

2020-02-19

## Benefits of Volunteering in Young People at Risk of Social Exclusion

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### Recommended Citation

Dávila de León, María Celeste; Negueruela, Mercedes; and Sánchez-Izquierdo, Macarena (2020) "Benefits of Volunteering in Young People at Risk of Social Exclusion," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass/vol20/iss1/5>

## **Benefits of Volunteering in Young People at Risk of Social Exclusion**

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Vol. 20(1), 2020, 47-59.

### **Abstract**

Studies on the benefits of volunteering in young people have received some attention, although important knowledge gaps still exist concerning this matter. The main aim of this study is to analyse the different profiles of those who choose to take part in voluntary activities and those who do not; another aim being to analyse the benefits of volunteering in young people. A total of 66 young people participating in training programmes in Spain completed a questionnaire and took part in a follow-up survey six months later. The study found that the young volunteers were more likely to volunteer in the future, perceiving a greater social support and attaching more importance to interpersonal values. After completing their volunteer experience, the young volunteers, as opposed to the non-volunteers, had a positive image of volunteering and perceived themselves as more likely to find a job. The results obtained are discussed.

### **Keywords**

Benefits, volunteerism, young people, social exclusion.

### **Introduction**

Volunteering is not only beneficial for those who receive the assistance, but also for those who provide it (Piliavin, 2003). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the study of the benefits that can be derived from engaging in volunteering. Much of this interest has focused on older persons (e.g. Tang, Choi & Morrow-Howell, 2010 and Wilson, Mirchandani & Shenouda, 2017). Young people have also received some attention although important knowledge gaps still exist concerning this matter (Kim & Morgül, 2017).

In this regard, studies on young people have mainly centred on the benefits of volunteering in relation to their social integration and involvement in society as active citizens. In general, evidence has shown that such benefits are in fact obtained. For example, volunteering promotes a positive change in attitudes towards diversity and society's obligation to meet the needs of its citizens, and it also encourages good citizenship practices, such as voting (Astin, Sax & Avalos, 1999; Bode, 2017; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Niemi, Hepburn & Chapman, 2000; Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997; Wilson & Musick, 1999). Linked to this, volunteering also fosters interpersonal trust, tolerance and empathy towards others, and, also, respect for the common good, which decreases the likelihood of young people becoming involved in negative social behaviour, such as vandalism or self-destructive habits (Wilson, 2000). We can also find some empirical evidence supporting the existence of a relationship between volunteering and mental health, which has found that young volunteers experience

higher levels of life satisfaction, happiness (Dosomething.org, 2012; Wilson & Musick, 1999), self-esteem (Broadbent & Papadopoulos, 2010; Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer & Snyder, 1998; Primavera, 1999; Yogeve & Ronen, 1982), and lower levels of depression (Kim & Morgül, 2017).

Volunteering promotes the belief in one's ability to bring about change, which increases perceptions of autonomy and self-efficacy. In this regard, it has been found that engaging in volunteering significantly increases young people's perception of self-efficacy, which could explain a possible link between the latter and their psychological well-being (Eley, 2003; Melkmfan, Mor-Salwo, Mangold, Zeller & Benbenishty, 2015; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Smith, Ellis & Howlett, 2002).

Lastly, some studies show that volunteering can increase the likelihood of finding a job, especially for those facing more disadvantages in the labour market (Gay, 1998; Gaskin, 2004). Given the current socio-economic situation, interest in this specific topic has grown in recent years (Rochester, 2009). Young people find themselves in an increasingly competitive environment, with similar education levels and limited work experience (Roulin & Bangeter, 2013). It is also becoming more common for employers to select candidates based on the variety of their experiences (Kail, Plimmer, Ni Ogain, Harries & Coops, 2014), and to consider that volunteering increases young people's chances of finding a job (Gay, 1998). Volunteering can involve participating in an extracurricular activity, which, in turn, can provide an opportunity to demonstrate attitudes, knowledge, skills etc. that add value to their professional profile and make them stand out among other candidates. Dean (2014) shows how young people are increasingly pressured into volunteering and into seeing volunteering as primarily a route into employment.

