Taking a Gap Year before Starting Post-Secondary Education:

Why It Benefits Some and Hurts Others

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Abstract

An increasing number of high school graduates are taking a gap year before matriculating at a post-secondary institution. The time may be spent engaging in activities such as traveling, working, volunteering, preparing for future education, or pursuing other interests. Taking a gap year is generally promoted as beneficial by the mainstream media and by organizations that offer structured gap year programs. Cited benefits for gap year takers include personal development, improved academic motivation and performance upon returning to academia, and increased employability. Each of these claims is examined in light of the available scholarly research to determine the true impact of taking a gap year in these three areas.The literature does provide some limited support for the claims but presents a more mixed picture of both benefits and drawbacks. Outcomes of taking a gap year are at least partially dependent on the young person's academic and socioeconomic background as well as on the type of gap year they undertake. The paper concludes with recommendations for potential gap year participants, guidance counselors, and policy makers.

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Introduction

Purpose and Rationale

It is becoming increasingly common for young people in Western countries to take time out from their studies to travel, work, volunteer, or engage in some other type of activity (Martin, 2010). This period of time is commonly referred to as a 'gap year.' The Internet is rife with articles about the gap year trend and information about gap year programs. (See Appendix A for examples.) In general, these mainstream sources tout the advantages of taking a gap year, but provide little empirical evidence to support their claims.

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine some of the most frequently cited benefits of a gap year in light of the recent scholarly research on the subject. The primary research question is, *what is the impact of taking a gap year on a young person's personal development and future academic and employment success?* As will be demonstrated, answering this question depends largely on the young person's background and on the type of gap year undertaken (Heath, 2007). This paper focuses on two background factors, academic success and socioeconomic status, and two main types of gap years. The traditional gap year involves travel and/or volunteering, and the non-traditional gap year involves work and/or studying. The information and discussion presented here is pertinent and valuable to any students considering a gap year. It is also useful for informing the practices of guidance counselors and policy makers.

Background and Definition

The gap year concept originated and developed in the United Kingdom. Although the phrase *gap year* and its modern connotations did not appear until around 50 years ago the idea may stem from the tradition of the Grand Tour, which began in the latter part of the 17th century.

Young British noblemen commonly embarked on a period of travel to see the world as part of their education, before beginning their careers (O'Shea, 2011).

The term *gap year* has since been widely used to refer to nearly any length of time off from education or work, for almost any reason. During the time off, "gappers" (as those who take a gap year are often called) may work, volunteer, travel, study, or engage in leisure activities (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). The most commonly cited definition of a gap year is from Andrew Jones' 2004 report for the U.K. Department for Education and Skills: "any period of time between three and 24 months which an individual takes 'out' of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory" (p. 8). It is reasonable to extend the upper limit of time to 28 months to account for the summer months between academic years (Hango, 2011).

For the purposes of this paper, a gap year will be defined more narrowly as a period of time away from formal, full-time studies, between graduating from high school and beginning post-secondary education. Therefore, most gappers are 17 to 20 years old. A gap year is longer than a typical summer break and may be longer than a calendar year, but gaps of greater than 28 months are not the focus and will not be included here unless specified. By definition, gappers have the intention, from the beginning of the gap, of enrolling in a post-secondary institution at the end of the gap (Leonavičius & Ozolinčiūtė, 2014). Finally, a gap year taker is one who engages in structured, productive activities. The activities may include recreation, but the main purpose is usually to study (without enrolling full time in a post-secondary institution), volunteer, work, and/or travel, with an expectation of some personal enrichment or development. Otherwise, it is merely a break or a vacation (Jones, 2004; Nieman, 2013).

Literature Review

Characteristics of Gappers

Taking a gap year is now common in many Western countries. As of 2010, 24% of Australian students took a one to two year gap between high school and further education, which was an increase of 14% from just ten years earlier (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). The gap year trend is relatively new in North America, but an American study (Wells & Lynch, 2012) found that 11% of high school seniors planned to delay further education for a year or more. This figure comes from a national survey of over 11,000 students who were in 12th grade in 2004.

