STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

Simona EFTIMIE, Ph.D.,
Petroleum – Gas University of Ploiesti
simone_eftimie@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Our paper aims to analyse our students' reasons to involve in a volunteer program meant to offer support (mentored activities – additional training) for children from social care institutions. In spite of general opinion expressed by media, which often describe young people as irresponsible, unable to adapt to labour market etc., we were impressed by the number of young students that offered to be volunteers, scarifying their spare time to help children from social care institutions to make homework, to develop their learning competences. Advantages, opportunities and future directions for volunteer programs, suggested by our subjects are also discussed here.*

Keywords: *volunteer activities, students.*

1. Introduction

Old concerns about young people psycho – social behaviour have been reborn through the light of recently events from Romania and around the world (tragedy from the rock concert, migrants' experience, terrorist attack from France etc.) – humanity feeling, union, empathy for others' suffering. As J.A. Marina (2006) said, if we only learn from our unhappy experiences, from history mistakes, we could consider ourselves genius…

Previous studies (see S. Eftimie, 2014) indicate that hidden feelings under the mask of indifference or aggressiveness have grown up to the young people these days. Young people, naturally, through a certain limit, are looking for company in an adults' world in which the last one seems to establish the rules and do not trust young people, inexperienced ones (considered socially and psychologically immature).

And still, these immature young people often give us lessons through their capacity to mobilize, to make decisions, to be empathic, to help others who are in need.

Specialists (evolutionary specialists) consider *pro-social behaviour* as a result of natural selection / conservatory instinct for the species. Often we have stereotype thoughts about young people: that they are irresponsible and indifferent, that they have no reference points and their behaviours are confused etc.

Sometimes, we consider, these stereotypes are the mask for our own irresponsibility towards young generation's education. We, as adults, demonstrate paradox behaviours toward them:

- We claim them to be responsible, but we do not let them to mature (we are afraid not to hart themselves, so we "protect them" to learn from their own experiences and mistakes);

- We claim them to demonstrate experience when comes to get a job, but do not offer them the possibility to work during school (Romanian legislation do not offer the framework / claim at least to high schools / universities to make partnerships with companies where students to practice their abilities and to develop competences requested by employers);

- When is convenient to us, we ask them to be altruist and demonstrate pro-social behaviour, but most educational practices (and we are not considering here theoretical ideas) and adults' models starting from families to schools tend to develop the *selfishness* (children learn, in a single child family – as most of the modern families are – that "the room is yours", "the toy is yours" and lately that "you have rights", "you have to succeed no matter how because is a competitive world" etc.). In a modern society, the adults do not always create the context so that the children to learn to share things with others (rooms and toys with brothers and friends, the joy of building things / learning together / from each other) and transmit to their children the message that "you deserve everything". And, lately, we reproach to younger generations their lack of respect for other people needs and their lack of gratitude for the adults' efforts (meant to create all the comfort to the children).

Specialists were also preoccupied to conceive programs that develop pro-social behaviours. For example, Feldman since 1992 (apud S. Eftimie, 2014) considered that, starting from the principle that pro-social attitude of individuals could influence deviant behaviours, it would be useful that deviant/ different children to be integrated in "normal" groups. The beliefs and behaviours of individuals determine behaviour change.

Others studies indicated that social support could reduce the level of exhaustion in the moment of high stress and contribute to health maintaining (see Taylor, 1999, apud P. Golu, F. Golu, 2012, pp. 111-113).

We think that, for the actual and mostly for the future society's health, we have to reconsider the *attitude toward work*. If in primitive societies, working is part of every society member's activity, without being separate from spare time and family life (P. Golu, F. Golu, 2012, p. 68), nowadays, modern family is un-empowering the child from domestic activities, the parents are substituting to these responsibilities of their children.

Initially, work activity was a part of family life; their members were working for survival, and lately for money. Today, depending on the scale of its own values, every person wants to win more or less money.

But, sometimes, peoples become intrinsic motivated and come to work because they like what they are doing, and come to work voluntarily, unpaid. And seems that the satisfaction they can get from unpaid work is higher than the one motivated by profit.

"Volunteering is generally considered an altruistic activity and is intended to promote welfare and to improve human quality of life. In return, this activity can produce a feeling of self-worth and respect to the individual involved, also contributing to skill development, socialization and fun. According to Romanian law, volunteering is an activity of public interest, undertaken out of free will by a person, aiming at helping others, without being motivated by financial or material gains (Legea voluntariatului, nr. 195/2001)." (E. C. Mihai, 2013).

