

NURTURING EQUALITY AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENT VOLUNTEERS AND COORDINATORS' RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

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Abstract

School volunteer programmes (SVP) facilitate students' community engagement, their personal growth and contribute to positive social change (Medlobi et al., 2021). Within the Croatian educational system, SVPs are integrated into school curriculum as extracurricular volunteering clubs, operating on the tenets of tolerance, solidarity, justice, inclusivity, and sustainable development. However, they facilitate a meaningful connection between students and teachers who coordinate SVP, as well. Such a relationship is defined by structured, continuous, and enduring students' engagement in volunteering endeavours within and beyond school's confines (Kamenko Mayer et al., 2019). This paper explores the dynamics of the relationship between student volunteers and coordinators of SVPs. A qualitative case study involving six focus groups with 38 student volunteers was conducted to describe and better understand such relationships. The thematic analysis reveals that coordinators foster a supportive, inclusive, and safe community. They cultivate quality relationships on mutual understanding, acceptance, respect, and equality. Students portray coordinators as inspiring figures who don't convey strict hierarchical settings and treat young people with high respect. These relationships play a pivotal role in dispelling preconceptions about hierarchical dynamics between students and teachers, thus promoting equality and democratic interactions. These interactions and experiences also lay a foundation for effective collaboration, teamwork, creative expression, and collaborative learning. The SVPs thrive in a relaxed and informal atmosphere, and are characterised by close, nurturing, and collaborative relationships. Trust is created between student's volunteers and teacher-coordinators, with the relationship being portrayed as warm-hearted and affectionate to that of a 'maternal figure'.

Keywords: *School volunteer programmes, student - teacher relationship, secondary school, sustainability citizenship, qualitative case study.*

1. Introduction

The aim of democratic societies is to cultivate the characteristics of sustainability citizens (UNESCO, 2014). These characteristics imply the interrelation between the cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural domains. Such citizens must have critical thinking skills, the ability to reflect and self-reflect, as well as values, attitudes, and motivation for sustainable development to act in accordance with its goals (Littlelyke, 2008; UNESCO, 2017). The concept of citizenship in general can be indistinct for students if its teaching is not approached in an appropriate way (Čulum et al., 2016). Volunteering within the formal education system has the potential to create space for exercising the role of an active and socially responsible citizen (Arnot, 2005; as cited in Čulum et al., 2016), or in this context, the role of a sustainability citizen. In this paper, school volunteer programmes (SVPs) are recognised as a model of education for sustainable development as they encompass its fundamental characteristics. As such, it is understood as a model that has the potential to contribute to the development of the characteristics of sustainability citizenship. SVPs promote students' engagement with the community, their personal development and contribute to positive social change (Medlobi et al., 2021). In the Croatian education system, SVPs are integrated into the school curriculum as extracurricular volunteering clubs and are based on the principles of tolerance, solidarity, justice, inclusivity, and sustainable development. However, they also enable a meaningful connection between students and the coordinators of SVPs (teachers and/or professional associates). Such a relationship is characterised by a structured, continuous, and sustained engagement of students in volunteering (Kamenko Mayer et al., 2019).

Coordinators typically include teachers and professional associates, such as pedagogues, psychologists, and librarians, affiliated with the school. They are recognised as one of the key actors in shaping these programmes as a platform where young people have the opportunity to develop the characteristics of a sustainability citizen. Coordinators of SVPs are a key figure in all segments of the programme and have a dual role. On the one hand, they are responsible for the organisation, implementation, and promotion of the volunteering activities, and on the other hand, they motivate and mentor student volunteers. As part of the programme organisation, coordinators are expected to advocate volunteering in their school community and work with external stakeholders, i.e., potential partners, in the implementation of volunteering activities. When working with student volunteers, the coordinator's tasks include encouraging students to volunteer, finding numerous and diverse volunteering activities, providing support when students organise volunteering activities on their own, and ensuring the necessary conditions for the realisation of these activities. Furthermore, coordinators have multiple tasks. They introduce students to volunteering and equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills. They also maintain constant communication with student volunteers. This includes monitoring the students' work and establishing a system to evaluate their engagement. Beyond monitoring the implementation of the volunteering activities, coordinators also play a vital mentorship role for student volunteers. They support students throughout the process and provide mechanisms for reflection and self-reflection. These mechanisms enable students to contemplate their volunteering experiences, facilitating self-awareness regarding the knowledge, skills and values they acquire. Coordinators help students understand how these competencies can be transferred into the framework of the formal educational process, but also personal growth and development (Kamenko Mayer et al., 2019). This type of support and guidance ensures long-term student engagement in the SVP and in the future. This empowerment is crucial as it prepares students to make positive changes in the community.

