DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 609 CG 023 602

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TITLE The Impacts of Teenage Employment: Teachers' Perceptions Versus Student Realities.
PUB DATE Aug 91
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (99th, San Francisco, CA, August 16-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Extracurricular Activities; Grade Point Average; High Schools; *High School Students; Negative Attitudes; *Part Time Employment; *Student Employment; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Expectations of Students

ABSTRACT

There has been considerable debate regarding the consequences of students working part time while attending school. This study was conducted to compare teachers' perceptions of work impacts with other measures of students' academic performance and involvement. Surveys were completed by 172 high school students and 47 teachers and administrators. Students were surveyed on work history, work climate, use of earnings or allowance, attitudes toward school, participation in extracurricular activities, health, and alcohol and tobacco use. Teachers and administrators gave their perceptions of the impacts of outside student employment in the areas of student personal development, classroom performance, involvement in extracurricular activities, the value of their employment to the larger community, and the teachers' classroom behavior. The results revealed that, despite teachers' generally negative expectations, no significant differences were found between student workers and nonworkers on grade point average or involvement in extracurricular activities. Teachers' expectations of students and grading standards appeared to have declined in the face of increased student employment and this may contribute to the negative findings. (Author/NB)

The Impacts of Teenage Employment: Teachers' Perceptions versus Student Realities

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Poster Paper presented at the 99th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association

San Francisco, CA

Running head: IMPACTS OF EMPLOYMENT

Abstract

There has been considerable debate regarding the consequences of part-time work while students attend school. The present study compared teachers' perceptions of work impacts with other measures of students' academic performance and involvement. Despite teachers' generally negative expectations, no significant differences were found between student workers and nonworkers on grade point average or involvement in extracurricular activities. Teachers' expectations of students and grading standards appear to have declined in the face of increased student employment and this may contribute to the negative findings.

The Impacts of Teenage Employment: Teachers' Perceptions versus Student Realities

The issue of part-time employment by high school students has become more salient in recent years for several reasons. First, there has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of youth who work part-time while attending school. Since 1940 there has been a sevenfold increase in the number of 16 year old males and a tenfold increase in 16 year old females who juggle work and school obligations (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986). Using data from a 1982 nationwide survey, D'Amico (1984) reported that about 56% of white high school females and 58% of white high school males regularly worked during the school year. Of these, 23% of the girls and 30% of the boys worked over 20 hours per week. Goldstein and Engwall (1988) found that 34% of junior high and 57% of senior high students in Plainville, CT hold part-time positions and 27% of the later group reported working more than 19 hours between Monday and Thursday. A report by the Massachusetts Department of Education found that 51% of seniors statewide reported working at least 16 hours per week (Sege, 1989).

There has been considerable concern about the consequences of this growth in part-time employment. On the one hand, many educators view it favorably. For example, The Panel on Youth (1973), a Presidential commission composed of prominent educators and social scientists charged with studying the way youth are socialized into adulthood, endorsed part-time employment since they believed that such work fostered the

development of autonomy, social learning, intergenerational harmony and eased the transition to adulthood. Moreover, D'Amico (1984) found that while employment reduced the amount of time students reported studying or being involved in school-based extracurricular activities, it generally had no negative impact on class rank.

On the other hand, a number of studies have painted a less sanguine picture regarding the consequences of youth employment. Greenberger and her colleagues (e.g., Greenberger, Steinberg, & Vaux, 1981; Steinberg, Greenberger, Garduque, Ruggiero & Vaux, 1982; Steinberg, Greenberger, Jacobi & Garduque, 1981) found that part-time employment was associated with (1) the development of personal responsibility (self-management), but not social responsibility (concern for others), (2) development of autonomy for girls, (3) less involvement in school, family and peer commitments, (4) more cynical attitudes toward work and the acceptance of unethical work practices, and (5) increased use of cigarettes and marijuana. They concluded that "proponents of the earlier and more deliberate integration of adolescents into the workplace have overestimated its benefits and underestimated its costs" (Steinberg et al., 1982, p. 385).

Even D'Amico's (1984) finding of no negative impact of employment on class rank must be viewed warily in light of McNeil's (1984) research on student work and teacher expectations. She found that as students reduced their commitment to academics because of outside activities, teachers, in

turn, often lowered their expectations of students by giving fewer outside assignments and placing greater emphasis on in-class work.

