

STUDENTS' VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

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Abstract: *This article is a result of an 11-year study on volunteering performed by students of Diocesan Gymnasium Vipava who worked with children with special needs at the centre Cirius Vipava. The research included 574 volunteers who carried out 11320 hours of voluntary social work. Volunteer activities included 681 children with special needs, having intellectual disabilities. The results showed that there was no statistically significant change in the number of volunteers throughout the research period. Likewise, the work load coefficient per volunteer did not show a statistically significant change. On the other hand, the phenomenon of volunteering among students of different grade levels showed a statistically significant change. Students volunteer more numerously at the beginning of their studies. Activities carried out by volunteers provide children with intellectual disabilities an additional opportunity for socializing. They provide them with a variety of social contacts, enriching their daily school life.*

Keywords: *volunteering, intellectual disability, students*

INTRODUCTION

Voluntary social work or volunteering has long been part of the Slovene society. It represents the most appropriate way of developing social solidarity in a contemporary society. Solidarity is fundamental for social coexistence (Ramovš, 2007); ability to empathize with others is a genuine human ability to offer a helping hand to those in need. Each person is important as individual, and is, however an irreplaceable part of every voluntary activity, with reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving.

Youth volunteering, part of the eight priority areas for European cooperation in the youth field (Gril, 2011), has received extraordinary attention in the last decade. Volunteering in Slovenia is mainly organised by associations and public institutes (Gril, 2007). Voluntary work is an unremunerated work done by individuals who decide to help other people (Mezinec, 2012). Volunteering, however, does not only help the recipient of the services, it also benefits the society and the volunteers themselves (Gril, 2007). It is characterized by unpaid

work, organised in cooperation between a volunteer and an organization, according to prearranged conditions (Breznik, 2009).

Slovene volunteer experiences show that the majority of psychosocial projects aimed at children involve young people, mostly university or secondary school students (Mikuš Kos & Pogačnik, 2002). Volunteering in Slovenia has become widespread and is also organised in different educational institutes for people with special needs, such as the Centre for Education, Rehabilitation and Training Vipava (Cirius Vipava). The institute provides education programmes for children with various disabilities (apart from intellectual disabilities), from every part of Slovenia.

The institute carries out a special education programme and three primary school education programmes for people with intellectual disabilities: adapted programme with educational standards at a lower level for children with mild intellectual disability and special education programme for children with moderate, severe and profound intellectual disability. Apart from education programmes,

the institute carries out the comprehensive rehabilitation programme for people with a combination of cognitive, motor, sensory, and social disabilities. It represents a complex rehabilitative care for people with multiple disabilities. It is part of a basic medical care service, aimed at all children and adults staying at the institute.

Cirius Vipava started volunteer activities in the school year 1994/1995, inviting first-year students of Diocesan Gymnasium Vipava. Second-year, third-year and fourth-year students gradually began to participate as well. Volunteering has progressively expanded; students of other secondary schools have started taking part in the voluntary work (e.g. secondary school of nursing and pre-school education), as well as our retired colleagues.

In our research we included only the data regarding volunteers of Diocesan Gymnasium Vipava in the last 11 years; since 1999, when the institute started keeping regular, systematic records of volunteering.

Pupils with special needs at Cirius Vipava

Pupils at Cirius Vipava are, according to Placement of Children with Special Needs Act (Official Gazette of RS, 54/2000), persons with special needs, having intellectual disabilities and other accompanying deficits, usually sensorimotor deficits (movement disorders, vision impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment etc.). All pupils have intellectual disabilities; 2/3 of those who have sensorimotor deficits as well have been diagnosed with cerebral palsy and display numerous movement disorders associated with it. Apart from motor deficits, people with cerebral palsy can exhibit other dysfunctions such as: epilepsy, hyperactivity, mental impairment, learning disabilities, poor concentration, numerous sensory deficits: vision and hearing impairment, speech and language disorders and wider communication and behavioural disorders etc. (Miller & Bachard, 2006). Manifestations of such conditions are as varied as it is the functioning of the damaged brain.