The relevant literature points to the need for role models and mentors in the educational process in general, i.e., people who stand for the realisation of a particular idea and with whom students build long-term and close relationships characterised by support and qualities such as empathy, trust, and patience (Reid & Jones, 1997; Sadler, 2015). According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), human behaviour is primarily mediated through contact with role models, and teachers should embody qualities worthy of emulation (Kristjánsson, 2006). Previous research has also confirmed that longer and more intense interaction between students and mentors in an environment that supports pro-sustained behaviour is more likely to lead to the adoption of such behaviour (Higgs & McMillan, 2006; Hill, 2012; Payne et al., 2003).

Wahrman and Hartaf (2021) suggest that in order to be role models for students, coordinators should be "good" citizens themselves and believe strongly in active citizenship. The same viewpoint is reflected in the findings of Moore and Allen (1996) who suggest that role models can influence adolescents in recognising prosocial values, developing social skills, and reducing risky behaviours. Furthermore, it is necessary for coordinators to have a strong pedagogical tact, i.e., to question and challenge traditional pedagogical constraints, especially those reflected in formal education, with the aim of achieving social change (Vrcelj et al., in press).

2. Methodology

The results presented in this paper are part of the doctoral dissertation and aim to describe and understand the phenomenon of SVPs in Croatian high schools and its role in cultivating characteristics of sustainability citizenship. Thus, the main research question is focused on experiences, processes, and activities within SVCs that foster high school students' potential to develop characteristics of sustainability citizenship, and how? Specifically, the doctoral dissertation was interested in the related influential characteristics of the school context, community collaboration, volunteering activities, the structure of SVPs and the role of coordinators in the overall phenomenon of cultivating sustainability citizens. This paper specifically focuses on the findings related to the role of coordinators of SVPs and their relationship dynamics with student volunteers.

A qualitative case study was chosen as the research strategy, as it enables detailed observation of a case from multiple perspectives and in different ways (Patton, 2002; Thomas & Myers, 2015). In this study, the triangulation strategy was applied to data collected from different sources and using different methods: I) semi-structured in-depth interviews (coordinators), II) focus groups (student volunteers) and III) qualitative content analysis (school curricula), all with the aim of gaining a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the researched phenomenon. This paper presents the results of focus groups with student volunteers.

For the purposes of this study, six cases were selected, all rich in information and with strong potential for providing answers to the research question. Between April and November 2021, focus groups were conducted involving 38 student volunteers aged 15 to 18. The collected data was then transcribed and analysed using MAXQDA software. The rigorous thematic analysis was conducted according to the phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The irreplaceable role of coordinators in school volunteer programmes

Thematic analysis clearly expresses that the coordinators are the merit of the SVPs. They are the ones who make volunteering in the formal education system possible, who plan and organise all the activities within the volunteer programme. Furthermore, their activities have a significant impact on the student volunteers. Firstly, they are often the main actors in the recruitment of new volunteers and serve as significant others who motivate, inspire and guide. Secondly, they monitor student progress and make a positive contribution to the school and community as a whole. The importance of coordinators in this study is clearly irreplaceable, as students expressed:

"When I grow up, I want to be like our coordinator."

"She is a great motivation in everything."

The results of the focus groups also make it clear that the students perceive the coordinators as key figures in the programme. They create a safe environment for the student volunteers and support them throughout the process of implementing the programme. Such an environment is considered particularly important in intense and stressful situations that sometimes occur during the realisation of volunteering actions and that can pose a certain risk to young people (Millora, 2023). It is therefore necessary to create an environment in which student volunteers feel protected, with the aim of having a positive experience of volunteering.

3.2. Coordinators have a special status among student volunteers

The results of the analysis illuminate the profile of coordinators based on the descriptions and perspectives of student volunteers. It is recognised that coordinators are individuals who have a strong desire to help and a commitment to activism, individuals for whom there are no barriers to ensuring the progress of SVPs and involvement of other stakeholders of interest. In the eyes of the students, all coordinators are exceptional coordinators, teachers, professional associates, and human beings. Student volunteers describe them as proactive, determined, persistent, innovative, and creative with a strong enthusiastic commitment.

The student volunteers also describe experiences where the coordinators showed understanding and proved to be people they could confide in. They perceive them as best friends and some of them view them as motherly figures. All students indicate that the friendly relationship with the coordinators does not undermine their respect for them. They highlight that coordinators can set clear boundaries during class and within SVP, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

"It's not that when we meet, we only talk about volunteering, but if someone has a problem with the school, she arranges a meeting with the pedagogue and say we can also talk to our parents if someone needs something like that."

She takes great care of us."

