SCHOOL VOLUNTEERING CLUBS: HOW THE SCHOOL CONTEXT AND ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT SHAPE (UN)SUCCESSFULNESS

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Abstract

School volunteering clubs (SVC) are a pedagogical innovation in the Croatian education system. Recent national research communicates a high level of networking between SVCs, locally-based institutions and civil society organisations (CSOs). However, the school context in which SVCs take place is not always conducive. SVCs often lack support from the school principals and teachers, as well as financial support (Ćulum Ilić, 2019; Rijavec, Jurčec, and Pavlović, 2019). This paper therefore aims to offer insights in attributes namely school context and organisational support, shaping the (un)successfulness of SVCs.

A qualitative case study (6 SVCs) was conducted to better understand the aforementioned phenomenon. Six focus groups were conducted with 38 secondary student volunteers. We will present findings of the focus groups with an emphasis on the organisational structure, and the school context in which the SVCs take place. The thematic analysis shows that SVCs are categorised in the school curricula as extracurricular activities or short-term projects. Each has coordinators who are either teachers or professional associates, while in some students share the coordinating role. Schools generally support collaboration with external stakeholders and findings of this study correlate, thus revealing a high level of successful collaboration that SVCs nurture with many CSOs. Such collaboration offers opportunities for students to engage meaningfully in addressing many local social issues, which contributes to their sense of belonging to the community.

Analysis of the school context reveals layers of institutional challenges, namely lack of support coming from the 'top', thus leaving the SVCs and its coordinators to be creative and innovative in their bottom-up approach, without the necessary resources. The indifference of those students who do not volunteer is noted, as well as of teachers who don't recognise such engagement as (academically) important nor valuable. In parallel, there is a positive and supportive atmosphere in all the SVCs. Emphasis is placed on democratic relationships among students, among coordinators and students, as well as on the collaborative line between students and CSOs. Students have a less formal and closer relationship with coordinators, which also affects their positive perception of teachers in general.

Many studies suggest that the school context in which educational processes take place affects the quality of these processes. The results of this study show that SVCs can operate successfully despite the lack of a positive school context, but resting solely on the coordinators' enthusiasm. This research contributes to the body of literature emphasising that a nurturing school climate, cooperation, equality within the SVCs members, and students-coordinators positive relationships are crucial for SVCs to succeed.

Keywords: School volunteering clubs, school context, secondary schools, qualitative case study.

1. Introduction

In societies with a developed democracy, the education system plays an important role in promoting the value of and implementing volunteering in schools. Such societies realise that volunteering organised in schools is an experiential way to educate young people for their future role as agents of social development and positive change. In other words, programmes that aim at empowering young people to actively participate in society are the most reliable way to develop a democratic society (Ćulum & Ledić, 2009). School volunteering programmes are such programmes and represent a pedagogical innovation in the Croatian educational context and are recognised as an integral part of civic education. In this paper, we will refer to school volunteering programmes as "School Volunteering Clubs (SVC)" because that is the way student volunteers refer to them, but the meaning and the definition are the same.

One of the roles of educational institutions is to set an example for students on how to actively participate in the community. Schools have the opportunity to encourage students to behave in a socially responsible manner, but also to provide them with the necessary mechanisms for easier integration into the community. Because volunteering within the formal education system creates such a space where students

can practise the role of active, socially responsible and sustainability citizens, Quentelier (2008) refers to SVCs as schools for democracy.

Since 2001, in the European context, recommendations have been made for the implementation of content and activities in schools that could help young people acquire the competences of active citizens (European Commission, 2001). Various strategic documents and programmes have been adopted at the national level to promote and strengthen volunteering and active citizenship. As a result, an increased number of young volunteers, especially high school students, has been noticed by recent studies. However, in order for youth volunteering to become stronger and sustainable, structural and systemic changes are necessary (Kamenko Mayer et al., 2019). The role of schools in developing youth volunteering is also recognized in the Croatian Law on Volunteering (58/07, 22/13, 84/21) which states that schools should promote and encourage volunteering activities. The National Framework Curriculum (Fuchs, Vican & Milanović, Litre 2017) does not explicitly mention volunteering in school but highlights aspects of engagement that characterise SVC, such as the development of students' positive attitudes towards others and active and responsible participation in the community.

SVC is defined as "a set of different (continuous and/or temporary) volunteer activities carried out by a specific educational institution" (Kamenko Mayer et al., 2019, p. 29) that follows the "principles of tolerance, humanity, solidarity, fairness, inclusiveness, and sustainable development, and contributes to personal development and positive social change" (Medlobi, Friščić, Prgić Znika, Požgaj & Borić, 2021, p. 13). There are four key actors in SVCs, namely: (I) students, (II) SVCs' coordinators, (III) teachers and principals, and (IV) community partners (most often CSOs), and each of them has a significant role. There is a body of literature arguing that young people who volunteer in their school have a greater chance and potential to remain active in society (Hall, McKeown & Roberts, 2001; Planty & Regnier, 2003), because the competencies and behaviours acquired in youth persist into adulthood (Ćulum, Gvozdanović & Baketa, 2016; Quentelier, 2008).