Campbell and Ungar (2008) report that at least 16% of high school graduates take up to three years out before attending a post-secondary institution, based on their survey of 200 young people across Canada. A Canadian Council on Learning report (2008) states that 27.8% of Canadian high school graduates wait at least four months (with no defined upper limit) before proceeding to post-secondary school. This figure comes from the Youth in Transitions Survey, a nationwide, longitudinal study. Using data from the same survey, Hango's 2011 report concludes that "almost half of high school graduates started PSE [post-secondary education] within four months of graduating from high school, while by fifteen months, close to three quarters had started." In other words, about 25% waited a year before enrolling.

Unfortunately, there is no available data concerning how those young people spent their time between secondary and post-secondary education. If they were engaged in any type of structured, productive activity, they can be classified as gappers. Certainly, some of those who delay do so in order to work (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008), but it is unclear exactly how many. Regardless, the studies above (Campbell & Ungar, 2008; Canadian Council on Learning,

2008; Hango, 2011; Hango & de Broucker, 2007) do provide evidence that large numbers of Canadian students delay their post-secondary studies.

One factor that correlates with taking a gap year is academic background. Students who get good marks in high school and well prepared for higher education are less apt to delay entering post-secondary education (Hango, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). Those who have positive attitudes towards school (Curtis, Mlotkowski, & Lumsden, 2012) or a higher level of academic aspirations and motivation (Hango, 2011; Martin, 2010; Niu & Tienda, 2013) are likewise more likely to enroll in college or university directly after high school.

Parents have an influence as well. If their parents have high expectations that they will go on to higher education, teens are less likely to take a gap year (Hango, 2011). In North America, young people whose parents have a post-secondary degree are more likely to go on to post-secondary education themselves, and are less likely to defer enrolling (Ingels, Glennie, Lauff, & Wirt, 2012; Hango, 2011). The inverse correlation between parental education levels and likelihood of taking a gap year also exists, but to a lesser degree, in Australia and the UK. (Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Curtis et al., 2012; Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). This may be because there is a more established tradition of taking a gap year in these countries, so even parents who expect their children to pursue higher education are supportive of gap year plans.

Another important background factor is the family's socioeconomic status. In the 1960's and 1970's, gappers were usually members of Britain's middle or upper class, who could afford to spend a year traveling or volunteering (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). This still holds true to some extent in the UK: those who plan on taking a gap year tend to come from middle- to upper-class families with highly educated parents (Crawford & Cribb, 2012).

However, in other countries, the larger proportion of gap-takers is not well-off (Wells &

Lynch, 2012; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). In Australia, gappers are more evenly distributed across all

levels of socioeconomic status (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). Of American high school

graduates who come from households in the top 20% of the socioeconomic distribution, only

about 5% postpone post-secondary enrolment, compared with 31% of those from families in the

bottom 20% (Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011).

Gap Year Experiences and Motivations

The traditional gap year experience involves volunteering and travel. Gappers who chose

to volunteer cited both humanitarian and personal motivations (Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil,

2012). They wanted to help the less fortunate and also to expand their skills and horizons. Some

reported that they were looking for personal growth and new perspectives (O'Shea, 2011).

Students who choose this type of gap year may also be looking for independence (Crawford &

Cribb, 2012), a life-changing experience, or a way to set themselves apart from their peers

(Martin, Wilson, Liem, & Ginns, 2013). These and other potential benefits of taking a gap year

are discussed below.

Much of the available research focuses on the traditional type of gap year experience.

However, since the majority of gappers are from families of a lower socioeconomic status, they

may delay enrolling in post-secondary education more by necessity than by choice (Wells &

Lynch, 2012). As demonstrated by surveys from Australia and England, a primary motivation for

many who take a gap year is to earn money to pay for further education or other expenses. For

example, Curtis et al., (2012), found that only 6% of Australian gappers used the time to travel

while 40% worked. Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) found that over half of Australian gappers

were employed at least part-time (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). A British survey found that 80%

of gap year takers worked for at least part of the gap period (Crawford & Cribb, 2012).

Working becomes even more common for high school graduates when labor market

conditions are good. The number of gap takers tends to increase when there are more job

opportunities for young people (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). Gappers may work in order to

save money, fund a trip, or gain experience and independence. But many are undoubtedly driven

by the need to pay for the costs of higher education, which have risen considerably in recent

decades (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008; Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012).

In addition to economics, academic performance and motivation plays a significant role

in whether a young person will take a gap year. Many survey respondents say they chose a gap

year because they wanted a break from studying (Martin, 2010). Some students feel "burned out"

by the end of their high school careers or unprepared for the rigors of post-secondary academics.