Research by Bachman (1983) disputes the notion that earnings generated by part-time employment helps students "learn the value of a dollar." He found that half the seniors in his national sample saved no money for college or other long-range goal, and over half made no contribution to the living expenses of their family. Rather, most students spent their income on automobile expenses and other personal needs such as clothing, movies, and eating out. Bachman speculated that such spending patterns might lead to a generation of consumers who have expensive tastes and who show little discipline in saving for "big ticket" items like housing.

Most recently, Steinberg and Dornbusch (1991) reported on a study involving 4000 15- through 18-year-olds. They found that "long work hours during the school year are associated with lower investment and performance in school, greater psychological distress, drug and alcohol use, delinquency, and autonomy from parents. Workers do not have any advantages over nonworkers in self-reliance, work-orientation, or self-esteem" (p. 304).

Thus, the previous research on the pros and cons of student work present an unclear picture. Some suggest it is personally beneficial, others say it is relatively harmless in terms of academic impacts, while still others report negative consequences on students. While much of the above

research has focused exclusively on student outcomes, the present research looked at the impacts of part-time employment from the perspectives of both teachers and students.

Method

Subjects

In Fall 1989, surveys were mailed to a random sample of 308 students in grades 10-12 attending the public high school of a north central Connecticut community. The town of 51,000+ people, located 15 miles from a large metropolitan center, is a predominantly white (5% Black, 2% Hispanic) community contains a broad range of socioeconomic groups.

A second survey was distributed to all teachers and administrators at the high school (N = 112).

Measures

The student survey, designed and implemented following the principles of Dillman (1978), asked about a wide variety of topics including work history, work climate, use of earnings or allowance, attitudes toward school, participation in extracurricular activities, health, alcohol and tobacco use. Students and their parents/guardians also signed releases giving the researcher access to their current semester grades and standardized achievement test scores. The high school also released data on the general distribution of students in the four levels of classes: advanced placement, honors, regular and basic.

The survey distributed to teachers and administrators focused on their perceptions of the impacts of outside student

employment in five substantive areas: (1) the student's personal development, (2) the student's performance in the classroom, (3) his/her involvement in extracurricular activities, (4) the value of their employment to the larger community, and (5) teachers' classroom behavior.

Results

One hundred seventy-two students returned the survey (56% response rate). Comparing these students with school data on the proportion of students in various types of classes (advanced placement, honors, regular and basic), we discovered that those returning the surveys were not representative of the student body as a whole. They were disproportionately enrolled in advanced placement and honors classes. Since such students might have significantly different attitudes, expectations and experiences than students in the other tracks, responses from students in the regular and basic tracks were statistically "weighted" in an attempt to make the distribution of responses more representative of the typical student.

Despite the response bias in favor of more academically able students, a large proportion (61%) of the sample held part-time jobs during the school year. While the percentage varied by grade--36% of sophomores, 66% of juniors, and 80% of seniors--there was little difference in the weekly hours worked (mean was 16.52 hours).

Forty-seven of the teacher/administrator surveys were returned (42% response rate). Respondents were predominantly male (59.6%), with a mean age of 46. Over 90% had at least a

Master's degree and about half (51%) had over 16 years experience at the high school. Although the two surveys were not designed to ask about identical issues, there are a number of areas of overlap. Consequently, the balance of the results section is organized around presenting generally comparable data from both the teachers' and students' perspectives. We begin by describing how teachers see the impact of outside work on the student's personal development.

Consequences for Personal Development

Over two-thirds (68%) of the teachers felt that part-time employment contributed to the student's personal development. When asked how, specifically, work might affect development, teachers endorsed both positive and negative traits (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 here

Nearly all respondents (96%) felt that work contributed to greater independence and a substantial majority felt it fostered both a better self-concept (72%) and increased responsibility (68%). Over half also thought it aided dependability (60%) and financial responsibility (59%). On the negative side, over 90% believed work led to a greater focus on both immediate (versus long-term) goals and on materialism and status; 57% also felt that such employment contributed to increased cynicism about work.

Data relevant to several of these traits was also collected

from students. Consider the issue of financial responsibility. A series of questions asked how students used their earned incomes (see Figure 1). What is clear from examining the figure is that most students use their money for personal purchases. Like Bachman (1983) noted, little is used to defer family expenses, although the proportion not saving money for college or other long-term goal seems to have decreased slightly, i.e., 42% reporting little or no savings versus Bachman's 50%. Nevertheless, the data generally support Bachman's concern that this affluence largely feeds the fires of materialism.

Insert Figure 2 here

We also included a brief cynicism scale (derived from Ruggerio, 1984) in the set of questions completed by those students who were working. As an indirect test of teachers' concern about work leading to increased cynicism, scores on this scale were correlated with work hours. There was no significant correlation between cynicism and hours worked per week ($r(97) = -0.036$, $p = .73$).