SVCs are usually coordinated by teachers or professional associates (e.g., pedagogues, psychologists, librarians). Coordinators are often enthusiastic individuals who independently initiate and oversee the programme. Their role can be explained by the concept of organisational citizenship behaviour (Bateman & Organ, 1983, as cited in Dipaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2001), i.e., coordinators are individuals who do more than is expected of them.

Schools that implement volunteering programmes partner with numerous community partners, but mostly with CSOs. As Maldobi and associates (2021) emphasise, CSOs in particular are key actors for SVCs as they enable the implementation of a wide range of volunteering activities and ensure the quality of implementation due to their knowledge and experience in conducting volunteer actions with various beneficiaries. As previous studies noted, CSOs engage in a wide range of activities that contribute both in a short and long-term context to the SVCs' sustainability, e.g they organise and conduct training for coordinators, thus contributing to the volunteer management. They also play an important role in implementing SVCs in school curricula.

For SVCs to function smoothly, it is imperative that the school context in which they operate be positive and supportive. Introducing new programmes into the school curriculum requires changes in formal and informal norms, structures, and relationships, and collaboration among all stakeholders is therefore necessary (Baranović, Domović & Štirbić, 2006). Bear and associates (2009, as cited in Popović Ćitić & Đurić, 2018) refer to a positive and productive school climate as such where relationships are supportive, where there are high expectations and clear goals on how to achieve them, where actors plan together, and where parents and community members are engaged as well.

Schools that foster positive climate promote youth development and provide a safe platform for productivity by encouraging peer mentoring, building connections to the local community, and ensuring that students feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli & Pickeral, 2009; DeWitt & Slade, 2014). A positive school climate means that students, their parents and guardians, teachers, professional associates and principals work together and contribute to a shared vision of the school (Cohen et al., 2009). Because school climate also reflects, to a significant extent, the subjective experiences of school actors, this paper focuses on describing the personal experiences of student volunteers - we are interested in how they feel and the importance they place on the SVC and their role as volunteers.

2. Methodology

The results presented in this paper are embedded in the project "Formal Education in Service of Sustainable Development - forOR" (2018-2024), funded by the Croatian Science Foundation. The main goal of the qualitative research is to describe and understand the phenomenon of SVCs in high schools and its role in cultivating attributes of sustainability citizenship. The main research question is: What experiences, processes, and activities within SVCs foster high school students' potential to develop

attributes of sustainability citizenship, and how? This paper presents only part of the preliminary findings with a focus on the school context, i.e., school climate and organisational support for SVCs. Qualitative case study was chosen as the prospective research strategy and six cases were selected based on specific criteria[1]. Focus groups took place from April to November 2021 with 38 student volunteers between the ages of 15 and 18. Collected data were transcribed and MAXQDA software was used for data analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun & Clarke (2006) protocol.

3. Analysis and discussion

Results related to the organisational structure, show that SVCs are implemented in school curricula and categorised as extracurricular activities or short-term projects. Each SVC has at least one coordinator, either a teacher or a professional associate. In some cases, student volunteers play the role of the coordinator's "right hand", whose task is to make linkages between the coordinator and other students and to help communicate with external collaborators. These co-coordinators usually are the most active student volunteers that coordinators can rely on. These results bring a certain novelty, as in previous studies the collaborative coordination model has been detected, but only when it comes to co-coordination between several teachers and/or professional associates (Ćulum Ilić, 2019). Some volunteering or humanitarian activities involve the entire school, however there are about 20 to 30 student volunteers across the cases studied that are usually engaged in each volunteering activity. The most common activities include raising donations for various causes, visiting kindergartens, homes for elderly or children's hospitals, as well as improving the school environment, organising and conducting workshops.

In terms of the school context, student volunteers are pleased with being equal with their coordinators. Their relationship is very democratic in terms of planning and organising activities. Students' ideas and their proposed scenarios of delivery are appreciated. SVCs are holding regular meetings that serve as a platform for sharing ideas, suggestions, and decisions, and students are involved in every aspect of the SVC and they share tasks equally. In addition, students are free to choose in which volunteering activities they want to participate in. In schools where there is a positive climate, students are involved in all processes and are less likely to be absent from school (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Furthermore, one of the recommendations for stirring a positive school climate is precisely to promote student autonomy (DeWitt & Slade, 2014), which is evident in the cases of SVCs, as illustrated by following excerpts from students who participated in focus groups:

> *"The coordinator asks us what we would like to do, if we have ideas, then we propose something and then somehow we all come up with an idea together."*

> *"We do everything very democratically, actually we are all equal and the teachers are equal to us. It's no longer that some teacher is in charge and that you obey him or her. Everyone always has the right to make suggestions, and to raise a veto."*

Most of the responsibility for the SVCs lies on the 'backs' of their coordinators. They must be promoters and organisers of volunteerism, and ideally, be volunteers themselves to motivate students by example. They must have extraordinary communication skills and intrinsic motivation (Medlobi et al., 2021). In addition, results from our study indicate even more, as students portray their SVC coordinators as *"mothers, teachers, and best friends, and all at the same time."* Students are aware of the severity and abundance of the work coordinators do, and at the same time they are aware and appreciate their enthusiasm and commitment, as one student pointed out:

