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YOUTH POWER LEARNING

A Study on Cross-Cutting Non-Cognitive Skills: Uncovering Youth's Values

This study was designed to gain a deep understanding of the skills that youth, employers, and educators think are important for education and employment.

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of employer demand and training supply of soft skills[1], it's youth who are responsible for meeting the standards of their future employers. Youth are challenged to uncover the essence of soft skills from trainings and education systems that are at times led by individuals who themselves do not exhibit such skills. Further, they must learn how to practice these skills in their own lives. The task is a large one, and so far, too little research has focused on understanding youth's perspectives of soft skills.

Grounded in the findings of Child Trends' *Key 'Soft' Skills that Foster Youth Workforce Success*[2] and Youth Power's *Key Soft Skills for Cross-Sectoral Success*[3], this study uses the Big Five Factor model (which includes the skills: conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, openness, and extraversion) to research youth perspectives on skills that are important for positive outcomes in education and employment.

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to gain a deep understanding of the skills that youth, employers, and educators think are important for education and employment. The study answers two central research questions:

Which soft skills do youth think are most important for education and employment?

What is the type and extent of the gap between the skills that youth, educators, and employers value?

The researchers planned to uncover which skills (type of gap) were valued by youth, employers and educators, as well as how different (extent of gap) those soft skill values were. Implementing the study in three locations—Honduras, the Philippines, and Rwanda—allowed researchers to make cross-cultural comparisons to document the influence of context on youth's soft skills and employer/ educator ideals.

Approximately 700 youth, 100 educators, and 100 employers participated in a soft skills assessment using the Anchored Big Five Inventory (A-BFI). Youth assessed their own skills, the skills of the "ideal employee," and the skills of the "ideal student." Educators assessed the skills of their "ideal student" and employers assessed the skills of their "ideal employee." This assessment was followed by a photography activity in which youth took photos of other youth using soft skills as well as focus group discussions with youth.

Youth, when asked about this systematic undervaluing of skills for employment and education, attribute the difference to employers / educators having higher levels of maturity or more experience.

FINDINGS

Youth's Ideals May be Derived from Their Own Personalities

High correlations between youth's self-ratings and ideal ratings suggest that **youth may base their ideals on their own personalities**. As Figure 1[4] shows, youth self-ratings closely track their ideal employee and ideal student ratings.

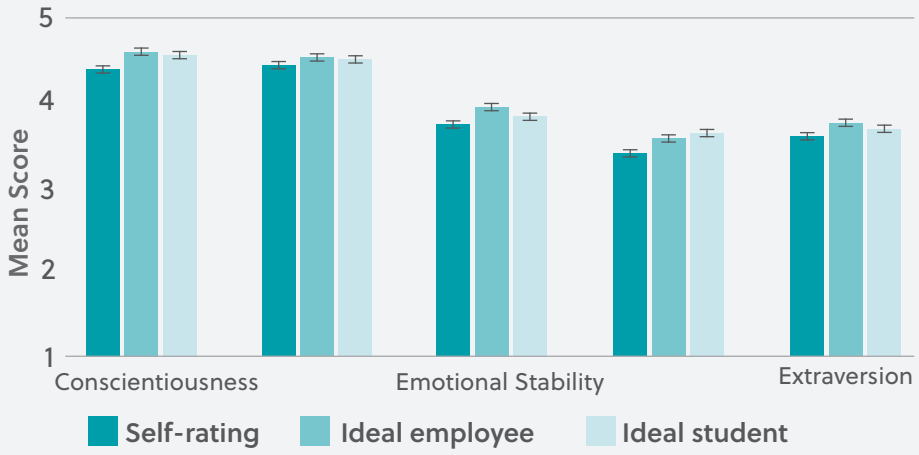

Figure 1: Youth's Self-Ratings and Ideals

Youth Underestimate the Importance of Key Skills for Employment and for Education

Given that youth's ideals seem to depend on their own traits, it is unsurprising that youth **consistently underestimate the extent to which employers and educators value most skills for employment and education**. Figure 2 depicts these gaps between youth ideals and employer/educator ideals.

Youth, when asked about this systematic undervaluing of skills for employment and education, attribute the difference to employers /educators having higher levels of maturity or more experience. Most youth, however, believed that improving their ability to express different soft skills was feasible and would improve their lives.

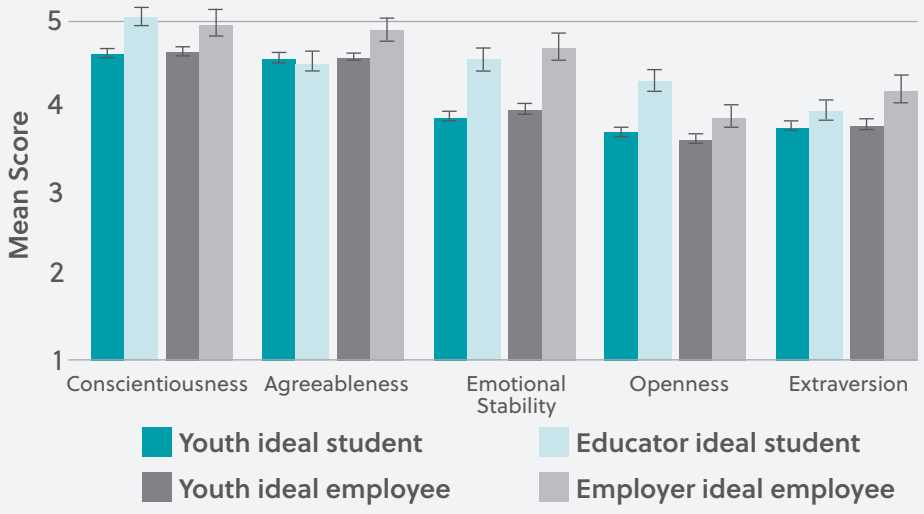

Figure 2: Soft Skill Ideals for Youth, Educators, and Employers

Skill Demand Varies by Work Field, but Not by Education Type

Employers in different sectors (production, direct services and business) demand different soft skills to varying extents. Employers working in production-oriented fields consistently rate their ideal employee as having lower levels of soft skills than do employers in business and direct services-oriented fields. In contrast, youth self and ideal employee ratings reveal a systematic (across all five soft skills) belief that more soft skills are needed for business than for direct services and production.