We also included questions that alluded to the concern that work might focus students on immediate (versus long-term) goals. When we asked students about their post-high-school plans, we found no reliable differences between working and non-working students on whether they planned to: (a) get a full-time job, (b) attend college, (c) attend technical or trade school, (d) or enter the military. Working students did say they were more

likely to get married and start a family than did non-working students [$t(155) = -2.07$, $p = .04$].

In a related vein, we wondered if work would lead students to view the purpose of high school as principally vocational (job-training) in nature as opposed to providing skills and/or knowledge needed to lead a more informed life (academic orientation). A vocational orientation was reflected in a student endorsing statements like "high school should teach students the skills needed to do particular jobs" while a more academic orientation would be indicated by students choosing statements like "students need to take courses like American and World History so they can understand what is going on in today's world." We found no significant difference between working and non-working students on an index comprised of these and similar statements.

Work and Classroom Performance

Most teachers thought that outside employment impacted classroom performance: 88% felt the impact was negative, while 7% saw positive consequences. The specific ways work negatively affected the classroom are shown in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 here

As can be seen, most teachers felt employment conflicted with homework and exam preparation and affected their ability to function in class. The handful of teachers ($N=3$) who saw work as beneficial felt that employment made classroom concepts more

real and that there was greater participation since students have more examples. They also felt that traits developed on the job do carry over to the classroom and students developed a greater appreciation of the value of education. Despite the generally negative impact perceived by teachers, the key issue remains: does employment, in fact, result in poorer academic performance?

To address this question, we performed a regression analysis in which student's semester grades served as the dependent measure and work, eighth grade standardized test scores (Cognitive Abilities Test), age and sex were used as predictor variables. Work was defined either dichotomously--did student have a paying job at least 3 hours per week (yes/no)--or in terms of the number of hours per week the student worked. In neither case did work emerge as a significant predictor of semester grade point average. The general trend of the data, however, indicated that hours worked were negatively associated with grades.

Using a similar regression approach, we also considered self-reported health and psychosomatic symptomology, absenteeism and tardiness as dependent variables. Once again, we found no significant relation between work status and any of these variables, but like the case with grades, the general trend was for poorer health, increased absenteeism and tardiness to be associated with outside employment.

Work and Extracurricular Activities

Almost 98% of the teachers thought that work hurt

extracurricular activities. Specifically, they felt that, as a result of work, fewer students participate, and that it negatively affects attendance at meetings. When only teachers who direct extracurricular activities were queried, 60% said they had changed the way they ran the activity because of students' involvement with outside jobs. The most common changes were changing the time when the group met (27%) and reducing the number of meetings (14%).

We asked students about their involvement in extra-curricular activities at the high school. We considered both the number of activities they were involved in and the intensity of their involvement, as reflected by the number of hours per week they devoted to the activity. Comparing workers and nonworkers, we found no statistically significant difference between workers and nonworkers on either measure; surprisingly, the trend was for working students to report being involved with slightly more activities than those not working.

Impact on the community

Teachers generally agreed (70%) that students were helpful to the community in regard to providing manpower during this period of a labor shortage (unemployment in the town was 3.4% at the time of the survey; in June 1991 it was 6.0%), but did not feel that it greatly reduced the likelihood of deviant behavior. Forty percent felt workers were less likely to engage in criminal behavior (versus 32% who disagreed) and only 11% said that work reduced students' likely use of drugs and alcohol. Thirty-eight percent felt that work was a useful public

relations mechanism between the school and the community, while 34% believed that having a son or daughter working was a boon to working parents since they wouldn't have to worry about what that child was doing.

Data on alcohol and tobacco use among students suggests that teachers' concerns about substance use are well-founded. Again using a regression approach with age, sex and work status as predictors, we found that work status was a significant predictor of substance use (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

Impact on Teaching

The final section of the teacher questionnaire asked how the presence of working students affected the way teachers went about educating students. Slightly over half (51%) reported that they had changed the way they taught because of the increased number of working students. Figure 4 presents both positive and negative changes.

Insert Figure 4 here

For example, 53% (of those reporting an impact) said that they had increased discussion time since students had more examples and 50% had changed the examples they used to make them more related to students' work experience. On the other hand, 35% said they lectured more and gave more class time for

reading since students were less likely to come to class prepared; 19% gave fewer homework assignments; and 8% gave shorter homework assignments.

