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UDK: 371.95
ISBN 978-86-7372-131-6, 16 (2011), p.
Original scientific paper

VOLUNTARY WORK AS A FORM OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF GIFTED STUDENTS

The article discusses the encouragement of voluntary social work by gifted students as a form of the development of social responsibility. It is expected by society that the gifted would make important decisions and take over responsibilities for the decisions taken; therefore, this is not an unimportant aspect of a high level of the quality of life in the society. The young have an opportunity to get familiar with very vulnerable individuals through philanthropic activities and they can assist in their social integration, thus developing the social sensibility for fellow-citizens and their hardships, becoming more tolerant and socially more responsible.

In the last three years we have been trying to implement a concept of an educational programme in the Slovenian high-schools whose aim is the gifted students' global and optimal development, in accordance with their potentials and interests. We are aware of the fact that for their development it is of paramount importance that their social and emotional aspects are encouraged, as only in such ways can the gifted young adolescences fully express their ideas and creativity. In the individualised plans, which are prepared for gifted students who wish to be involved, we do not view the work from the cognitive aspect alone, but we also pay attention to other areas including the interest motivation, artistic aspect, aspects concerning the body, and to the social and emotional issues; this framework also included the encouragement of voluntary work, such as helping less successful peer-students and primary school pupils, socialising with the elderly who live alone, with old pensioners in the retirement homes, with people with disabilities, etc.

Through voluntary work the young develop their social skills and enrich their communication. The practice shows that many gifted students are socially very sensible and empathetic, therefore they form strong bonds with people with whom they get involved through their volunteer work. The experience and knowledge which they gain change them significantly and we can expect that they will function in a more humane way in their adult life and will respect and realise solidarity among people.

Key words: voluntary social work, social responsibility, socio-emotional area of gifted.

Voluntary Work as a Form of the Development of Social Responsibility of Gifted Students

We shall probably all agree that a full-scale development of personal potentials is of paramount importance for all children

and adolescents; therefore, the gifted cannot be excluded from such a concept. Mere direction of gifted individuals into a broader and deeper knowledge in the areas, in which they may be interested, the development of specific skills and stressing high achievements, which no doubt should be recognised, is considered to be definitely insufficient from the point of view of their personality development. Therefore, the concept of the educational system concerning gifted students, which we have been trying to implement in Slovenian high-schools in the last three years, in addition to their intellectual development, their personal, social and emotional maturity is aimed at.

The content of the concept, approved by the Specialist Council of the Republic of Slovenia for general education, is based on the following fundamental principles of work with gifted students:

- taking into consideration special abilities and strong interests of students;
- taking into account individual personality characteristics;
- broadening general knowledge;
- increasing speed in the learning process;
- developing creativity;
- encouraging higher forms of reasoning and learning;
- using cooperative forms of learning;
- encouraging independence and responsibility;
- fostering holistic personality development (cognitive, emotional, social, moral, physical);
- ensuring variety of choice and facultative choice of subjects for students;
- implementing mentor relationships between students and teachers or other programme educators;
- ensuring that the gifted are suitably included in their class and school environment;
- providing opportunities for the gifted to socialise among themselves, considering their special needs and interests.

In planning and executing educational work with the gifted we encourage activities which make the youngsters think about other people, who in turn challenge them to think from other viewpoints. We provide opportunities for them to take part in activities where they have a chance to experience sincere contact with children, their peers and adults, who are different from them (e.g. children with cerebral palsy, with mental disabilities in psychological development, chronically ill patients, with Romany

children, the elderly, etc.). This will give them a chance to understand and accept their being different, originating in their special needs, current predicaments, their different beliefs and views and different behavioural patterns from their own.

Equipped with an entirely new life experience and understanding they can more readily listen to people in distress and to groups from the social borders and can be more easily prepared to act to the benefit of society. If the young can get this kind of experience, we can consequently expect that they will take over socially important roles in a more creative and responsible way and act socially more responsibly to the benefit of the general good. One of the effective ways of gaining such experiences for the gifted youngsters is to include them in various forms of voluntary social work.

Voluntary social work, which represents an important aspect of educational work with high-school students, has been a long-term tradition in Slovenian schools. It represents an organised psycho-social activity and its aim is to provide assistance to individuals and groups, who are, due to various reasons, endangered from the point of view of social or mental health, or who could become so. We talk of direct help in tackling concrete life problems, misfortunes and difficulties in everyday life (failure at school, social exclusion, loneliness, etc.) - According to Žorga, 1991.

Volunteers, by getting to know different social environments, broaden their horizons, which has an important impact on their understanding and respect of differences. Through their voluntary work they develop solidarity and social responsibility towards other people who are in difficulties and go through various straits. By gaining important life experiences, the young volunteers grow and mature personally as well. In new relationships, which are formed, they develop their tolerance, nobility in communication and become socially more sensitive; thus, inclusion into different forms of voluntary work is important also in the sense of prevention.

The gifted high-school students, who wish to become volunteer workers, suggest different areas within which they can freely choose what they would like to do. They may decide on social work in homes for the elderly, assistance to primary school pupils or other fellow students in school subjects, to socialize with lonely elderly people in their homes, they can also work with children or adults with disabilities, etc. In addition, we organise

numerous charity events at school aimed at raising money to help persons in need after natural calamities or chronic patients who need special care, to purchase special equipment for people with disabilities, etc. Gifted students are also encouraged to use self-initiative in organising such activities, while we offer support and create opportunities for their development of leadership skills.