In this context, we were interested to analyse the motivation for our students to involve in a volunteer program meant to provide mentoring services for children from social care system, children with learning difficulties or delays in their acquisitions. Considering *involvement to volunteer activities* a form of pro-social behaviour, our paper intend to analyse students' perception about the opportunities offered by this activity and the motivation for their implication.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research objectives and hypothesis

As we have mentioned above, our research objectives were:

a. to identify the reasons of our volunteer students to involve in this kind of activity;

b. to analyse the main obstacles overwhelmed during activities and advantages of their activity;

c. to identify the main areas that students considers as a priority to involve volunteer in.

2.2. Methods and instruments

In order to follow the objectives that we have proposed, we have involved in our study young students (with different specializations, aged between 20 and 38 years old), 42 non-involved and 24 students already involved in a volunteer program (meant to offer support / mentor for children from social care institutions). The methods we have used were focus group interview and questionnaire.

2.3. Results. Analyses and discussions

Motivation for volunteer activities

Previous studies (Clary et. al, 1998), considering the functions served by volunteerism mentioned:

- *Values* – "volunteerism provides for individuals to express values related to altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others";
- *Understanding* – "the opportunity for volunteerism to permit new learning experiences and the chance to exercise knowledge, skills, and abilities that might otherwise go unpracticed";
- *Social* – "interacting with others volunteering reflects motivations concerning relationships with others";
- *Career* – "career-related benefits that may be obtained from participation in volunteer work";
- *Protective* – "Related to ego defensive (Katz, 1960) or externalization (Smith et al., 1956) concerns, such motivations center on protecting the ego from negative features of the self and, in the case of volunteerism, may serve to reduce guilt over being more fortunate than others and to address one's own personal problems.";
- *Enhancement* – "when some respondents report that they volunteer for reasons of personal development (Anderson & Moore, 1978) or to obtain satisfactions related to personal growth and self-esteem (Jenner, 1982)".

Considering the answers of our investigated *subjects which are not involved in a volunteer program*, we have identified the follow reasons:

• First place in the reasons mentioned by our subjects was *career*: "to gain experience in the field", "an advantage for employment", "an opportunity to put in practice theoretic information";

• Second place in students' motivation was *values*: "to help somebody", "to help the needy ones"; "I like to help and my happiness means the happiness of others, of everybody. I like to be useful" (38 years old, female, economic sciences student);

• Third place was occupied by *social* motivation: "to learn how to work in a community, in a team", "to better communicate with others face to face".

Other reasons mentioned by our subjects were about *enhancement* ("for personal development", "to do something useful and pleasant", "this could train me to became a better man"), or *understanding* ("for new experiences that will help me in my career", "to develop skills in the field").

We also noticed that 10 of 42 subjects non-involved in a volunteer program mentioned that they wouldn't participate to such a program because of their limited time resources or, surprisingly, because "a real economist would say *No* to an unpaid activity" (male, 30 years old, economic sciences student).

Students that are already involved in a volunteer program for children from social care institutions (our students offer support to the children on Maths, Romanian and English for better performances in their learning activities in school) maintained the same hierarchy, but with some different nuances in their motivation:

• First place *career*: "this activity will help me in my career because I'll become a teacher and I enjoy working with children";

• Second place *values*: "being volunteer, I have the possibility to help others";

• Third place *social*: "I have the opportunity to develop my communication skills, to socialize and practice my teaching".

We can notice that a main constant motivation for involvement in volunteer activities for students is *career*. Why? Mainly, because, as our subjects indicated, school offer them mostly theoretical information and less develop their practical skills and because the employers request to the future employees *experience*.

Their involvement in a volunteer program offer the opportunity to develop practical skills, requested by profession, and their social skills also necessarily for a successful social and professional integration.

It's interesting that most of our subjects have demonstrated the maturity to notify that not only academic skills (theoretical and practical) are important to be a good professional, but also social skill (communication, cooperation as a team member for optimal relationships). Some of them even indicated that psycho – pedagogic module helps them to develop these transversal competences.

Obstacles / benefits for volunteer activities

Most of students involved in the volunteer program indicated that the only obstacles that they have expected were in their mind: "great expectations of centre's responsible", "difficulties of interacting with children because my lack of experience".