Others express uncertainty about what type of post-secondary program to pursue, and taking a

gap year allows them time to explore their options and make decisions about their future

education and career (Campbell & Ungar, 2008; Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). It seems that

some decide to take a gap year only after receiving disappointing exam results (Crawford &

Cribb, 2012) or failing to get into their program or institution of choice (Wells & Lynch, 2012).

It is therefore not surprising that many gappers use the time to study. An Australian

survey found that 16% of gappers in 2009-2010 were involved in studying or training (Lumsden

& Stanwick, 2012). As Curtis, Mlotkowski, and Lumsden (2012) suggest, a likely reason to

study during a gap period is to improve exam scores or to prepare for college or university.

These non-traditional gappers are less likely to have planned for their gap year in advance.

The U.K. Department for Education's study (Crawford & Cribb, 2012) found that 28% of

gappers had not planned to take a break when asked about it before completing their secondary

education. In an Australian survey, only about 10% of students in Year 12 (age 17) said that they

planned to take a gap year, yet 24% actually did (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). As mentioned,

this may be due to falling short in terms of academic performance or finances. For some, a last

minute gap year plan may simply reflect a failure to plan ahead adequately (Wells & Lynch,

2012). Others cannot immediately pursue higher education because they are obligated to take

care of children or other family members (Campbell & Ungar, 2008).

The Gap Year Industry

While some people arrange their own gap year experiences, others sign up for organized

packages and programs. Organizations have sprung up, particularly in Great Britain and—more

recently—in the United States, to meet the demand for 'worthwhile' gap year activities:

> A commercial gap year industry sector has emerged in the U.K. consisting of a large
>
> number of diverse gap year activity providers offering a huge range of different potential
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> activities for young people to undertake during their year out. These range through paid
>
> and voluntary work, various forms of training, travel and leisure activities located both in
>
> the U.K. and across the globe. (Jones, 2004, p. 17)

In 2005, the gap year industry in the UK was worth an estimated five billion pounds, an amount

predicted to quadruple by 2010 (Lyons et al., 2012). Jones's 2004 review counted 85 British

organizations specializing in providing gap year programs. Updated statistics are not available,

but it is likely that, as the number of gap year takers has grown, so has the industry.

The gap year industry is now international. A Google search for 'gap year programs'

produces over 33 million results. The American Gap Association has developed an accreditation

process for such organizations. Their website (www.americangap.org) lists seven accredited

programs and 22 more in the process of being accredited (American Gap Association, 2014). At least 35 gap year fairs are organized annually in the US (USA Gap Year Fairs, 2014). There are far fewer gap year programs and organizations in Canada, but one example is My Gap Year, an Ontario-based provider of structured, personalized gap year activities (My Gap Year, 2013). See Appendix B for more gap year program websites.

The gap year industry caters primarily to the needs of traditional gap year takers with the means to pay for structured programming and travel expenses during their time away from formal studies. Most of these organizations focus on travel and volunteer experiences and typically charge substantial fees for their services (Campbell & Ungar, 2008; Lyons et al., 2012). Young people are typically required to raise several thousand pounds in sponsorship for volunteer and internship placements in the UK (Heath, 2007). One example of a comprehensive Canadian program is "Global Gap," a 27-week volunteer program designed for North American high school graduates. It involves working on various service projects in five countries and costs 29,995 Canadian dollars (Global Gap Year: Overview, n.d.).

Benefits of Taking a Gap Year

The industry promotes gap year programs in part by touting the many benefits of participation (Heath, 2007; Martin, 2010). Likewise, several recent articles in the mainstream media have supported the idea of taking a gap year (Appendix A). Even some university presidents and heads of state have come out in favor of the practice (Simpson, 2005). Purported benefits include personal growth, increased academic motivation and performance, and skills development. However, the evidence for such claims tends to come from anecdotes or surveys conducted by gap year organizations themselves rather than from independent researchers (Martin, 2010).