Pupils with special needs, especially those with multiple deficits, are often deprived of many social interactions and peer relations. Any form of

volunteering and socializing with young volunteers, with their peers, is thus a positive form of social integration for them (Kobal Grum & Kobal, 2009). As stated by Mikuš Kos (1999), youth participation in voluntary work enables social learning. Pupils and young people receiving help, experience solidarity.

Research objectives and hypotheses

Our research established the dynamics of volunteering at the institute over a longer time period. We used the data collected over the last 11 years. We focused on: the number of hours of voluntary work for each school year; the work load coefficient per volunteer and the number of volunteers (according to secondary school grade level).

The following hypotheses were made:

- H1: the number of volunteers in the period of school years 1999/2000 - 2010/2011 shows a statistically significant change.
- H2: the differences in the work load coefficient per volunteer in a single school year show a statistically significant change.
- H3: the number of volunteers in different secondary school grade levels and in different school years shows a statistically significant change.

METHODS

Organising volunteering

At the beginning of each school year, Centre's Advisory Service determines the number of students who would like to volunteer. A mentor - psychologist gives a presentation of Cirius and its volunteer activities to the first-year students of Diocesan Gymnasium Vipava. Volunteer activities are coordinated by centre's and school's advisory services; both mentors collaborate and exchange information. Centre's mentor follows the activities also through phone calls, e-mails, record entries, conversations with teachers, children and volunteers themselves. Students – volunteers can find some useful information in the booklet "Small tips

for facilitating our life as volunteers” (1998) and “The booklet on volunteering” (2007). When volunteers come to the institute, first they report their presence to a class, education group or professional personnel (teacher, educator, social worker, psychologist etc.). They then insert the date and the duration of volunteers' visit into their Volunteer booklet which serves to the institute for keeping the register of students - volunteers and children they assist at the institute. Volunteers come to Cirius once a week, in the afternoon, after class. For the students of Diocesan Gymnasium Vipava, voluntary work at Cirius Vipava is recognized as part of the school compulsory electives. The record of hours of voluntary work can be kept in the book of non-formal learning (Nefiks) with the purpose of collecting the acquired knowledge and social competences. The form of voluntary work is decided according to child's physical and mental fitness and is characterized by socializing, conversing with pupils with special needs. Volunteers can visit pupils in an education group or in a class; they stay within the institute's premises (playground, multipurpose space, living room, bedroom, gym, swimming pool, computer room, music room). Volunteers can read books, stories, newspaper etc. to pupils; the approach depends on pupils' mental fitness or their intellectual perception and their interests. In upper grades of the adapted programme with a lower education standard (from 6th to 9th grade), volunteers can participate in consolidating individual subject matters if a teacher, a volunteer and a pupil are all agreed. Volunteering is part of institute's individualised programme, designed for each pupil, as well as part of institute's Annual work plan.

Volunteering at Cirius Vipava apply two approaches - individual and group. Individual approach involves volunteers and pupils in sports activities, walks, reading, playing social games, singing, school work help etc. Groups involves small groups of pupils and volunteers, according to pupils' personal interests and their strong points. Cirius organises creative-art workshops where pupils, assisted by volunteers, learn about how to create with clay, draw, paint etc. Dance workshop is another form of group work, where the participants learn about different dance and

rhythmic improvisations, free movements, movements inspired by rhythm, first dance steps and choreographies. The third form of group activities is represented by creative communication workshops, dealing with various current social issues.