"Because I never been in a social care for children, I was expecting to find sad children, an overwhelming atmosphere, harsh supervisors. I didn't imagine finding so many children with good results on school, to receive help from centre personnel. I thought that the centre look like a hospital with many rooms, long halls. But I found out a place with pictures on the walls, with hand work of the children exposed everywhere. I thought that young people will be unopened and uncooperative, and will be had to communicate and connect with them, but I find normal children eager to learn and cooperate." (female, master student in Education Sciences, 23 years old)

It's interesting how such an experience could help society to accept institutionalised children and help to their social integration; as our volunteer mentioned sometimes we have stereotype thoughts and prejudices toward institutionalised persons and volunteer activity in these centres could remove or limit them form social perception.

But, all of investigated subjects have noticed a lot of *advantages*, not only for them as volunteers but also for the beneficiaries:
- Career: experience in working with children; volunteer diploma;
- Enhancement: "I do something that I like"; personal development;
- Values: "Working with children in social care institution make me feel that I am doing something to worth, and also make me realize that children and personal that is working in these centres are normal people, opened minded, eager to interact with someone from outside. I love doing that. Also, it's important for children to feel important, to feel no different from us, to trust again people, to develop human relationships." (female, licence student in Philology, 20 years old)

It's easy to notice our investigated subjects' maturity in thinking and their openness to identify the opportunity of volunteer activities.

Suggestions for future projects for volunteers

The suggestions for future / possible volunteer programs that our subjects would involve in were:

• Educative programs: programs for children, preventing school dropout, education for health, education for environment / animals' protection, cultural programs, reading skills development

• Social programs: programs for caring / entertaining old people / needy families, social and professional integration of children with disabilities or children from social care institutions.

•

3. Conclusions

Starting from our findings, we have noticed our subjects' disappointment considering their expectations about what school / university could offer them and what they really learned during studies: "I was expected to learn how to manage in real life situations and school only teach me to memorize and reproduce" (female licence, Managerial Assistance student, 20 years old).

In this context, their involvement in volunteer activities could be a chance for reinventing school, to give a new sense for social life of our students, to offer them the possibility to practice skills that could help them to integrate socially and professionally.

From the results of our research we have developed a new "face" of our young people: they demonstrate opened minds, capacity to see some others' needs and help them, a social maturity that did not fit with society's image about them. But, these good traits could be valued only if society, school, community offer them the chance to involve.

Other interesting observation is that most of the students involved in our volunteer program came from rural areas, and this is contrary to the observation of Corduban et. al. (2014) that "although the number of volunteers enrolled in various programs has substantially increased in Romania in the latter years, only a small fraction of these come from the rural areas."

This could be explained by the fact that our students are not representative for rural area (they are a particular category of population which have had succeeded to higher education). Education is the solution for a larger category of population to develop their interest for volunteer

activities and, secondly, as a consequence, to change the attitude toward work.

So, to change this society and its future, not children have to change their way to be, but us, grown up people have to change, to change our attitude, to change the way we are looking and criticizing the young generation, to change the way we are trying to learn them to deal with their future.

We intend to continue to promote volunteerism for the students from our university and to make more profound studies considering the personality changes (especially their focus on pro-social behaviours).

In conclusion, it is impressing to see the openness of our students to involve in social programs as volunteers (they are aware of the benefices of involving in volunteer programs), attitude that makes us optimistic about their resources (with one condition: to let them and / or lead them to use these resources in the right direction).

References

Clary, E. et al. (1998). Understanding and Assessing the Motivations of Volunteers: A Functional Approach. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74(6), 1516-1530.

Corduban, C.G., Dumitraşcu, A.I., Nica, R.M., Gafiuc, P.V. (2014). Education through Volunteering: Involvment in a Community Project. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 142, 285 – 290.

Eftimie, S. (2014). Agresivitatea la vârsta adolescenţei, Editura Polirom, Iaşi.

Golu, P., Golu, F. (2012). Dimensiuni aplicative ale psihologiei sociale, Editura Universitară, Bucureşti.

Marina, J.A. (2006). Inteligenţa eşuată, Editura Polirom, Iaşi.

Mihai, E. C. (2013). The Motivation of Romanian Volunteers: values and implications. Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences 127, 616 – 620.