For instance, the Center for Interim Programs (CIP), the oldest gap year organization in the US, lists several benefits of taking a post-high school gap year on their website. These include hands-on learning, improved confidence, and skills development (The Center for Interim Programs, LLC, 2008). Holly Bull, the president of CIP, acknowledges that most of her evidence is anecdotal, based on participant feedback. However, she does not shy away from making bold claims about the benefits of taking a gap year:

> I suspect that most parents value any process that fosters independence and happy self-confidence. If the process can guide their young adult toward a meaningful and fulfilling career, there is even greater incentive to take part. A well-constructed gap year can offer all of this—and the invaluable benefit of a life enriched by varied experience and the inspiration to continue to create such a life. (Bull, 2006, p. 31)

One of the most common claims is that a gap year is an opportunity for self-reflection and personal development. This is not an easy outcome to measure, but some qualitative research has shown that gappers believe that they benefited from the experience. For example, in one South African case study, gappers reported gains in confidence, independence, self-awareness, and life skills (Coetzee & Bester, 2009). Since this study only had three participants from one country, however, it is not generalizable to a larger population.

In another example, O'Shea's 2011 case study of a UK-based gap year organization found many positive outcomes for the participants, whose experiences all involved international volunteering. They reported becoming better informed about socio-political issues and about specific cultures or communities. Their appreciation for family, friends, and others grew. They felt more confident, effective, and mature and described shifts in their priorities and perspectives. Some compared it to a rite of passage. O'Shea (2011) concludes that this type of gap year is a

good opportunity for character development. Again, the results of this study have limited generalizability as they are based on the responses of 29 participants in programs offered by a single gap year organization. In fact, as Lyons, et al. (2012) point out, although there exists a general perception that volunteer travel experiences contribute to personal development and a sense of global citizenship, there is currently little empirical evidence to support such a claim.

A second common claim is that taking a gap year can enhance one's subsequent academic performance. One reason behind this theory is that gappers collect more experience and practical knowledge with which to link the new information they learn in the classroom (Martin, Wilson, Liem, & Ginns, 2013). They may also be better organized, more mature, more adaptable, or more motivated to study after their time off (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012).

A quantitative study conducted in Australia analyzed the records of nearly 7000 first year students at one university in the years 2002, 2003, and 2004. The researchers focused on the 6% of them who enrolled a full year after graduating from high school. They concluded that "taking a 1-year break between high school and university was found to have a positive impact on students' tertiary academic performance [and that] this relationship is stronger for students on the lower-end of the marks distribution" (Birch & Miller, 2007, p. 341). The researchers attribute this finding to the students' increased motivation and greater certainty about their choice to study after their gap year.

Studies from other countries about the effect of taking a gap year on tertiary marks are lacking. However the theory that taking a gap year can increase both motivation and confidence is supported in the literature. Many gappers use the time to explore interests or job possibilities and so feel more confident about their choice when they do begin post-secondary education (Campbell & Ungar, 2008; Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Jones, 2004). Nieman (2013) interviewed 34

students at four South African universities who had taken a gap year. Those who had felt the need for a break from studying before their gap year later felt "refreshed and re-energised, ready and even eager to engage in academic activities" (Nieman, 2013, p. 139).

Martin (2010) also found a link between taking a gap year and academic motivation. He surveyed 338 Australian students from two universities. Students who were not very motivated academically were more likely to take a gap year, and taking a gap year seemed to improve their motivation: "It appears that participation in a gap year may enable possible resolution of motivational deficits between high school and university" (Martin, 2010, p. 570).

Another explanation as to why gappers may do better in tertiary education is that they become more adaptable. The participants in the O'Shea (2011) study claimed to have an easier transition into university life, since they already had experience with living on their own or with a roommate. They reported working harder in school and having a higher level of intellectual development. Martin (2010) supports these claims with evidence from his large quantitative study. He found that "gap year participation positively predicted adaptive behavior and negatively predicted maladaptive behavior at university or college" (Martin, 2010, p. 570).

An additional benefit often touted by gap year supporters is increased employability upon completion of a post-secondary program. Many gappers gain workplace experience as volunteers or paid employees. Employers value previous work experience, which can help develop an individual's confidence and workplace skills, including communication skills and professionalism. (Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013).

