningful work opportunities earlier, ones that provide industry access while actively dismantling historic discrimination; however, youth workforce participation is steadily declining. This is alarming for two reasons. First, many students need work to persist through education, and without these opportunities, degree and job attainment will continue to be inequitably slanted toward those with the means and not necessarily the capabilities to succeed. Second, work experience builds technical and

transferable skills, opens professional networks, creates formal and informal mentoring structures, and allows young people to practice a profession. Without gateways for young people to find work, we lose the opportunity to build a workforce representative of our communities, with the skills needed to succeed and be competitive enough to support new economies.

These challenges are not unique to the US; countries around the world must respond to diversifying workforces as a result of immigration, population displacement, and aging workers, while aiming to replace old-world work practices to meet globalized economic competition. In the European Union (EU), immigrant and migrant workers are filling critical labor shortage gaps in work across the wage spectrum, from agriculture to STEM (OECD, 2014). While short-term integration costs are high, research shows this investment pays off quickly in terms of gross domestic product output. Despite this reliance on migrant and immigrant labor, xenophobia toward new immigrants and communities of color, especially those from Muslim countries, has sparked a far-right backlash across Europe, pitting policymakers against one another and resulting in threats of EU dissolution, as we have seen begin with Brexit.

The Netherlands, for example, has experienced a rise in migrants, new immigrants, and asylum seekers and their families during the past few decades (van Selm, 2019). Though many new arrivals come from within the EU, an increasing number are arriving from the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa. These new immigrants are filling a labor need across industries, most notably in agriculture, but much like the rest of Europe during the past decade, this population influx has been met with a staggering rise in far-right political activity and power. This is especially remarkable in the Netherlands considering its historical inclusivity yet shows where fault lines may have been overlooked or overshadowed by progressive policies serving a historically homogenous country. The white nationalist Forum for Democracy party won a majority of seats in the Dutch senate, signaling just how high this movement has been able to ascend and its influence on Dutch consensus.

Subsequently, policy debates have drifted further from *how* new populations can be better integrated into education and work to whether they should be granted access in the first place, rooted in explicit promotion of white supremacy and Islamophobia. Similar concerns are present in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries that have, historically, been a refuge for migrants seeking safety and security within their borders. This has implications for young people of color, who represent the future of labor and societal progress in these countries.

Managing and aligning systems change alongside managing societal changes is one of the greatest challenges of policymakers today in both education and labor. A collective rise in consciousness related to racial and economic justice has bred calls for immediate action while dissenting voices shout for more exclusion. Practitioners in education and employers across sectors may be left grasping for a solution without the tools and knowledge needed to invest in innovative and effective interventions. Globally, apprenticeships and similar work-based learning models are being elevated for their potential to address these challenges and others. As the US workforce as well as the workforce in Europe becomes increasingly racially and

ethnically diverse, cultivating talent from historically underrepresented populations will be critical for economic and social wellness.

Working for a Future

Working to Learn: Disrupting the Divide Between College and Career Pathways for Young People (2020) exposed the false dichotomy of work and learning, elevating narratives of young people around the world who are doing both as a means to build better futures and urging policymakers to invest in systems that support this growing population. This book has been wildly successful for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in the growing field of work-based learning. *Working for a Future: Equity and Access in Work-Based Learning for Young People* builds on the success of *Working to Learn* by focusing on the future of work and how young people, especially low-income young people and young people of color, are pursuing college and career goals through work-based learning experiences yet encountering an increasingly racially and socioeconomically stratified labor market and educational system. Through policy analysis and case studies both from the US and abroad, we present the argument for why these models warrant revisitation, innovation, and investment and elevate profiles of young workers, nonprofits, corporate partners, and governments today who are using work opportunities to open doors once closed.

The following chapters provide illustrations and case studies of resilient young people navigating increasingly challenging workplace and educational landscapes both in the US and UK, to secure work and career pathways and integrate school and learning along the way. The goal of *Working for a Future* is to not present one-dimensional representations of young people or to generalize narratives and experiences, but to illuminate the strengths-based approaches young people employ daily to flourish, not just survive. Moreover, we focus on the work of national, state, municipal entities, intermediaries, and leaders that buttress the work of young people by opening up opportunities, reducing barriers, and providing direct service to expand young people's freedoms to achieve.