Many teachers also reported changing their expectations and grading standards over the past five years. About 66% reported a change in expectations regarding students; of these, about 18% say they have increased their expectations, while 47% say they have lowered theirs. Forty-two percent of teachers reported changing their grading standards: 16% say they have raised their standards, while 28% acknowledge lowering their criteria.

Discussion

When we compare teachers' and students' perceptions, beliefs and behaviors regarding part-time work, we find both areas of agreement and notable discrepancies. In the area of personal development, teachers felt that outside employment might have a number of beneficial effects including increasing students' financial responsibility. They were concerned, however, that work might result in a focus on materialism and status. When we examine how students spend their income, it appears that the saving for college or other long-term goal or assisting with family expenses are not high priorities for many students. Indeed, Bachman's (1983) fear that we may be creating a generation concerned with immediate, self-oriented consumption appears largely justified.

On the other hand, concerns that students will become cynical about work or overly focused on immediate goals are

not generally supported by our data. There was no correlation between hours worked and cynicism (indeed most students reported being quite satisfied with their job). Compared with nonworkers, employed students did not see high school as more vocational in nature, nor were they less likely to seek out additional education or training following high school. The one significant difference was in regard to getting married and starting a family. Additional analysis of this difference indicated that it was not sex-linked; it was a preference expressed by both working males and females.

In regard to classroom performance, the data are particularly surprising. Teachers are uniformly of the opinion that work hurts students' performance. Nevertheless, working and non-working students do not differ in terms of their academic performance, a finding consistent with D'Amico's (1984) research. Perhaps the changes in teaching strategies mentioned by teachers in coping with the increased number of working students, the modest amount of time students spend on homework [national average is less than four hours per week (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986)], and the decline in teacher expectations and grading standards all serve to minimize the impact of outside work on academic performance.

Another area of contrast regards student involvement in extracurricular activities. Although teachers felt that outside work negatively impacted student participation, the self-report data from students showed no differences between

working and non-working students in their actual involvement in extracurricular events. Two alternative explanations seem reasonable regarding this: first, the changes in the structure and scheduling of extracurricular activities that teachers directing such activities reported may have made them more accessaile to both working and non-working students. Second, teachers may be responding to a longitudinal decline in participation with the growth in the number of students with outside jobs. This dynamic might not be captured in the present cross-sectional study.

Outside work did not serve as a deterrent to deviant behavior. Indeed, such employment was a significant predictor of alcohol and cigarette use, a finding consistent with Steinberg, Greenberger, and Vaux (1981).

To this author, the most disturbing data involves the changes in teacher expectations and standards. Like McNeil (1984), we found a sizable number who reported lowering their academic criteria. The danger is a downward synergistic spiral: As teachers lower expectations for performance, students feel more comfortable devoting more time to their jobs which negatively impacts classroom performance; this, in turn, reinforces further lowering of standards, a situation with dire long-term consequences for the community as a whole.

To summarize, an examination of the impacts of student employment on various aspects of students' academic life suggests major differences between teacher expectations and actual performance. Teachers generally expected negative

impacts, few of which were not born out by examination of the data. Overall, our findings are consistent with D'Amico (1984) who found no evidence of academic impact but were generally not supportive of the findings of Greenberger and her colleagues (e.g., Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; see also Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991) with the exception of increased alcohol and tobacco use (Steinberg, Greenberger, and Vaux, 1981).

Conclusions

The debate over the costs and benefits of teenage employment will continue. Our data present a mixed picture. On the one hand, teachers expect predominantly negative sequelae arising from outside work. The consequences predicted, are generally consistent with impacts noted by previous researchers, include reduced commitment to academics and extracurricular activities, as well as an overemphasis of materialism and status. On the other hand, the data we report on impacts (some of which are measured indirectly) do not generally support the teachers' expectations.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the methodology involved (a cross-sectional survey with no control group of students who wanted to work but didn't have jobs) is less rigorous, and the sample size smaller than other studies of work impacts (cf., Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991). Several other caveats regarding this study should also be noted. First, it should be reemphasized that there was a significant bias in those students who chose

to complete and return the survey, and while efforts were made to mathematically "weight" the responses to counteract this bias, there is no guarantee that such weighting was effective. Thus, a key question remains: to what degree are the students who participated representative of the entire student body?

Similarly, it is not known how representative the teacher sample was. While demographic information on these respondents was presented earlier, we do not know how accurately they reflect a true cross-section of the teachers and administrators of the high school. Therefore, one needs to be cautious in interpreting the results of this research. The findings reported here should not be seen as justifying extensive part-time employment by students, nor condemning it. Clearly, we need to know a lot more before we can make any such generalizations.