There is some empirical evidence to suggest that gap year experiences can be beneficial in finding a job. A survey of job recruiters conducted by Community Service Volunteers, a London-based charity, found that 88% of respondents agreed that graduates who had taken a

well-structured gap year were more likely than their counterparts to have the 'soft skills' many

employers seek (Heath, 2007). In a large-scale Canadian study, Hango and de Broucker (2007)

found that gappers' employment rates were at least as good as those who did not delay going to

college or university. For college graduates, once other factors were accounted for, there was

virtually no difference in employment rates between the two groups. On the other hand, there

was a significant difference among university graduates:

> Youth who took time off between high school and completing a university degree are
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> much more likely to be employed than university graduates who went directly to
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> university after high school, even after controlling for experience. One possible
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> explanation for this finding is that youth who delayed have more actual job experience
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> than youth who did not delay and so, once they leave with their degree, they are more
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> prepared for the labour market. (Hango & de Broucker, 2007, p. 51)

Another study (Ferrer & Menendez, 2014), which also used data from nationwide surveys

in Canada, confirmed these findings. Moreover, the study shows that those who delayed

enrolling in college or university had significantly higher earnings than those who followed the

traditional path. This was especially true for university graduates, and held true even five years

after graduation. The researchers believe that the delayers had been able to make better

educational decisions because of something they had learned about themselves or the labor

market during their time away from education (Ferrer & Menendez, 2014).

These three potential benefits of personal growth, academic improvement, and increased

employability are elements of *cultural capital*. Cultural capital refers to experiences, learned

competencies, skills, habits, preferences, and so on that help to ensure academic success and pass

on socioeconomic status to the next generation. The concept comes from Pierre Bourdieu's

theory of social and cultural reproduction, which helps to explain how socioeconomic

imbalances are perpetuated through education and other societal institutions (Edgerton &

Roberts, 2014). Some scholars (Heath, 2007; Martin et al., 2013) suggest that middle and upper

class young people may take a gap year in order to gain cultural capital: "The gap year provides

students with an important means of gaining distinction over other students in the context of

increased competition for entry to elite institutions" (Heath, 2007, p. 91) and can give individuals

an edge in the competitive graduate labor market (Heath, 2007).

In summary, there is some evidence in the available scholarly literature to support the

claims made by gap year programs and the mainstream media, but that evidence is limited.

Personal development is a potential outcome of a gap year experience, but the only studies that

support the idea are small in scale and focus mainly on the type of gap year that involves

organized travel and volunteerism. A greater amount of evidence supports the claims that taking

time off after high school can help improve a young person's later academic performance and

motivation. Some studies also show that such an experience may increase one's cultural capital

and employability.

Drawbacks of Taking a Gap Year

While there are potential benefits to taking a gap year, the available literature also

outlines some important drawbacks. The findings of some studies seem to contradict the findings

of others. For example, although Birch and Miller (2007) found evidence that gap-takers in

Australia had greater academic success, several other studies on the subject found the opposite to

be true. Those who postpone beginning post-secondary education are less likely to choose four-

year programs (Niu & Tienda, 2013). Those who do attend university after a delay are less likely

to be academically prepared for higher education (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007) and less likely to complete a bachelor's degree (Wells & Lynch, 2012).

It is possible that factors other than the gap year itself may have an influence on gappers' tendency to drop out of post-secondary education. For instance, gappers disproportionately performed poorly academically in high school and they were more likely to have family responsibilities. Two American studies (Attewell & Heil, 2012; Roksa & Velez, 2012) took steps to control for these and other covariates. Nonetheless, both found that those who postponed college or university were significantly less likely to graduate. It is important to note that all of the above studies focused primarily on postponed enrollment and demographics, without taking into account how the young people spent their time during the gap. This may explain the contradictory findings.

Some scholars (Attewell & Heil, 2012; Martin et al., 2013) believe that delaying the start of college or university has a negative impact on academic momentum. Academic momentum is the idea that "the speed with which undergraduates progress during the early phase of college significantly affects their likelihood of completing a degree" (Attewell & Heil, 2012, p. 39). The effect depends partially on the length of the gap (longer gaps being more detrimental) as well as on the type of activities engaged in during the gap year. For example, working instead of studying after high school can be a distraction from educational goals (Heckhausen, Chang, Greenberger, & Chen, 2013), but developmental activities such as volunteering, traveling, or taking classes of interest tend to have a positive impact on momentum (Martin et al., 2013).

While some gappers report a greater ease of transition into post-secondary education (O'Shea, 2011), others struggle to regain academic momentum and adapt to the post-secondary environment. Those who travelled may experience 'reverse culture shock' upon returning (Lyons

et al., 2012). Reverse culture shock is associated with difficulty adjusting to college and feelings of loneliness, anxiety, or depression (Gaw, 2000).

