

VOLUNTEER ACTIVITY AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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The subject matter of the article is the phenomenon of volunteering among students from grade 4 through grade 7. Referring to the subject literature, such concepts as voluntary service and a volunteer were recalled. The forms of voluntary service performed in schools were mentioned. The main subject of the article is to present the results of the own research disclosing the role of volunteering in young people's life, interpret knowledge and aid skills and reveal the essence of changes towards people in need.

Key words: voluntary service, volunteer activity, primary school.

Introduction. Volunteering is defined as a non-compulsory, conscious activity undertaken for no financial gain, dedicated to other members of a society or human kind in general. Volunteering extends beyond relationships with family, colleagues and friends. A volunteer is a person who consciously works for other people, non-governmental organisations and social institutions for no financial profit and out of his/her own free will [7]. The noun "volunteer" has several synonyms. They include such terms as: "benefactor", "philanthropist", "activist" [1, p. 20]. Some synonyms, however, point to another meaning of the word, i.e. a person who takes part in experiments/tests. This group includes such terms as: "patient", "case" [1, p. 20].

It should be mentioned that a person who helps his/her own grandmother cannot be called a volunteer. However, someone who helps an elderly person in a hospice or welfare facility out of his/her free will is undoubtedly a volunteer. Many school children are willing to do something good or worthy for others, express their eagerness to communicate with others and establish new relationships. Not only adolescents, but also children (students of primary schools) tend to be interested in taking part in charity or humanitarian initiatives. Organised within a school, such projects provide the best way of developing children's interest in volunteering. Adolescents seem to be motivated by quite different factors than younger children.

These include: compensating for the good received from others, learning new skills, gaining life experiences or following religious principles. Younger children learn attitudes of respect, empathy and sensitivity. Observing initiatives carried out by older colleagues, as well as taking part in organising and conducting events at school and within their neighbourhood together with learning about results of such initiatives, children are able to make conscious decisions on participation in volunteering, which without doubt brings about respect and self-satisfaction. Volunteering in Poland has developed since 1990, although it is not as

popular as in Western countries. Statistics show that in 2016 in Poland 18 % of adults engaged themselves in volunteering [8].

The highest percentage was achieved in 2005, when 23,2 % of adults were reported as participating in volunteer activity. The following years brought a decrease in the number of volunteers. Such a change might have been caused by migration or weaker awareness of what volunteering really is. B. Kromolicka claims that volunteering is the phenomenon of our times. According to her „Devoting a piece of oneself – time, effort, knowledge and skills to someone else, provides a chance to improve one’s life and ensures the development of society made up by active individuals” [3, p. 230].

In order to teach about and raise awareness of what volunteering is, schools have introduced volunteering knowledge and skills education since September 2017. The initiative has been carried out not only by adults, but by adolescents and children who more and more often take part in events conducted by adults in their schools, shops and streets. Volunteering activity has been observed in rural areas as well. It is conducted, for instance, by such organisations as Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich [Farmers’ Wives’ Associations]. New provisions of law concerning volunteering in schools provide for such issues as: shaping pro-social attitudes, creating conditions fostering participation in volunteering activities by students, establishing volunteering committees in schools and including regulations concerning the manner of organisation and conduct of volunteering activities in by-laws. Such regulations would define the system of vocational counselling conducted within schools, issues concerning cooperation with various associations and organisations within initiatives focused on innovation, as well as stipulating tasks for teachers and regulating the organisation of volunteering activity within a school.

One of the main objectives fulfilled by school is to develop and shape competences useful in a young individual’s adult life. Volunteering facilitates the attitude of openness and sensitivity towards other people’s needs. Moreover, it contributes to creating a system of values, helps to pursue interests and provides a chance to spent spare time in a meaningful way. Yet another strong point of volunteering is fostering cooperation between a school and organisations whose activity is focused on helping people in need. Finally, volunteering develops schools’ potential and strengthens relationships between teachers, students and parents. Volunteering supports fundamental tasks of schools, i.e.: didactic, educational and guiding. M. Misztela recalls the meaning of these functions in the context of volunteering. As far as the didactic function is concerned, the author claims that „the school volunteering activity provides its participants with a chance to gain new knowledge and skills.” [4, p. 6]. Referring to the educational function, Misztela states that “volunteering improves adolescents’ social attitudes” [4, p. 6]. The guiding function is fulfilled through “meeting poorer students’, whose parents require help and support, needs” [4, p. 6].