Consequently, concerns about working teenagers will not be easily resolved. In my opinion, three things need to be done. First, there is a need for continued research to document more explicitly the impacts of student employment. Such research will need to consider impacts beyond the student such as effects on teachers, parents and employers.

Second, the general public needs to become more aware of the issues. In the last year, for example, there has been increased media coverage, both local and national, of the dilemma of student employment (see Bell, 1989; Franklin, 1989; "Government accuses," 1989; Mabry, 1989; Stoddard,

1990).

Finally, and most important, once community concern is aroused, there needs to be frank discussion of concerns about student employment with all the stakeholders involved, i.e., students, parents, employers, teachers, and school officials. No meaningful change will occur without the development of a community-wide consensus regarding what limits, if any, should be placed on students' outside employment during the school year.

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Table 1

Regression Analysis on Index of Tobacco and Alcohol Use as a Function of Age, Sex and Hours of Outside Employment

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Value	Prob>F
Model	3	4.19414	1.39805	3.542	0.0177
Error	90	35.52575	0.39473		
C Total	93	39.71990			

Root MSE	0.62828	R-square	0.1056
Dep Mean	2.40789	Adj R-sq	0.0758
C.V.	26.09235		

Parameter Estimates

Variable	DF	Parameter Estimate	Standard Error	T for H0: Parameter=0	Prob>|T|
INTERCEPT	1	1.028837	1.11632239	0.922	0.3592
AGE	1	0.058188	0.06780515	0.858	0.3931
SEX	1	0.017617	0.13167217	0.134	0.8939
HOURS WORKED	1	0.024982	0.00825822	3.025	0.0032