There is a well-established connection between post-secondary achievement and labor market outcomes (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). Gappers who do not finish their post-secondary studies have an employment rate lower than their non-gappers with the same amount of education and even lower than those who did not take a gap year and do not have any post-secondary education (Hango & de Broucker, 2007).

Although studies by Hango and de Brouker (2007) and Ferrer and Menendez (2014) found a positive relationship between taking a gap year and earnings, a greater number of studies have found that gappers earn less than non-gappers after graduation. Canadian data shows that recent university graduates who took a gap year earned $85 per week less than those who did not take a gap year (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). A large-scale Swedish study found a "persistent and non-trivial earnings penalty" (Holmlund, Liu, & Nordstrom Skans, 2008, p. 683) associated with taking a gap year between high school and post-secondary education. The effect was greater for those whose gap extended to two or more years and resulted in a lifetime earnings difference of about half a year's peak salary (Holmlund et al., 2008). Researchers for the U.K. Department for Education reported similar results. Controlling for other variables, they compared the earnings of gap-takers with those who did not take a gap year. At age 30, the gap-takers were earning an average of 6.5% less per hour. The gap narrowed over time but persisted into their late 30's (Crawford & Cribb, 2012).

A possible explanation for the differences in earnings involves the type and timing of experience gained outside of post-secondary studies. Those who follow a direct path to post-secondary education have more time to build a career after graduating (Canadian Council on

Learning, 2008). Put another way, "the returns to post-university work experience are higher than the returns to gap years. Postponement of university education reduces time for post-university investment in skills and therefore entails lower earnings subsequent to university graduation" (Holmlund et al., 2008, p. 685).

Discussion

The Gap Year Gap

The literature review above outlines the main advantages and disadvantages of taking a gap year. The mixed results are due at least in part to the diversity of gap year experiences: "Synthesizing findings for and against deferred entry, it is evident that some activities may lead to academic success and other activities may impede success" (Martin et al., 2013, p. 665).

When the popular media and gap year program marketing materials outline the benefits of taking a gap year, they are primarily referring to the traditional gap year involving travel and volunteering. There is arguably what Heath (2007) refers to as a hierarchy among gap year experiences, with the traditional gap year having more benefits and being more valued: "Indeed, not all gap-year experiences meet on equal terms, and the gold standard that is constructed within these accounts is of a well-structured and purposeful period of time out" (Heath, 2007, p. 94). In the UK for example, international travel and volunteering experiences are rated highly because of their associations with independence, morality, and character-building. Working domestically, on the other hand, is an increasingly common but much less valued gap year experience (Heath, 2007). Prince William and Prince Henry both took gap years to travel and volunteer in developing countries. As a result, the perception of these activities as not only worthwhile but as a pursuit of the elite grew (Lyons et al., 2012).

Taking such a gap year may be a way of increasing one's cultural capital (Martin et al., 2013). Unfortunately, "the most highly rated forms of gap-year experience remain the preserve of those from more affluent backgrounds" (Heath, 2007, p. 98). The costs of the type of gap year experience that seems to yield the most cultural capital and other benefits essentially requires that the gapper come from a middle or upper class family: "A gap year without adequate funding can saddle a young person with significant debt when they return to education, training or employment" (Jones, 2004, p. 67).

The majority of gappers cannot afford such programs. They may take a gap year because they lack academic preparation, confidence, motivation, or funding for their post-secondary education. Their gap may not be prearranged and often consists of working to save money. Given the different set of circumstances of the gappers in each category, different outcomes can be expected (Martin, 2010). Non-traditional gappers, already at a disadvantage academically or socioeconomically, are much less likely to benefit from taking time off from their studies (Wells & Lynch, 2012). Therefore, the academic and the socioeconomic background of the gapper are important factors in determining whether a gap will be beneficial or not. Gap years may even serve to widen the gap between rich and poor (Heath, 2007).

Alternatives

Thus far, two main types of gap years have been discussed. Traditional gappers sign up for structured and costly volunteering and travel programs, while non-traditional gappers typically delay entry in order to make money or improve academic scores. There are, however, other gap year options emerging. Research on the outcomes of these options is limited and beyond the scope of this paper, but they may offer a viable alternative for those looking for the benefits of a traditional gap year experience.