In Chap. 2, we leave the US and travel across the pond to the UK to examine the impact of Brexit. A public referendum in 2016 resulted in the UK's exit (aptly titled 'Brexit') from the European Union and subsequently has had deleterious effect on labor migration, educational access, and quality of life for young people. The reasons for this draconian decision are many, stemming from growing nativist resistance to immigrant labor to broader nostalgic sentiment for a glorified British empirical past. Yet the impact is still being felt, particularly among low-income, working-class populations across all racial/ethnic groups. In this context, we look briefly at the history leading up to this sweeping change and specifically examine the work of the City of London Corporation and Birmingham Metropolitan College to disrupt the social and economic divide accelerated by Brexit and continue opening opportunity for working and learning among low-income young people by leveraging municipal resources and corporate networks.

In Chap. 3, we look at the history and current experiences of Native Hawaiian youth in relation to work and school, a grossly understudied and relatively ignored area of research. Although the 50th state in the US, Hawaiʻi has a long and tortured colonial history, and the subsequent challenges of Native Hawaiian youth are obscured by romantic and somewhat fetishized images of this tropical landscape as a vacation paradise. In fact, the history of colonization of Hawaiʻi and the subjugation of its native people and language has resulted in Native Hawaiian young people with among the highest school dropout rates, incarceration, mental health challenges, and unemployment among US youth. In the face of these circumstances, we highlight organizations such as Kūlana Hawaiʻi Native Hawaiian Program at Honolulu Community College, which is attempting to disrupt this trend with Native Hawaiian young people by providing cultural awareness, work-based learning, and educational access.

Building on a thread in Chap. 3, in Chap. 4 we present a case study of Exalt, a New York–based nonprofit serving as an alternative to youth incarceration. In this model, court-involved youth (ages 16–19) participate in a paid, work-based learning program as an alternative to a juvenile prison sentence. This successful program model ensures young people are kept out of the criminal justice system by reconnecting them to educational and professional opportunities. Using work as a compass and with intentional support services provided through Exalt, young people are able to reforge a new path toward both college and career. This case study will illuminate the power of work-based learning in the pursuit of educational and work equity as well as a mechanism for criminal-justice reform.

In Chap. 5, we focus on the experiences of young women of color navigating a youth apprenticeship program in New York City, blending high school and work-based learning in corporate environments. In a model once built upon structures of racial and gender exclusion, these young women speak to how their own agency is shaping their college and career pathways in predominantly white work environments and historically male-dominated occupations while navigating personal responsibilities and expectations to build lives they value. In this chapter, we propose a new conceptual framework to strengthen data-informed practices and evidence-building in support of equity-driven youth apprenticeship expansion. We also explore the critical role of one intermediary nonprofit, FutureWorks, who have structured their modern youth apprenticeship model and supportive services to meet the needs of young workers in a complex work and learning landscape.

In Chap. 6, we explore the future of work, including the skills, credentials, and experiences that will ensure young people are prepared to participate and compete. Pulling lessons from the case studies included and incorporating labor-market research and trends, this chapter frames the "future of work" in terms of jobs, skills, industry, and education, illustrating the impact on apprenticeships and other work-based learning programs. The authors discuss how AI, blockchain, and other new technologies are changing the nature of work, credentialing, training, and education, and how policymakers and practitioners can leverage these new technologies to support apprenticeships and other work-based learning initiatives. The authors propose policy changes as well as research and data-driven practice considerations

in the field of work-based learning to promote a more equitable approach in antici-
pating the future of work.

Finally, in Chap. 7, we advance suggestions of robust policies and promising
practices that should provide more equitable approaches and access for young peo-
ple in work-based learning. We maintain that focusing on building skills and com-
petencies with young people will not only position them for greater opportunity and
expand their freedoms to achieve but reinforce a healthy sense of identity and foster
greater agency, which, in turn, benefits the labor market and society more broadly.

Conclusion

Working for a Future: Equity and Access in Work-Based Learning for Young People
continues to disrupt the dichotomy in workforce research, policy, and practice,
which tends to bifurcate labor studies from education, from youth labor markets,
and from the future of work, and tends to look nostalgically and sometimes uncriti-
cally at European models for answers to perennial problems in these domains. We
do not attempt to ignore the complexity of the challenges of adapting to a changing
labor market with still unseen consequences on occupations, especially in the age of
AI. Yet we attempt to step into the fray and recenter the experiences of young people
and the organizations designed to serve them as the compass directing our effort to
adapt and anticipate changes in the way young people work, learn, and live. The
current handwringing over the future of work in the age of AI will be reduced to
arm-chair philosophizing if we, as scholars and policymakers, do not become even
more proximate to those young people who are doing the work to seize opportunity
and the practitioners who are attempting to expand freedoms for young people his-
torically left out of our labor markets and marginalized in our educational systems.
We are in a *both/and* and not an *either/or* period in the current milieu, where the
integration of research, policy, and practice is required now more than ever. Young
people are already doing the work around the world. It's time for older adults and
the systems we lead to catch up to young people.