> *"This programme is very good because in a way we perceive teachers as people who don't sleep, don't eat, as someone who is like a robot, you have an image of a teacher who is strict, who evaluates. And through the SVC we make a connection, and then in actual teaching it's much easier, we do not have this fear, we do not have this tension that she's going to evaluate us badly, but we understand that she's just a human being and that it's her job to evaluate me, but I know that I can ask her, I can talk to her, I can make suggestions if it's necessary."*

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[1]Criteria were as follows: (I) Integration of SVC in the school curricula, (II) continuous presence during at least one school year, (III) accessibility to all students, (IV) collaboration with CSOs and other institutions, and (V) SVC content related to the sustainable development.

From the student volunteers' perspective, it's the coordinators who create an informal, friendly, and relaxed atmosphere at SVC, that is highly effective for shared learning and support. Many student' volunteers state that they have made many friends and acquaintances from other classes and schools as well.

> *"Above all, that togetherness is important to me. This support that you have, people you can talk to, who don't judge you because you're different, because you have a problem. It's like a second family, so to speak, and I think that's very important."*

Students generally perceive that the school (headmasters and teachers) supports SVC, however there are examples of eroding behaviour as well. Students from one SVC report that they perceive the headmaster and teachers as uncooperative and that there is a lack of financial support, working space, and basic resources needed for the programme to function effectively. Very similar findings are found in previous research, which also indicates that the institution often withdraws from organising certain volunteering activities or redesigns planned activities to minimise costs due to lacking financial support (Ćulum Ilić, 2019).

> *"Personally, I think our headmaster thinks that SVC is not important, that we only volunteer to avoid classes, that this is the only reason we do it. If we were a club of mathematicians, she would see us in a very different light."*

In some cases, students also feel disappointed because most teachers have a negative attitude towards volunteering in general, don't recognise such engagement as (academically) important nor valuable, and they have no trust in student volunteers. So, one of the many tasks of the coordinators is to use their communication skills and assure those teachers of the benefits of volunteering so that the students can participate in the volunteer activities. Study from Tarter & Hoy (1988, as cited in Baranović et al., 2006) points out that if there is no trust between all actors in the school, there cannot be a positive school climate. Learning by volunteering is one way to break teachers' biases against volunteering. In this way, teachers, coordinators, and student volunteers could work together to find a way to connect subject content with actual volunteering activities (Kamenko Mayer et al., 2019), and therefore showcase the meaning of experiential learning. Moreover, most students feel that their non-volunteer peers don't appreciate their role as volunteers. At best, non-volunteers are indifferent to SVC, but sadly some of them view volunteering as a "waste of time". Fortunately, volunteer students aren't swayed by the negative attitudes of their peers, as suggested by one of the students: *"Well, it's stupid to give up volunteering when it's soooo interesting, just because it bothers someone else."*

However, most students report that they are supported by headmasters and teachers. In one school, students report that their headmaster gets involved in many activities. In most schools, teachers also help in some way to organise and implement volunteering activities. In these schools, teachers recognise student volunteers as responsible and mature and build a positive relationship with them, both inside and outside the classroom, as illustrated by the following excerpt: *"It's like we get along a little better with the teachers because you can joke with them a little bit, and be more relaxed."*

As for the collaboration with CSOs and other institutions, student volunteers have experienced working with various external stakeholders and there were only gratifying and pleasant experiences. Students from vocational schools made a special bond with external collaborators because they feel that they learn much more about their profession from them than they do in school, calling it *"the real school for life."* Students describe the external collaborators as cheerful, enthusiastic, open, knowledgeable, dedicated, helpful, and loving what they do. Students feel accepted and appreciated, and it is this feeling that makes these young people long-term volunteers as they have learnt to be a meaningful part of their communities - *"I think we feel more a part of this community because we can really do something, for example, when we paint a fence, we know that we have done something for this community."*

4. Conclusion

The results of this study show that in most cases a positive school climate prevails. Students reveal positive, democratic, and equal relationships between students and coordinators; they have the opportunity to be involved in every aspect of planning, organising and delivering volunteering activities; they feel connected with school and their (local) community. There is a positive collaboration among all actors from school and their local community, as well as mutual trust. However, there are also examples of unsupportive behaviour from headmasters, teachers, and other student non-volunteers. Results show that SVCs can

operate successfully despite the lack of a positive school context, but only if there are very enthusiastic, creative and capable coordinators. This research contributes to the body of literature emphasising that a nurturing school climate is critical to the sustainable success of SVCs. SVCs have been shown as a training and learning ground for practising the role of the sustainability citizen, as a safe platform where student volunteers are equals, and engaged in every aspect of the programme. In addition to the students, the teachers can also benefit from the positive school climate - they are more satisfied with their role and have greater chances to be more creative. Lastly, the organisational structure is very important for the smooth functioning of SVCs - such as a strong structure, careful planning, and financial support from "the top".

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