Sample

The research included all the volunteers attending Diocesan Gymnasium Vipava, since the beginning of record keeping on volunteering (school years 1999/2000 - 2010/2011). It involved 574 volunteers (83% girls and 17% boys, aged between 15 and 18) who carried out 11320 hours of voluntary work. There were 275 first-year students, 150 second-year, 101 third-year and 48 fourth-year students. The decision to take part in volunteering was taken by 48% of first-year students of Diocesan Gymnasium Vipava, 26% of second-year, 18% of third-year and 8% of fourth-year students. For each school year we established the work load coefficient for each volunteer, according to the number of hours of voluntary work performed. The work load coefficient, calculated for the school year 1999/2000, amounted to 6,86 hours for each volunteer; in 2000/2001 it amounted to 20,88 hours; in 2001/2002 to 14,37 hours; in 2002/2003 to 23,09 hours; in 2003/2004 to 20,40 hours; in 2004/2005 to 18,65 hours; in 2005/2006 to 27,49 hours; in 2006/2007 to 20,84 hours; in 2007/2008 to 24,08 hours; in 2008/2009 to 27,62 hours; in 2009/2010 to 17,17 hours and in 2010/2011 it amounted to 19,29 hours for each volunteer. The work load coefficient for the entire period amounted to 19,72 hours for each volunteer.

The testing procedure

For research purposes the following variables were examined: the number of hours of voluntary work for each school year, the total number of volunteers, the number of volunteers according to the secondary school grade level, the work load for each volunteer.

Data processing

The research on volunteering over a longer time period was conducted by means of statistical data processing. For research purposes, in order to

establish significant differences, chi - square test was used for measuring the work load coefficient and for determining the structure of the whole sample, according to secondary school grade level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Theoretical frequencies were calculated on the basis of the theory of probability. The results of chi-square test also showed that the change in the number of volunteers in the period between 1999 and 2011 is not statistically significant. The variations are thus the result of incidental oscillations.

In a 11-year time span roughly the same number of volunteers participated each year.

Theoretical coefficients were calculated on the basis of the theory of probability. The results of chi-square test showed that the change in work load per volunteer in the observed time period is not statistically significant. Average work load has not changed significantly over the years due to the fact that volunteering is organised in one hour of voluntary work per week. Only “compulsory” or “scheduled” hours get registered, even though

Table 1. Voluntary work results - number of hours

SCHOOL YEAR	NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS	ANNUAL NUMBER OF HOURS	NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS (according to secondary school grade level)			
			1.	2.	3.	4.
2010/11	35	675	11	9	9	6
2009/10	48	776	22	12	11	3
2008/09	45	1243	22	13	7	3
2007/08	39	939	19	13	3	4
2006/07	51	1063	26	5	13	7
2005/06	41	1127	15	14	8	4
2004/05	49	914	21	10	13	5
2003/04	45	918	18	14	5	8
2002/03	55	1270	26	12	11	6
2001/02	59	848	38	12	9	0
2000/01	58	1211	28	20	8	2
1999/00	49	336	29	16	4	0
TOTAL	574	11320	275	150	101	48

Table 2. The number of volunteers in school years 1999/2000 - 2010/2011.

SCHOOL YEAR	f	f't	χ^2
2010/2011	35	47,83	3,44
2009/2010	48	47,83	0,00
2008/2009	45	47,83	0,16
2007/2008	39	47,83	1,63
2006/2007	51	47,83	0,09
2005/2006	41	47,83	0,97
2004/2005	49	47,83	0,02
2003/2004	45	47,83	0,16
2002/2003	55	47,83	1,07
2001/2002	59	47,83	2,60
2000/2001	58	47,83	2,16
1999/2000	49	47,83	0,02
Σ	574	573,99	12,49

Legend:

f – empirical frequency

f'_t – theoretical frequency

χ^2 - chi-square = $\Sigma (f - f'_t)^2 / f'_t$

$\chi^2 = 12,49$

$p = 0,05$

df = 11

$\chi^2_{0,05} (11) = 19,68$

some volunteers spend time assisting pupils outside scheduled time as well.

Theoretical frequencies were calculated on the basis of the theory of probability. The results of chi-square test showed that the difference in volunteering within secondary school grade levels is statistically significant. We established a decreasing tendency in terms of numbers of volunteers in the upper grades of the secondary school. The reason for a lower participation of upper grade students can be identified in their specific interests, related to their further education (choice of contents related to their further education) and with the fact that they are not yet familiar with the activity of volunteering.