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Chapter 2
The Face of Work and a Recommitment to Work-Based Education in the UK

Introduction

Young people around the world are confronting rising barriers to participation in the current job market as global economies contend with the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid technological advancement and competition, and acute worker shortages (Korn Ferry, 2018; Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Each of these challenges alone would require significant resources and cross-sector solutions to solve, and when layered, call for changes to how local governments, schools, and employers are approaching solutions to skills training and employment. Even as the globalization of work and learning builds connective pains and responses between nations, local and regional economies are each positioned to address the unique needs of communities given their distinct and complex sociopolitical and historical contexts.

The UK is one such nation that has undergone tremendous changes over the past several decades in terms of population, policy, and the workforce. Employers across industries face rising challenges filling job vacancies and are struggling to upskill their existing workers to meet the demands of rapid industry advancement (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2023). Companies are also struggling to balance rising operational costs alongside wage demands to retain workers, and industries such as transportation and health care are facing severe worker recruitment deficits (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2023). At face value, these economic challenges, along with existing labor shortages, have led to a significant talent deficit across the UK and a particularly severe labor shortage in lower-waged jobs (Portes & Springford, 2023; Sumption et al., 2022).

Notably, at the center of recent developments in the UK is "Brexit," the slogan for the public referendum in the UK to leave the European Union (EU) in 2016. Free movement, or the ability for citizens of the UK to easily move and find work across the EU and vice versa for EU citizens in the UK, ended in 2020 by a slim margin (BBC, 2021a). This vote divided the UK population along lines of "Leavers" and

"Remainers," with primary economic arguments focused on whether membership in the EU enhanced the UK's economy through shared labor and free trade, or if EU membership fees and regulations detracted from the UK's ability to grow their national economy in a way that could regain global competitiveness and broker independent trade agreements (Portes, 2022).

However, to approach the UK's labor woes and the Brexit decision in a political and social vacuum would ignore a ubiquitous battle being waged by White communities across Western nations. These communities feel they have been "left behind" by economic advancement and blame both liberal government policies and communities of color and new immigrants for their lost stability (Schertzer & Woods, 2022). Within Brexit, "Leavers" were predominantly older and White Brits from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and with lower levels of educational attainment who perceived increased immigration to the UK over the past 50 years as a core component of opportunity loss (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). Labor was a core battleground within this argument—namely, who should have access to job training and assistance, receive public investment, and be protected within the broader workforce.

Dominant Brexit messaging served to distract from long-standing trends of educational and employment exclusion and the challenges vulnerable communities continue to face to participate equitably in the UK workforce. Rooted in a fractured history of colonization and labor exploitation, occupational segregation in the UK today severely disadvantages communities of color and particularly young people of color ages 16–24 (UK Government, 2022a). Even as White students are entering colleges and universities at lower rates than any other racial or ethnic group (UK Government, 2022b), they complete degrees (Bolton & Lewis, 2023) and secure employment at higher rates (UK Government, 2022b). Low-income students, women, and students of color earn less on average than White male Brits even when controlling for background, degree choice, and other factors (Britton et al., 2021). This leaves young people of color—particularly Bangladeshi, Pakistanki, and Black youth—disproportionately   unemployed   and   looking   for   work   (UK Government, 2021).

Occupational segregation also affects the type of work young people of color and young women are able to access in the UK. Young people, women, and workers of color are more likely to be employed in "gig" economy work that is lower-waged, part-time, and more susceptible to job loss during periods of economic volatility (UK Government, 2018). Black workers are more likely to be in "elementary" level jobs or jobs associated with the lowest levels of advancement and lowest earnings (UK Government, 2022c). Black and other racial and ethnic minority workers are also more likely to hold employment in the least secure and safe sectors (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2021). In all industries, members of racial and ethnic minority populations experience higher rates of discrimination in their work, including higher rates of discipline and lower rates of advancement and pay, which affects both their outlooks and senses of safety and belonging in the experience of work (Trades Union Congress, 2022).

These barriers impact the ability for young people of color to participate in a tightening labor market. Youth (ages 16–24) unemployment had been steadily falling since its peak following the financial crisis (Buchanan, 2023), but disparities in youth employment have persisted. Before the pandemic, more than a quarter of young Black Brits were unemployed (Thomas, 2021), and during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, this rate rose to nearly 42% while White Brits of the same age were unemployed at a rate of 12.4% (Thomas, 2021). Since the pandemic, unemployment rates of all ethnic and racial minority groups in the UK remain at more than double the rate of White Brits (UK Government, 2022a). As of 2022, unemployment rates of British youth who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups are double the rate of White British youth. Young and Black Brits face an unemployment rate of 21%; Bangladeshi young people have an unemployment rate of 19%; and other ethnic groups are unemployed at a rate of roughly 15% compared to a 9% unemployment rate for White young people (Powell, 2022). These trends do not match how pro-Brexit leaders and voters presented the current state of the UK during that debate.