When youth and educator ratings are grouped by general secondary school and technical vocational school, youth ideals and self-ratings were systematically higher amongst youth who were in or wanted to study in general school compared to technical school. However, educators of both technical and general secondary school required similar levels of soft skills.

Youth Have Gendered Expectations of Who Needs Which Soft Skills

Gender differences that were apparent from the A-BFI between the youth self-ratings and ideals were very small (see Figure 3, where differences between males' and females' self-ratings are hardly observable). However, qualitative data presents another perspective.

Youth were asked to comment on the importance of soft skills as expressed in photos of only males, after which they were asked to examine photos of only females. After examining photos of males, the majority of both male and female respondents agreed that all soft skills were equally important for males and females, even though they acknowledged that one gender tended to express certain skills more than the other. However, when asked to look at photos of females, youth's reactions were quite different—they expressed that certain soft skills were more important for women.

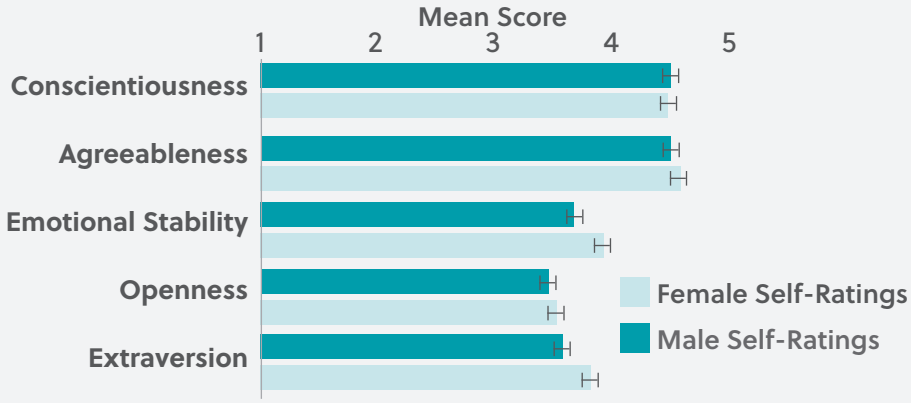

Figure 3: Youth's Self-Ratings by Gender

Country Context *May* Influence the Skills Demanded

While small sample sizes require caution in drawing conclusions across countries, employers from different countries (though the sample is not comprised of the same work sectors from country to country) value different soft skills and to different extents. Similarly, educators from different countries—though again educators in each country were not comprised of the same mix of technical vocational and general secondary school instructors—also value different skills to different extents.

Employers working in production-oriented fields consistently rate their ideal employee as having lower levels of soft skills than do employers in business and direct services-oriented fields.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several key conclusions and recommendations can be made from this study:

Youth seem to base their ideal soft skills for work and education on the skills that they, themselves, possess.

Recommendation: *Work readiness training programs should assess youth's soft skills at the beginning of training in order to provide better-targeted training to individual youth.*

Youth underestimate the extent to which these skills are required by educators and employers.

Recommendation: *Work readiness training programs should inform youth not only of which skills employers and educators demand, but how much of those skills they demand.*

Employers in different sectors demand soft skills to different extents, although youth do not seem to be fully aware of this.

Recommendation: *Work readiness training programs should educate youth on the extent to which different skills are valued by different sectors so that youth can prepare themselves for the sector they want to enter.*

While general secondary school and technical vocational school educators do not value soft skills differently, youth believe a higher level of soft skills is necessary for success in general secondary school.

Recommendation: *Programs that include success in education as a meaningful outcome should educate youth that high levels of soft skills are necessary at both technical vocational and general secondary school.*

While quantitative data did not return meaningful differences in results by youth's sex, qualitative data revealed a much more nuanced view of the soft skills necessary and typical of males and females, respectively.

Recommendation: *Evaluators and researchers should use both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, prizing qualitative data collection to present a rich, nuanced understanding of gendered perspectives of soft skills.*

This study which focuses on the soft skills that youth value suggests that a positive youth development approach—in which they are fully informed of their skills and the market and are partners in their own development—is ideal for implementing work readiness programming when youth's ideals and skills are misaligned with what is demanded in school and at work. While work readiness programming cannot be implemented well without needs assessments and market analyses that inform implementers of market qualities and education systems, studies such as this one highlight that work readiness programming also needs to consider youth's perspectives.

ENDNOTES

1 Non-cognitive or soft skills are also commonly referred to as transferable skills, life skills, work readiness skills, etc. Throughout this report, they will be referred to as soft skills.

2 Lippman, Laura H., Ryberg, Renee, Carney, Rachel, Moore, Kristin A. (2015) *Key 'Soft Skills' that Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a Consensus across Fields.* Child Trends. Publication #2015-24.

3 Gates, Sarah, Lippman, Laura, Shadowen, Noel, Burke, Holly, Diener, Obed, and Malkin, Morrisa. (October 2016). *YouthPower Action. Key Soft Skills for Cross-Sectoral Youth Outcomes.* FHI 360.

4 Note that A-BFI results use a 7-point scale. In this figure and all following figures, a truncated 5-point scale is depicted in order to make graphs easier to see and interpret.

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