Some universities now offer a gap year experience. Last year, Tufts University in Massachusetts kicked off Tufts 1+4, which places interested new students in a national or international gap year service experience before beginning their formal studies. Funding is available for students who cannot afford to pay (Howard, 2014). This was perhaps modeled after Princeton University's Bridge Year program, described on their website as "a tuition-free program that allows a select number of incoming freshmen to begin their Princeton experience by engaging in nine months of University-sponsored service at one of five international locations" (Princeton University Bridge Year Program, 2015). In Canada, the University of Regina offers a similar program (Future Students: UR Gap Year Program, 2015). In Australia, the University of Canberra offers 'Gap Year Plus,' which includes both a gap year experience and a course designed to help participants reflect on and learn from their experience. (Kennedy, Ward, & Milne, 2010).

Independently planning a gap year can also be an affordable option. Some gappers work for the first part of their gap in order to earn money for traveling or other activities in the latter part (Heath, 2007). If the most beneficial type of gap year involves community service, there are ways to volunteer without spending a fortune, such offering one's services to a local charity.

Recommendations

Considering the mixed research findings and multiple factors to consider, it is impossible to broadly recommend or discourage the practice of taking a gap year (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). A discussion of the benefits or drawbacks of taking a gap year must take into account the type of experiences, the background of the potential gapper, and his or her motivations and aspirations. Although the issue is complex, the research reveals some key

considerations for young adults considering a gap year and their parents, guidance counselors, or others helping them to make the decision and subsequent plans.

First, while taking a gap year can have either positive or negative outcomes, there is ample and unambiguous evidence that post-secondary qualifications are associated with positive outcomes such as higher employment rates and earnings (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). Heckhause, et al (2013) put it even more strongly:

> With a multitude of potential paths and the high risks of becoming marginalized in society without adequate education and occupational training, a successful transition to adulthood depends on how much a youth invests in postsecondary education after graduating from high school. (p. 1385)

Some gap takers do not end up following through with their intentions to get a post-secondary degree. Therefore, potential gappers should take steps to ensure that they will continue on a path to post-secondary education after their gap year or years. One way of doing this is to apply for and gain acceptance to a post-secondary program before high school graduation. Many institutes allow admitted students to defer their enrolment until the next academic year (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). Participating in a gap year program designed or endorsed by a university and connected with future academic studies is also recommended for this reason.

The type of activities undertaken during a gap year also seems to influence whether or not the gapper maintains a trajectory towards finishing a post-secondary qualification. According to Niu and Tienda (2013), delayed enrollment "need not undermine pursuit of baccalaureate degrees if the hiatus from academic work allows students to mature, to acquire work experience, and to accumulate resources for college" (p. 2). This does not require signing up for a packaged program offer by the gap year industry, but thoughtful planning is required to

avoid drifting and consequently wasting the time (Jones, 2004). "A worthwhile activity can be anything that helps young people understand more about themselves, learn about the options open to them, and increase their confidence in their abilities" (Campbell & Ungar, 2008, p. 45).

Where possible, gap year planning should take long-term goals into account. For a student interested in majoring in anthropology, for example, a year spent traveling abroad provides valuable experience to draw on during future studies. Mathematics departments, on the other hand, may not look favorably on a long interruption of studies (Jones, 2004).

Parents and guidance counselors have an important role to play in helping high school students determine whether taking a gap year might be right for them and supporting them in that decision. Campbell and Ungar (2008) found that the practice is often discouraged, even when it could be beneficial:

> Many participants said that they did or could have benefited from a time-out before, during, or after completing post-secondary education. One of the primary benefits cited was that it would have given them an opportunity to figure out what they wanted to do. However, many reported that taking a time-out was frowned upon, particularly if it lasted for any length of time. This was especially true for those who wanted to take a time-out immediately after high school. (p. 36)

Some participants who enrolled in post-secondary education directly after high school felt that they wasted time and money because they were not ready academically, emotionally, or in terms of motivation (Campbell & Ungar, 2008).

Parents and counselors can also help students find out more about their options. In Campbell and Ungar's 2008 study, most participants were not aware of the full range of post-secondary and gap year opportunities available to them. Students who excelled academically

were expected to go to university, and those who didn't were expected to proceed to college, vocational training, or directly into the workforce. Young people often follow these paths because they do not know what else to do. However, "university is not a good fit for all young people who do well in high school, nor is college or the trades suitable for everyone who doesn't do as well" (Campbell & Ungar, 2008, p. 44).