Taking the above into consideration, participation in volunteering brings intra and interpersonal benefits. An individual is offered the chance to motivate oneself and improve one’s potential and, on the other hand, to experience contact with people who need help and protection. School volunteer group should depend on teachers responsible for its operation. While looking over volunteers’ engagement, teachers have an opportunity to discover their

students' interests, capabilities and behaviours – they can better understand their charges' attitudes and qualities. The following part of the paper involves the analysis of various forms of volunteer activity conducted within schools. It also features results of research carried out among students of grades from 4 to 7 of a primary school. The research included not only children but teachers responsible for volunteer groups as well.

Volunteering at schools Currently, schools conduct volunteering activities. It takes all kinds of forms. It concerns sports, social issues, religious initiatives, working with adolescents, the elderly, the disabled or the environment and animals. Forms of volunteering available at schools encourage mutual help, developing interests, discovering the world, gaining experience in various dimensions of life, as well as solving local problems. Schools enable their students to participate in two kinds of volunteering: individual and group. Becoming active volunteers, young people learn how to be tolerant, responsible, how to gain trust of the society and cooperate. The skills they are able to improve include expressing feelings, controlling emotions, expanding knowledge, improving social and interpersonal competences. Acting as volunteers makes young people more caring, self-sufficient, resistant, brave, sensitive and emphatic towards those in need. Other positive qualities fostered by acting as a volunteer concern the ability to listen to others, punctuality, team work, consequence and solidarity. Engaging in such initiatives prepares young people to entering adult life responsibly. As R. Kowal claims: "school volunteering provides the young generation with a chance to expand their knowledge, improve skills and competences" [2, p. 4]. Moreover, according to A Polek "volunteering is a school of life which cannot be found in any other place. It is a school of maturity and being adult" [6, p. 23].

The author states that nothing reaches young children as much as meeting suffering people in reality. In primary schools, young children can be shown what helping other really means. Thus, as they become older, they are more willing to help people in need, initiate actions needed in the local area or support charity and cultural events. Underaged persons may engage themselves in volunteering, provided that they have their legal guardians' consent. In her work, M. Miszteli informs that "the legal system provides for working with an underaged volunteer" [4, p. 8]. Students who obtained information on volunteering "may conclude agreements for executing volunteering actions with their legal guardians...they discover areas, where their help would be needed and forms their help may take" [5, p. 8]. As far as primary schools are concerned, forms of volunteering activity concern: 1. Participating in initiatives conducted in Poland: Góra Grosza [Penny mountain]; collecting clothes, paper for recycling, bottle caps; collecting money for the WOŚP finals; participating in "Sprzątanie świata" ["Clean the world"] and "Cała polska czyta dzieciom" ["Poland reads to children"] projects. 2. Organisation of local celebrations: supporting orphanages by collecting toys, clothes, cosmetics, books and school resources; collecting toys for children's hospitals and ambulances; supporting animal shelters by collecting feed, toys and blankets; participation in the "Pomóżmy zwierzętom leśnym" ["Let's help forest animals"] initiative – collecting chestnuts, acorns, potatoes and beetroots for forest animals; participating in plays prepared for social welfare facilities (creating holiday cards and crafts, nativity plays, Easter plays, Grandmother and Grandfather Day plays, the Senior Day plays, etc.); preparing plays and refreshments for the retired school workers; participating in projects on cleaning forests; cleaning graves of soldiers and national heroes; collecting food for people in need and

packing the purchased goods in shopping centres. 3. Supporting other countries: preparing school supplies and books for children in Ukraine. 4. Participating in initiatives at school: helping in completion of tasks of the “Kopernikus” Association operating at school (physical ability and agility workshops, cookery workshops, heritage tours); organising family days, school markets, holiday plays; providing help with homework for younger children, children from pathological families or those living in orphanages who attend the particular school (in addition, teaching them how to use a computer, effectively spend free time, reading set books together); preparing packages for families in need before holidays; assisting organisers of school and class events, such as St. Andrew’s day, Santa’s visits, School Open Doors; creating and sending holiday cards to children in hospices. 5. Emergency initiatives: collecting funds for families affected by flood or for a seriously ill child. In schools there are volunteer groups gathering students willing to help others. Such groups are supervised by teachers who support their charges in creating a plan, programme or project of volunteering actions, which constitutes a basis for social philanthropist, charitable and beneficent activity. Undertaken initiatives should be monitored in order identify deficiencies, increase dynamics and exact results obtained through carrying out the team’s actions. It is important to found actions undertaken by such groups upon the Volunteer’s Ethical Code and award active volunteers.