No statistically significant changes in the number of volunteers were observed between school years 1999/2000 and 2010/2011. In the last 11 years roughly the same number of students have decided to participate as volunteers. We can assume that organisation and presentation of voluntary work on the part of the institute does not influence the level of participation. The work load coefficient for a single volunteer is statistically not significant due to the fact that volunteer activities are programmed for one hour per week. Only visits, registered in Volunteer booklet were considered, even though many volunteers visit the pupils more often. The first-year students are more likely to volunteer; there is a gradual drop in participation

Table 3. Work load coefficient per volunteer

SCHOOL YEAR	f	THE NUMBER OF HOURS	K	Kt	χ^2
2010/2011	35	675	19,29	19,72	0,01
2009/2010	48	776	16,17	19,72	0,64
2008/2009	45	1243	27,62	19,72	3,16
2007/2008	39	939	24,08	19,72	0,96
2006/2007	51	1063	20,84	19,72	0,06
2005/2006	41	1127	27,49	19,72	3,06
2004/2005	49	914	18,65	19,72	0,06
2003/2004	45	918	20,40	19,72	0,02
2002/2003	55	1270	23,09	19,72	0,58
2001/2002	59	848	14,37	19,72	1,45
2000/2001	58	1211	20,88	19,72	0,07
1999/2000	49	336	6,86	19,72	8,39
Σ	574	11320			18,46

Legend:

K – empirical coefficient

$$\chi^2 = 18,46$$

K_t – theoretical coefficient

$$p = 0,05$$

K_t = the number of hours (total)/the degree of freedom (total)

$$df = 11$$

$$\chi^2_{0,05}(11) = 19,68$$

Table 4. Volunteering within secondary school grade levels

SECONDARY SCHOOL GRADE LEVELS	f	f't	χ^2
1.	275	143,5	120,50
2.	150	143,5	0,29
3.	101	143,5	12,59
4.	48	143,5	63,56
Σ	574	143,5	196,93

Legenda:

f – empirical frequency

$$\chi^2 = 196,93$$

f'_t – theoretical frequency

$$p = 0,05$$

χ^2 – chi-square = $\Sigma (f - f'_t)^2 / f'_t$

$$df = 3$$

$$\chi^2_{0,05}(3) = 7,82$$

in the upper grades. This can be associated with the professional orientation of upper-grade students, facing the choice for further study. In addition, the conclusions of Žorga (2002) suggest that the professional development demands a flexible approach, allowing students to learn through their own efforts, especially when they have a possibility to collaborate with colleagues in a joint problem-solving and in reflecting on their own experience.

The institute plans to continue implementing the programme of volunteering, trying to involve students of other secondary schools as well. We intend to undertake a further research, focused on establishing the main motives for which volunteers choose to work with people with intellectual disabilities; and on establishing the satisfaction level of children assisted by volunteers.

CONCLUSIONS

After 11 years of studying voluntary work we can conclude that volunteering has become an integral part of the institute's overall educational process. Volunteering has proven to be an efficient, child-friendly form of a complementary activity, helping to diversify children's daily school life.

The results showed that the change in the number of volunteers in the period between 1999 and 2011 and the change in the work load per volunteer are not statistically significant. The participation of the first-year students is statistically significant; there is a gradual drop in participation in the upper

grades. Volunteers are more numerous among students starting their secondary school education, faced with the voluntary work for the first time. The drop in participation in the upper grades can be a result of their increasing study commitments or due to the students' professional interest, associated with the choice of further study.

We believe that there is a particular need to continue with the positive inclusion of volunteering in institute's educational programming. Children with special needs, assisted by volunteers, learn new things, get new friends and acquaintances; their daily school life becomes more interesting. Socializing with other people facilitates their social integration. We believe that positive results are obtained in terms of mutual understanding and communication. Socializing with volunteers and through their assistance (visiting theatres, cinema, offices...), children with special needs integrate much easier into the environment where they go to school and where they live during the school year.

During all these years real friendship ties among the participants have been created. Apart from the positive effects of integrating children with special needs into a suitable social environment, volunteering has become a bridge of collaboration between Cirius and Diocesan Gymnasium Vipava. There is a need for mutual collaboration and the possibility to build mutual relations through communication and promotion of diversity awareness.

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