Once a gap year is decided on, it is important to make sure a quality program is chosen. There are no national or international governing bodies to monitor the quality of services provided by the gap year industry. However, some private organizations have started to offer such services. For example, the American Gap Association (American Gap Association, 2014) and the Year Out Group (Jones, 2004) have strict criteria that its member organizations must adhere to. Reviews of gap year experiences are available on websites such as Go Overseas (www.gooverseas.com).

Since some types of gap years appear to be more beneficial than others, these should be encouraged and perhaps subsidized. The Canadian Council on Learning (2008) report on gappers suggests that bursaries be made available to lower-income students who want to take a gap year:

> Bursaries can be awarded upon acceptance into a postsecondary institution. The bursaries can then be partially disbursed prior to and during the gap year with the remainder of the bursary disbursed upon enrolment in first-year classes. Typically, bursaries are only awarded to students entering or continuing a post-secondary program, but extending these awards to gap year students, on a partially deferred basis, allows lower-income students the opportunity to take a gap year while simultaneously providing a strong incentive to return to formal education. (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008, p. 5)

Policy makers should also be made aware of the evidence both against and in favor of taking a gap year. Referring to the potential earnings deficit of gappers, Holmlund et al. (2008) suggest that "if taking a year off is wasteful rather than productive, policies should make it more costly to postpone higher education" (p. 684). However, such broad policies could be harmful to gappers who need to take time after high school to earn money for higher education (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). I would suggest instead that policies target the inequalities in gap year opportunities by providing financial aid and by offering and promoting more programs that do not require fees. For example, American citizens and permanent residents can apply for an AmeriCorps program, which pay modest stipends to their volunteers (Corporation for National & Community Service, n.d.). Canadian high school graduates do not currently have such an option.

Conclusion

This paper examined the outcomes of taking a gap year by evaluating three common claims about gap year experiences commonly found on the Internet. The first, that taking gap year can lead to personal development, is widely accepted. The literature does not refute the possibility, but support for the idea comes mainly from anecdotes and studies conducted on a very small scale with limited generalizability.

The second claim is that taking a gap year can be helpful in subsequent post-secondary studies. As demonstrated in the literature review, the studies that address this possibility found various results. Some gappers seem to gain confidence and motivation and thus do better, while others seem to lose academic momentum and may fail to complete a post-secondary program. This may depend on the type of activities engaged in during the gap year.

The evidence is also mixed in regards to whether gap years help or hinder the gappers' employment rates and earnings. It appears that some employers look favorably on a gap year

experience as an opportunity to develop soft skills, particularly in countries like the UK, which

have a strong gap year tradition. However, other studies have shown that experience after

graduation can be more valuable and that gappers tend to earn less in the long term.

There is clearly a need for more data and more empirical information about the pros and

cons of taking a gap year. Further research is recommended, particularly relating to specific

types of gap years and gap year takers. Comparisons could be made, for example, between the

benefits reaped by gappers who worked versus those who traveled or volunteered.

For some, a gap year can be a time to learn, develop, and plan for the future. For others, a

gap year represents wasted time or a distraction from achieving educational and career goals.

Much depends on the young person's background and the type of gap year they are able to

experience. Parents, guidance counselors, and policy makers all have a role to play in helping

young adults find their most suitable pathway towards future success.

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Appendix A

Selected Recent Gap Year Articles in the Media

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Appendix B

A Sample of Gap Year Providers and Websites

- mygapyear (www.mygapyear.ca): an Ontario-based provider of structured, personalized gap year activities

- Center for Interim Programs (http://www.interimprograms.com/): the oldest independent gap-year counseling organization in the United States, offering more than 6,000 program opportunities

- Go Overseas (www.GoOverseas.com): a website listing opportunities and participant reviews for work, travel, study, volunteering, and gap year programs abroad

- gapyear.com (www.gapyear.com): a website and social network offering resources and advice for planning a gap year abroad

- Year Out Group (www.yearoutgroup.org): an association of gap year program providers based in the UK

- The Gap-Year Guidebook (www.gap-year.com): a U.K.-based book and website offering resources and programs for gap year experiences both abroad and in the UK

- The Corporation for National and Community Service (http://www.nationalservice.gov): U.S. government sponsored programs for volunteering within the country