As policymakers and practitioners work to build more inclusive postsecondary pathways and workforce opportunities, they must confront the economic and social reverberations of Brexit and a divided vision for the future of work and workers in the UK. They also must confront a history that has been subdued for the sake of maintaining polite sensibilities. As journalist and sociologist Gary Younge (2023) argues, "This refusal to engage with our full racial history matters not primarily because it impedes our capacity to understand what happened, but because it thwarts our ability to understand what is going on now." To correctly diagnose and address inequities that impact young people and the future of work, this history must be confronted by institutions that aim to address disparities in work and learning in the UK.

This chapter will briefly explore the historical and social dimensions of the contradictions of Brexit and how nationalist arguments serve to ignore the pervasive inequities experienced by racial and ethnic minority populations. We will focus specifically on how cognitive distortions of White worker exclusion have cyclically disadvantaged young people of color in the UK in both school and work. These persistent exclusions exacerbate the economic challenges the nation faces today and serve to replicate the colonizing conditions on which Great Britain was built.

Next, we will explore how cross-sector institutions in two municipalities, London and Birmingham, are working to address barriers to economic participation in communities with high proportions of young people of color. They are doing so through programs aligned with a national expansion of career-connected learning and youth apprenticeships, which prepare young people for entry into university as well as work-based learning experiences. These policies aim to diffuse the pains of White working-class communities while expanding pathways into equitable economic participation for young Brits of color in the UK.

We will close with lessons we can glean from municipal cases in the UK that can help inform how other nations, such as the US, can respond to similar challenges. Namely, we explore the ways in which work-based learning and cross-sector

coalitions of partners are supporting communities through coordinating education and employment pathways, and we argue that these efforts are more effective when leaders interrogate the conditions upon which current disparities were created. In doing so, they can effectively build programs and policy solutions that fortify systemic social equity as a driving principle in workforce development efforts.

Brexit and the New Immigration

Brexit was a symptom of a growing base of anti-immigrant angst in the UK, and arguments for or against leaving the EU became signals for deeper social beliefs and divisions. Although arguments were made pedaling economic reasoning for leaving, the discourse that emerged was unequivocally propelled by xenophobia and racism. Sociologists Sivamohan Valluvan and Virinder S. Kalra argue (2019), "whatever the underlying factors, the European Union (EU) referendum was primarily framed in the popular imagination by the overdetermined issue of immigration and wider cognate anxieties regarding race and ethnic difference" (p. 2394). Stoking these fears, policy leaders positioned immigrant communities as the scapegoats for economic pains and to gain traction for the Brexit movement. In this broader debate, the British people were determining which course they would take, either toward expanding social progression and liberal policies or toward increased economic isolation and social conservatism.

The Brexit discourse was quickly dominated by a battle of political values and consciousness among British people regarding the ethos of British society. At the center of this conflict was the rise of a nationalist movement motivated superficially at strengthening the British economy but with a vested interest in ringing alarms against the broader diversification of Britain. Valluvan and Kalra (2019) mark Brexit as a punctuating point during which this nationalist movement positioned itself as stalwarts of a Britain they felt was being stolen. They argue, "Brexit signaled one significant instantiation of a successful new nationalist political programme that hinges substantially on the ostensible problems of immigration, multiculturalism, and ethnic diversity more broadly" (Valluvan & Kalra, 2019, p. 2394). This movement was not bred out of Brexit, but it signaled the bubbling over of fears, angers, and anxieties that have been building over decades or even centuries.

In their book *The New Nationalism in America and Beyond: The Deep Roots of Ethnic Nationalism in the Digital Age*, Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods (2022) argue that despite the anchoring of Brexit in economic policy issues, "these issues tended to be presented through a framework of ethnic English nationalism" (p. 147). They argue that Brexit symbolizes the imagination of an "English ethnic nationalism," or a collective identity that has been woven over centuries through various myths of White and British exceptionalism (Schertzer & Woods, 2022, p. 147). At the core of this nationalism is the belief that White Brits have a duty to protect working-class jobs, liberal democracy, social services, and a glorified imperial past from a growing population of immigrants and migrants. What is inexplicit,