FIGURE 1

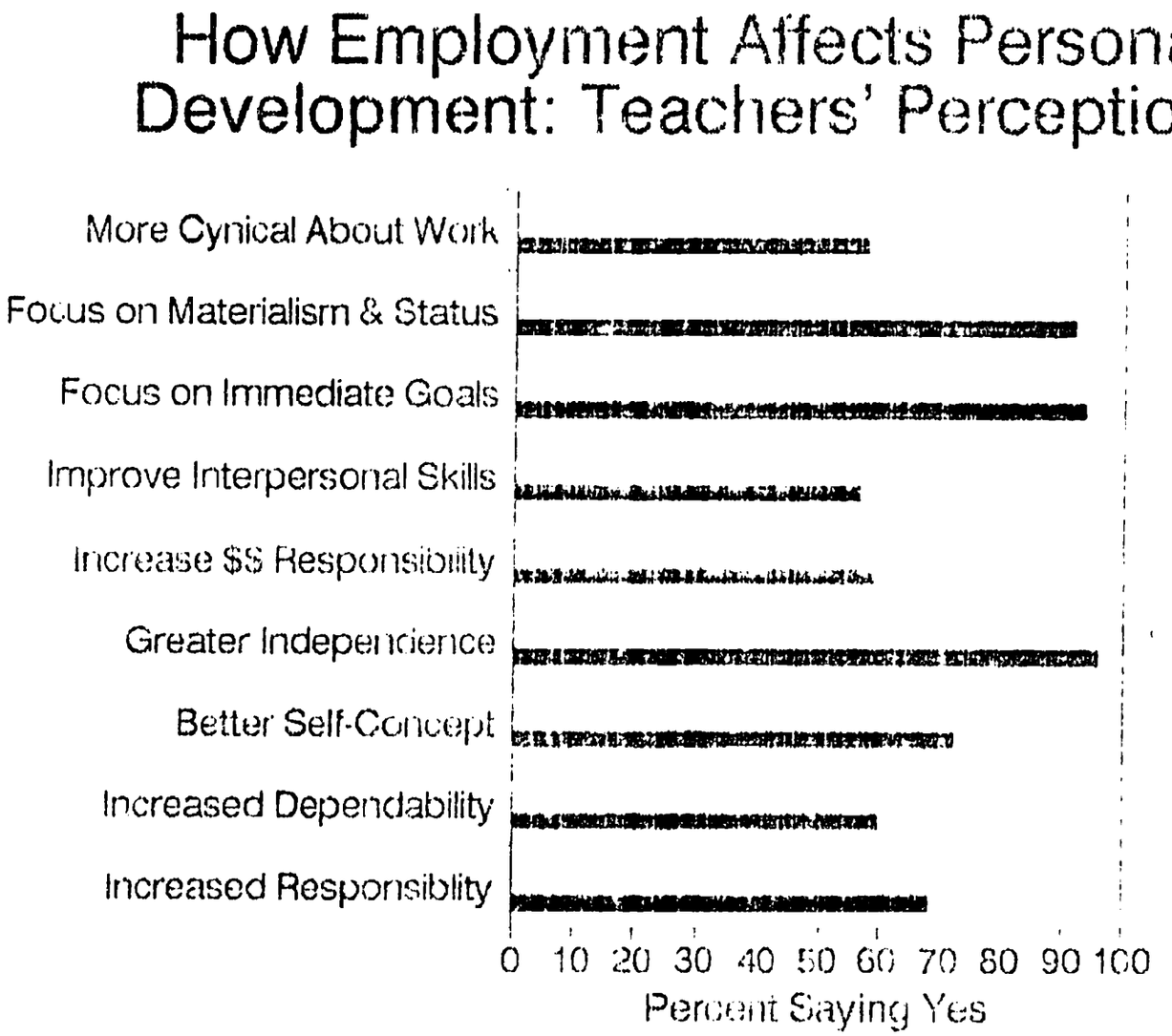

How Employment Affects Personal Development: Teachers' Perceptions
More Cynical About Work
Focus on Materialism & Status
Focus on Immediate Goals
Improve Interpersonal Skills
Increase $$ Responsibility
Greater Independence
Better Self-Concept
Increased Dependability
Increased Responsiblity
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
Percent Saying Yes