"We can tell her everything openly, about teachers, about absolutely everything that bothers us at school. But she immediately had this approach that everything is open and relaxed, it's not like she was reserved at the beginning. She allowed us to talk openly."

3.3. Building democratic and inclusive relationships in school volunteer programmes: equality and collaborative learning

In almost all volunteer programmes, harmonious relationships are built between students and coordinators. Students describe the atmosphere as relaxed and emphasise the equality of all participants. The relationships that develop within the volunteer programme are often described by the students as "democratic" and they are proud of this. Above all, such equality is reflected in the allocation of tasks and mutual cooperation and respect.

The coordinators often participate with students in the implementation of the volunteering activities. Some students emphasise that they are particularly happy that the coordinators take part in the volunteer activities with them. This makes the students feel even closer to the coordinators and gives them the feeling that everyone is equal in the SVP.

"She goes to the volunteering activities with us, it's not like she just organises them and then sends us off on our own."

As adults who treat the students with respect and seriousness, the coordinators represent stable figures who do not insist on strict hierarchical settings. In such an environment, the students feel safe, accepted, and free to actively participate without any fear of judgement. One of the most significant results is that the coordinators openly display their humanity and vulnerability to the students, showing them no fear in revealing their weaknesses. This openness, together with their participation in volunteering activities, helps them to get to know and understand each other better. Such examples assist in overcoming prejudices about hierarchical relationships between young people and teachers, while promoting equality along with democratic relationships. In addition, such experiences create a good basis for good cooperation, teamwork, creative work and collaborative learning. The closeness that is created is a source of even greater respect for the coordinators.

"When we take part in these workshops, there is no teacher-student relationship, the difference disappears. It's not so official and strict."

The positive relationships between students and coordinators, as well as the relaxed atmosphere in SVPs are largely attributed to their cooperation both inside and outside of school settings. Thematic analysis reveals that student volunteers recognise coordinators as relatable individuals, especially through moments observed outside of school. These instances include informal interactions, witnessing coordinators in casual attire, and seeing them express emotions, all of which reinforce their humanity. Understanding coordinators as people first and foremost plays a crucial role for students, diminishing any fear towards teachers and fostering a deeper appreciation for their work. This realisation also helps in dispelling common prejudices towards teachers and professional associates, promoting a more inclusive and understanding school environment.

"As part of the SVP, I realised that professors are not just professors, but can also be friends."

Echoing the findings from the literature, the research results underscore the importance of regular, clear communication, as well as honesty, openness, and authenticity. These elements are fundamental to fostering a friendly and relaxed atmosphere (Medlobi et al., 2021). The conclusion that a positive atmosphere and close relationships play a key role is not new in the context of volunteering and education for sustainable development. Both Badger et al. (2022) and Schröder et al. (2020) came to similar conclusions in their studies. The importance of an equal relationship, which implies active listening and mutual respect, is emphasised as a key factor for joint decision-making (Jennings et al., 2006). Kirk et al. (2017), in their study of the student empowerment model, identify equality between teachers and students, the teacher's confidence in the student's abilities and a developed sense of community between students and teachers as key incentives for the development of emancipation.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results presented in this paper, it can be concluded that students and coordinators in SVPs tend to develop high quality relationships. The analysis presented indicates harmonious relationships based on mutual understanding, acceptance, respect, and a sense of equality. There is a relaxed and informal atmosphere within the SVP, characterised by close, caring, and collaborative relationships.

This indicates that the coordinators of SVPs are passionate and enthusiastic individuals dedicated to nurturing a positive and democratic atmosphere within the programme. By breaking down traditional hierarchical structures, they foster an environment of equality and mutual respect where students are encouraged to participate freely in volunteering activities without fear of judgement. This approach not only empowers students to express themselves creatively but also builds a foundation of respect and personal responsibility. The coordinators' commitment to maintaining a respectful and inclusive environment ensures that there is no room for fear or unconstructive criticism, creating a healthy atmosphere that fosters collaborative learning and progress for all participants.

Given these insights, it is evident that the coordinators play a pivotal role as organisers, mentors, and role models. They inspire students to personal growth, community involvement and the adoption of pro-sustainable behaviour. Their approach fosters an atmosphere that encourages collaborative learning and empowerment. It promotes the development of the characteristic of sustainability citizenship among students. By engaging with students as equals and embodying the characteristic of sustainability citizenship themselves, coordinators encourage deeper involvement and collaboration, enhancing the effectiveness of SVPs.

In conclusion, the research advocates for the recognition and support of coordinators of SVPs in formal education. Their role is critical not only in the context of successfully managing SVPs, but even more, in cultivating sustainability citizens. This study emphasises the indispensability of coordinators for the educational and personal development of students in SVPs that are aligned with the sustainable development goals.

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