The development of an effective motivational system for volunteers may pose a challenge, as they do not obtain any financial gratitude for their work. The most universal forms of motivation and rewarding include such acts as: good words, granting gadgets with a logo of the cooperating organisation, granting gifts and awards, participation in formal and informal group meetings, as well as, if possible, including volunteers in the decision processes. Moreover, it is important to celebrate the Volunteers’ Day, facilitate self-development and help volunteers achieve new skills. Names of active volunteers should be highlighted in the annual report drafted by the organisation. They should also be praised and distinguished as well as sent to various courses. Own research The research included 104 students of grades from IV to VII and 10 teachers – supervisors of school volunteer groups operating in primary schools. The group included 45 girls and 59 boys. The structure of the examined group with reference to sex is presented in the table below.

The research was conducted in a primary school during classes. Students were informed about the purpose and course of examination. Only those students who volunteered to be examined participated in the research. They were informed that the examination is anonymous. Students read instructions and filled in the table on their own.

It shall be emphasised that not all examined students were members of school volunteer groups, although they are aware that such groups function in their school. Moreover, students were familiar with the activities conducted by volunteers. They also knew that currently schools are required to conduct volunteering activity. Even though the students were not official members of volunteer groups, they often participate in charity initiatives organised by their school. Students were given a short survey including three questions with multiple-choice answers. These questions concerned determining the essence of change towards people in need, as well as skills and knowledge, which students can obtain while acting in the school volunteer group or while participating in other kind of volunteering activity. The analysis of each question included their multiple-choice answers, as well as numeral and percentage data. Teachers responsible for volunteer groups were asked to specifically rank

sentences constituting answers to the question: What benefits does supervising a volunteer group bring a teacher? Teachers filled in the questionnaire individually in their schools. 10 teachers from different primary schools, situated in urban and rural areas, were asked to rank these sentences. The group included 7 women and 3 men. The analysis of this question enabled presentation of the number of points attributed to each sentence.

The presentation of the results was opened by answers provided by students which were followed by data collected from answers provided by teachers. In the survey, all participating students were asked about skills developed while taking part in volunteering initiatives. Most frequently chosen answer was the ability to work with children (62,5 %) and interpersonal communication (52 %). In their volunteering activity, older students are willing to help younger colleagues, e.g. with doing their homework at school. Although media provide us with multiple kinds of indirect communication, students are determined to seek face-to-face contact with other people. Over 49 % of examined students chose “offering first aid”. Such tendency may result from classes on first aid conducted at school and the interest in this area expressed by students. Students from grades from 4 to 7 are also engaged in conducting charitable initiatives in their schools (46 %). Students were least interested in choosing such skills as: working with the elderly (20 %) and disabled people (6 %).

However, while observing students attending integrated classes, it may be concluded that they are willing to help their disabled classmates. For instance, they help with carrying backpacks or moving from one classroom to another. As far as answers on new knowledge are concerned, the most popular ones included: world problems (54 %), human dignity (52 %) and human suffering (49 %). Hence, students are aware of problems faced by human kind around the world, they do not agree with humiliating others and that they are sensitive towards human suffering. Other answers included: homelessness and diseases (34 %), disabilities (6 %). None of the students chose “refugees”. Some choices contradict others, as famine and diseases may be defined as types of suffering and yet they were not selected by students. The issue of refugees was also ignored by respondents. Such outcome may result from the fact that this subject has been presented

Table 1. Structure of examined groups

Grade	Sex				In total
	Girls		Boys		
	N	%	N	%	N (%)
IV	12	44	15	56	27
V	12	48	13	52	25
VI	10	38.5	16	61.5	26
VII	11	42	15	58	26
Total	45	43	59	57	104

in the media rather negatively and some part of the society perceives refugees as terrorists.

Analysing how the subject of refugees is discussed among students during breaks it may be easily concluded that such a negative opinion on the issue of refugees is shaped by what young people hear on welcoming people from foreign countries, especially from Iran, from the society and their families. Respondents were also asked about the matter of change in treating people in need. They could choose the most important answer out of four options. The largest number of answers concerned the “I help more” phrase (71 %). Only 25 persons (24 %) expressed their willingness to learn more about other people’s problems. The least popular choices included: “I prepare myself to help” (almost 3%) and “I am searching for experts who would improve the quality of help” (almost 2 %).