FIGURE 2

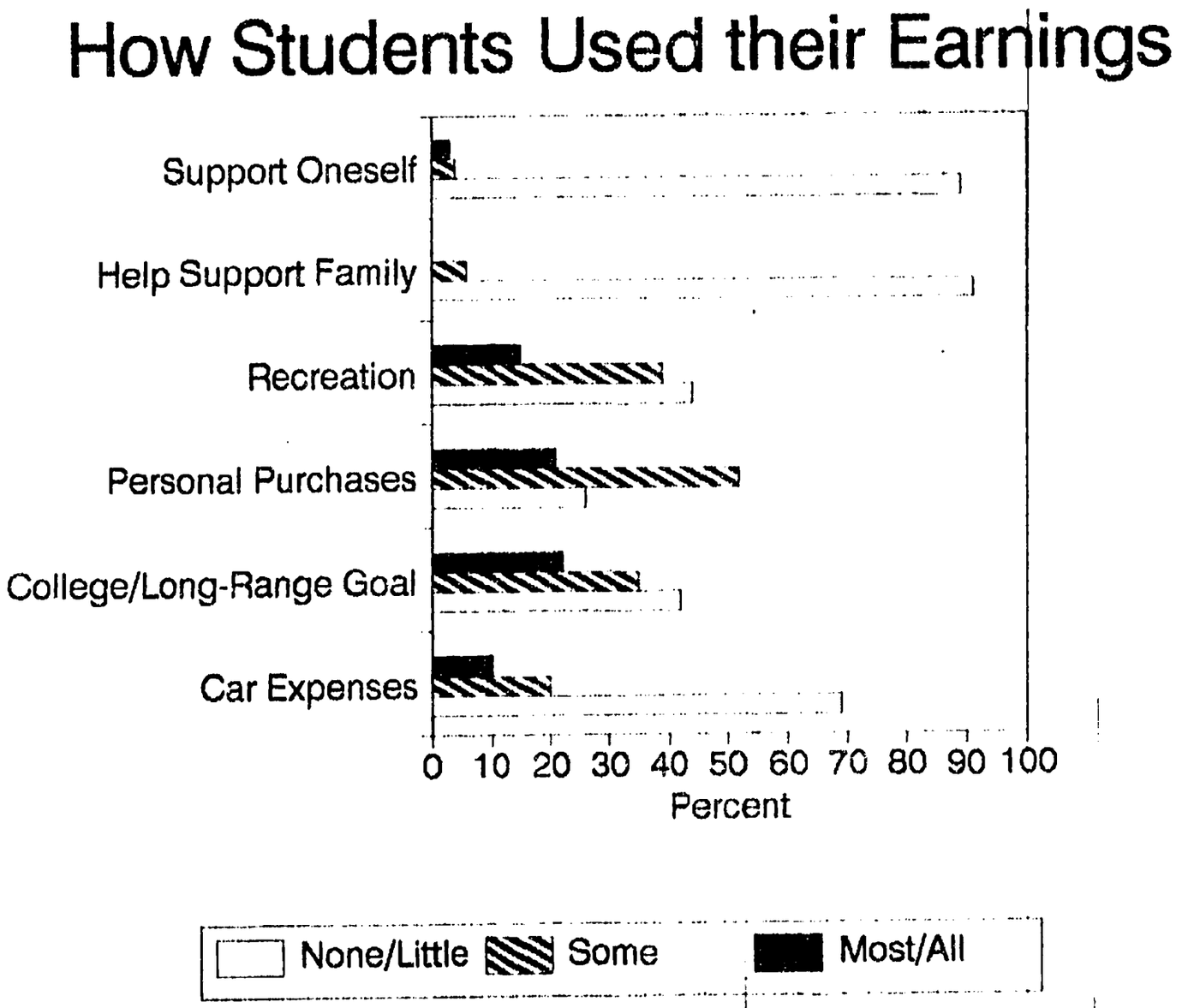

How Students Used their Earnings
Support Oneself
Help Support Family
Recreation
Personal Purchases
College/Long-Range Goal
Car Expenses
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
Percent
None/Little
Some
Most/All