The overall goal of the voluntary work carried out by the students is to help people in need, to understand and accept their feelings and their way of thinking. Voluntary social work also affects the whole school by which social voluntary work is organised and carried out; we talk about the humanisation of relationships in the school and the positive impact on the social climate of the school. The targets, important for a wider society, are education in solidarity, humanisation of relationships and consequently taking over greater responsibilities for the social good.

For each high-school student who is to take part in voluntary social work, specific targets are set, including:

- active free time;
- development of social skills;
- development of altruism;
- familiarisation with existential and other problems and ways of resolving;
- encouragement of solidarity;
- development of empathy;
- positive self-esteem;
- better self-acceptance.

These targets are listed in the programme of each individual student and are of equal importance as the achievement of cognitive targets, or targets in the physical area, artistic development and the like. Therefore, it is vital that the planning and evaluation of the educational work with gifted students is not left to one person alone, decisions should not be made only by his/her mentor who covers the field in which the student shows his highest interest, but rather by the entire school team, where all, including students and parents, have an equal role. In this case a school team includes the student's class master, the school counsellor, coordinator for work with gifted students, mentors for individual interest areas, sometimes mentors from outside institutions, co-signatory to the educational plan of work with gifted students, and the school master.

While organising and actually carrying out social voluntary work, the mentors and students will work together with various institutions, organisations, associations, clubs and groups, and centres which also provide tighter links between the students and the school on the one hand with the wider society on the other.

Voluntary social work also has an important role in career orientation, as it gives the students an opportunity to familiarise themselves with those professions which are based on working with people and who offer help in different ways. Through their voluntary social work they will also be acquainted with different institutions and how they function and what the expectations of their users are. This is crucial if we have in mind gifted students, as we can only wish to have such people in professions related to working with people in the future. In particular in professions related to giving assistance we wish that the professionals would be creative, empathic, ready to work in teams when trying to resolve problems, etc.

Voluntary work can be efficient only when supported by relevant training, monitoring, guidance and leadership. The mentor, responsible for the voluntary social work at school, is responsible not only for the work carried out by the volunteers, but also for the relationship to those they work with. In order to ensure a high quality of voluntary work, the volunteers must be equipped with specific theoretical knowledge needed to enable them to start perceiving the facts of life from those points of view which correspond to presumptions based on specific expertise. At the same time, they should be trained to gain those skills which are needed both for a specific type of voluntary social work and successful formation of long-term relationships (according to Žorga, 1991, Stritih, 1984).

If their work is carried out within a specific institution, they should be introduced to their rules. Therefore, schools organise various forms of preliminary training, including those in which external mentors take part in, while some training may take place within relevant institutions. As it is desired that the voluntary social work of gifted high-school students is organised, carried out and evaluated at a high level of quality, the mentor of voluntary work must closely work together with the coordinator, who is responsible in a particular school for working with gifted students. Often, the function is covered by the school counsellor.

As in other forms of counselling, the stress is on the awareness of the paramount importance of the relationship

developed between a volunteer and the receiver. Often unconsciously, the volunteer will introduce himself/herself into the relationship, his wishes, tendencies and expectations, his/her own perspective of reality. The relationship formed is reciprocally dependant on the reference frame of the individual the volunteer works with; nevertheless, the volunteer is in a professional role, therefore a greater expectation is placed upon him concerning the relationship.

Experience shows that the recipients quickly accept the volunteers who are open, spontaneous and emotionally responsive in their communication, which with the gifted students most often is the case, therefore they are very warmly accepted as volunteers which in return has a favourable effect on their self-image. However, there have been cases of gifted but rather introverted youngsters, who produced outstandingly good results in voluntary social work and achieved exceptional improvements in their own communication with others as in the verbalisation of their own life.

Characteristics of efficient volunteers are open-mindedness and respect for the different expectations, interests and viewpoints of others. They are interested in novelties, new ideas, new affairs and changes in the society and social environment in which they live. More than to the material works, they are focused on people, and they are capable of envisaging situations of other people who they get involved with, which is one of the preconditions to understand their problems. Tolerance of volunteers enables them to build an atmosphere in which individuals or groups of people feel safe to speak about their feelings and state what their wishes are.

Gifted youngsters when in the role of volunteers, strengthen the belief in the value of every person in society and their abilities for development and change by respecting those with whom they work or whom they help, while not placing themselves into the position of a critical judge of their actions, norms and values, thus maturing themselves in return.

Sincerity of volunteers is important; manifested in their genuine interest in those who need their help, it also means sincerity to themselves. Volunteers should be aware not only of their power but also of their limits. Therefore all volunteers have regular mentor consultancy available at a very high level as well as a chance to reflect upon their feelings and experience. This is how they can become aware of their role and have a chance to change their perspective, viewpoint and future reactions in similar

situations. This represents a responsible attitude towards volunteers and for that reason we can expect that they will act responsibly in return and will not allow society to remain careless and impersonal towards those who are in need.

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