The analysis of answers provided in the last question proves that participating in school volunteering initiatives increases students’ engagement in helping others. What is more, it enables them to discover and learn more about challenges faced by people from their closest environment. Students tend to be less interested in searching for experts who would support the volunteering projects. This situation may be caused by the lack of sufficient life experience, which would help them be successful in this area. However, it is possible that should the students be allowed to choose more than one option, more of them would choose: “I prepare myself to help.” Teachers in charge of volunteer groups from ten schools (located in urban and rural areas) were asked about how they benefit from such responsibilities.

Once the answers were collected and ordered, the most popular one turned out to be “satisfaction”. All teachers pointed to it as their first choice, so the amount of collected points equalled 80. Less popular ones included: “The feeling of doing something valuable” – 64 points, five teachers gave this answer 7 points, four – 6 points and one – 5 points. The answer “joy” ranked third and gathered 46 points. As far as this answer is concerned, three teachers gave this answer 4 points, two teachers – 7 points and five who gave this answer 6 points. Next on the list of results were: “faith in young people” (41 points), “the opportunity to improve myself” (24 points), “the lesson of humility” (17 points), “regaining life energy” (24 points). Intra-psychological qualities, which improve an individual’s mental wellbeing, were the most frequently chosen ones. Observing young people’s efforts and drives, teachers appear to believe in their charges. The state that a worthy way of spending one’s free time will improve the process of choosing a dream job, as well as provide a person with positive qualities facilitating self-development and fostering satisfactory and happy life.

Conclusions. Volunteering is not limited to helping others. It is connected to gaining life and professional experience, conducting social activity, as well as encouraging others to do the same. Participating in such initiatives makes one’s life complete and brings joy. Volunteering improves openness, compassion, endurance in facing challenges, empathy and tolerance. Pedagogues should encourage young people to make effort in helping others, see their suffering and remedy it, as well as learn to tackle boundaries dividing social groups, nationalities, races and religions. Volunteering brings comprehensive benefits; no sphere of life is left unimproved. It is irrelevant whether a student is successful at school. Volunteering gives all young people equal chances. It makes them feel appreciated, fulfilled and needed. Hence, volunteering facilitates self-satisfaction, enables finding a young person’s identity

and creating his/her sense of self. This kind of initiative makes young people respect their environment.

As R. Kowal claims: "Volunteers are the ones who discover the true potential of their school and the way it can affect students." [2, p. 6]. According to the author, volunteering develops relationships between teachers and students, which leads to better understanding of one another and perceiving each other from a whole new perspective. Volunteering enables influencing not only young people but the school community and local people as well. In many cases, such initiatives turn out to be a driving force of the whole social groups and a factor enabling the discovery of their true potential. Considering results of the research and observations conducted in school it may be concluded that many young people are interested in spending their free time in a way that brings them respect and self-satisfaction. In the course of research, it turned out that even those students which were not members of volunteer groups expressed their willingness to help others and make themselves useful.

Many young people are not perceived as creative, resourceful and effective unless they are given an opportunity to present these qualities in action, without the pressure of grades. It is enough to express appreciation for their work and encourage them to be active as an individual and as a part of a society. Labelling students by saying: "You've been bad and aggressive. You are worthless!" is forbidden in this context. It is crucial to interest students with education, give them work, encourage to help others, show them what to do in order to see the bright side of life, incite their creativity and motivate to action. Properly motivated, students offer their best. Volunteering plays not only social and local role. It has a spiritual and educational dimension as well. "By helping others you help yourself!" That is why it is crucial to encourage young people to help those in need, the elderly, those suffering from diseases and disabilities. It is our responsibility to teach them not to ignore human suffering and pain. Let us make them see problems of the contemporary world even in their closest environment and selflessly embrace poverty, misfortunes, disabilities and diseases suffered by others.

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ВОЛОНТЕРСЬКА АКТИВНІСТЬ СЕРЕД УЧНІВ ПОЧАТКОВОЇ ШКОЛИ

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Предметом статті є феномен волонтерства серед учнів 4-го та 7-го класів. Посилаючись на предметну літературу, згадуються такі поняття, як добровільна служба та волонтер. Зазначено форми добровільної служби в школах. Основною темою статті є представлення результатів власних досліджень, які розкривають роль волонтерства в житті молоді, інтерпретують знання та навички надання допомоги та розкривають сутність змін щодо людей, які цього потребують.

Ключові слова: добровільна громадська діяльність, волонтерська діяльність, початкова школа.

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