FIGURE 3

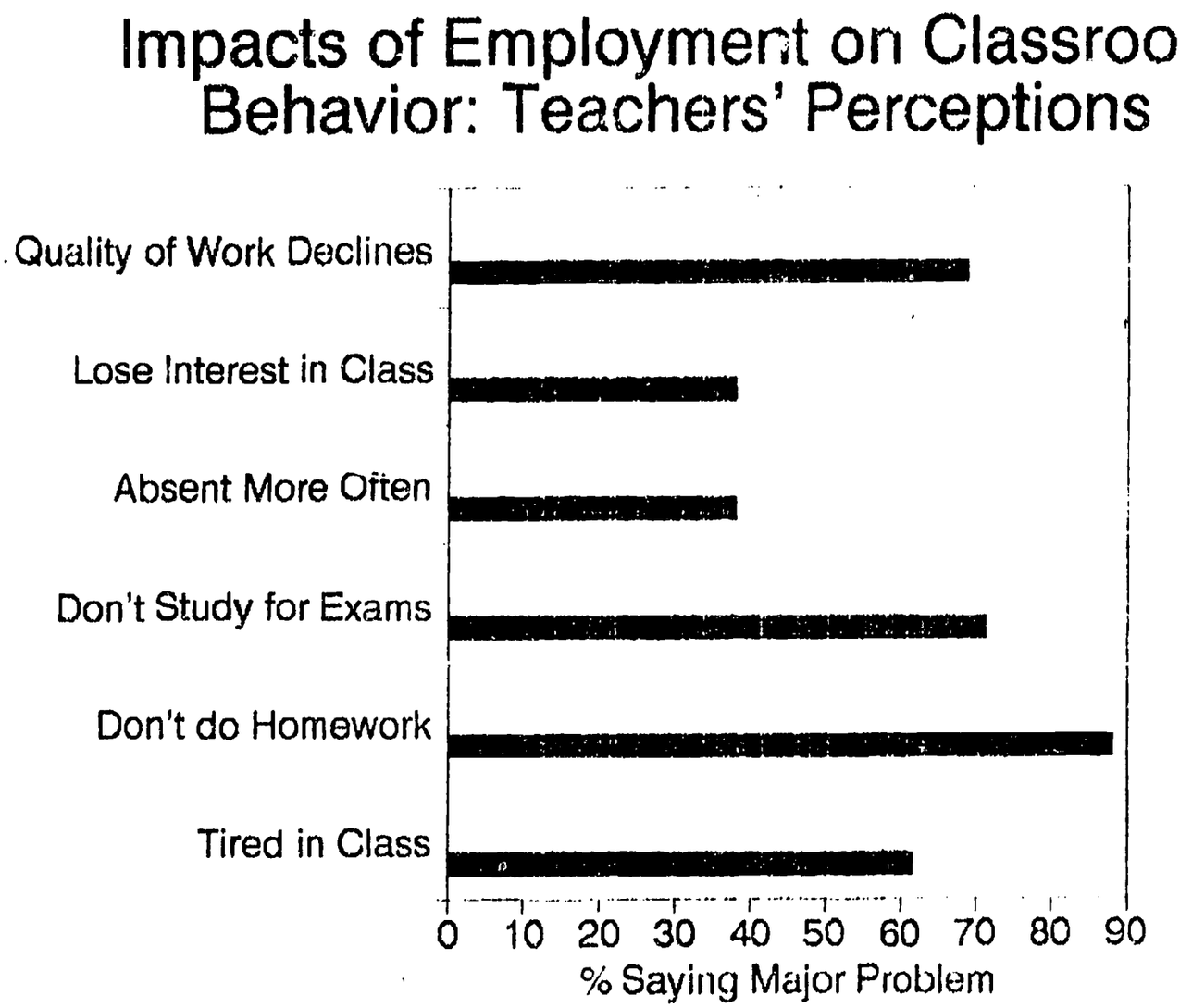
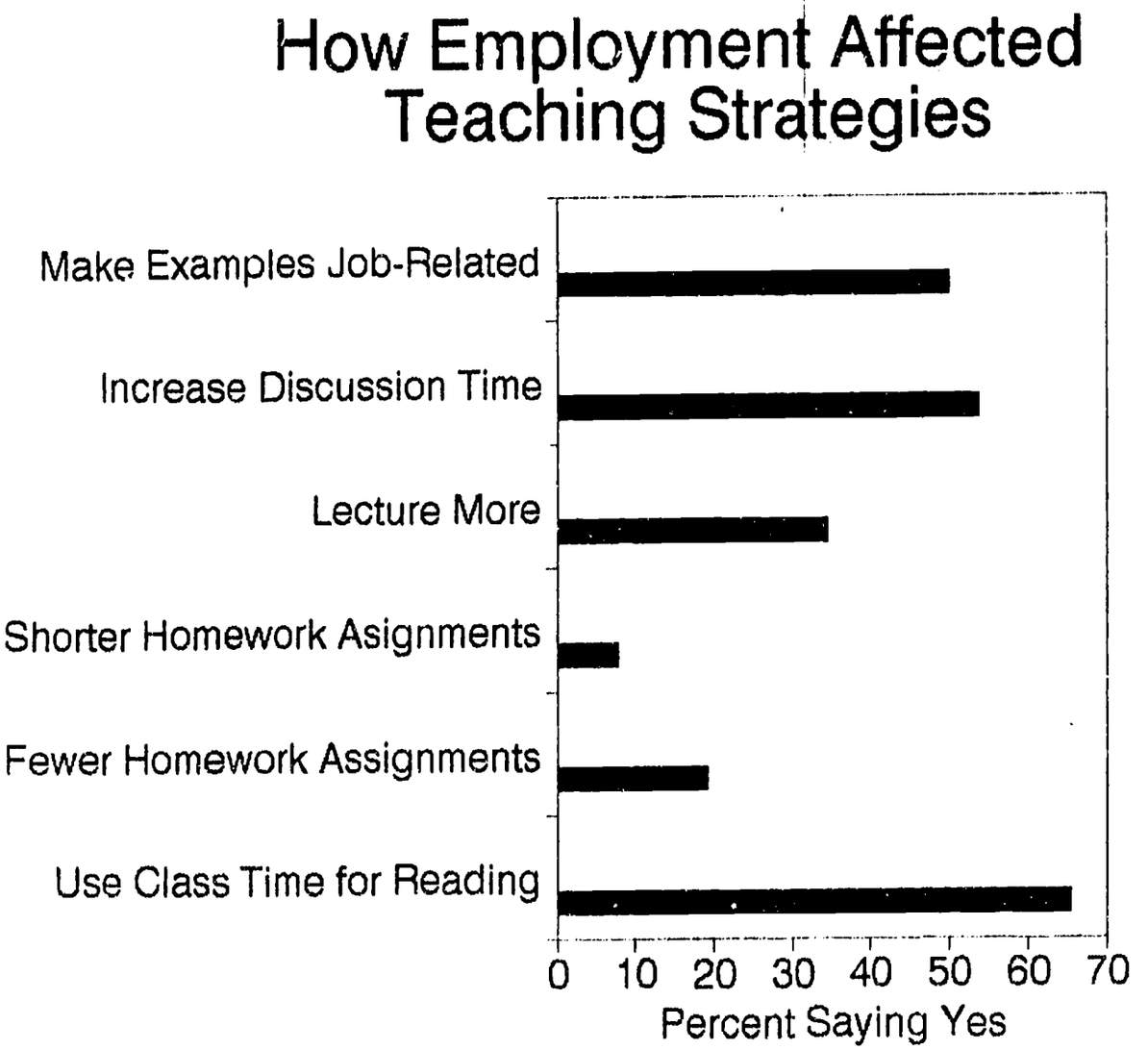

Impacts of Employment on Classroom Behavior: Teachers' Perceptions
Quality of Work Declines
Lose Interest in Class
Absent More Often
Don't Study for Exams
Don't do Homework
Tired in Class
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90
% Saying Major Problem

FIGURE 4


How Employment Affected Teaching Strategies
Make Examples Job-Related
Increase Discussion Time
Lecture More
Shorter Homework Asignments
Fewer Homework Assignments
Use Class Time for Reading
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
Percent Saying Yes