Although young people perceive that volunteering improves their chances of finding a job (Cnaan et al., 2010; Donahue & Russell, 2009; Hill, Russell & Brewis, 2009; Newton, Oakley & Pollard, 2011; Smith et al., 2002; VInspired, 2008), there is little empirical evidence to show that this is actually the case (see for example, Hackl, Halla & Pruckner, 2007; Paine, McKay & Moro, 2013; Wilson & Musick, 1999). However, there is evidence to support that volunteering gives young people the opportunity to acquire knowledge; improve their interpersonal relationship skills and increase their communication skills (Broadbent & Papadopoulos, 2010; Celio, Durlak & Dymnicki, 2011; Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Fortier, Auger & Froment-Prévesto, 2007; Erturan-Ogut, 2014); develop skills like management and leadership (Broadbent & Papadopoulos, 2010; Donahue & Russell, 2009; Eley, 2003; United Nations Volunteers, 2011); make new contacts in their social networks that can help them access job opportunities; and experience different types of jobs that facilitate decision-making concerning their future professional career (Cnaan et al., 2010; Haski-Leventhal, Ronel, York & Ben-David, 2008; Lindsay, Chan, Cancelliere & Mistry, 2018; United Nations Volunteers, 2011; Speakman, Drake & Hawkins, 2001; Kay & Bradbury, 2009). All of these factors help to improve their employability, which is understood as the “*set of skills and attitudes that allow an individual to secure and keep a job*” (Royal Spanish Academy, 2017).

Dean (2016) and Bonnesen (2018) describe that youth participation depends largely on the social class. Most young volunteers are primarily middle class. Therefore, young people with other profiles (working-class, for example) could not experience the benefits of volunteering. Added to this issue, some studies demonstrate that the benefits derived from volunteering can be even more significant among young people at risk of social exclusion (United Nations Volunteers, 2011, for example). Young people in this situation can often have a greater need for educational and professional resources and have a lesser degree of civic attitudes and behaviours (Spring, Dietz & Grimm, 2007). The term “young people at risk of social

exclusion" refers to young people who are vulnerable due to various factors - covering both the context in which they grow up (for example, in families with low education levels and limited economic and social resources, or in an uncertain legal situation, such as being an immigrant or asylum seeker) and difficult personal circumstances (for example, emotional or behavioural problems) - which often results in them leaving school and lacking the necessary resources to secure a job. Although volunteering can be more beneficial for young people at risk of social exclusion, it is nonetheless less likely that they will engage in developing the above-mentioned attitudes and behaviours (Dean, 2016; Spring et al., 2007).

While these findings help to demonstrate the potential benefits of volunteering in young people, the empirical evidence available on young people is still scarce. Research on personal consequences is limited, and very little is known about issues like psychological well-being and occupational achievement (Kim & Mogül, 2017), for example.

Furthermore, comparisons between young volunteers and young non-volunteers are limited, and data is not usually collected from young people before they start volunteering. In addition to this, most of these studies are non-longitudinal, which makes it difficult to identify and determine causal relationships (Hill & Stevens, 2010; Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010).

Thus, this study seeks to analyse both the differential profiles of young people at risk of social exclusion who choose to engage in voluntary activities and those who do not, and the benefits they experience after taking part in a volunteering programme over the course of an academic year. Specifically, it demonstrates that volunteering contributes to improving the image of volunteer work, the self-reported likelihood of engaging in volunteering in the future, perceived social support, the experience of positive and negative effects, happiness, values, assertiveness, self-confidence, the perception of the likelihood of finding a job and actual job obtainment.

## **Methodology**

For this study, a quantitative approach was adopted. Data collection was carried out through a survey. The selected questionnaire included different types of questions that allowed the previously identified variables to be measured. Specifically, in relation to positive and negative affect and happiness (see e.g. Diener & Emmons, 1984; Diener, Sandvik, Pavot & Gallagher, 1991) a Spanish adaptation of the Watson, Clark and Tellegen PANAS scale (1988) was used. Values were evaluated through a Spanish adaptation of the Positive Orientation to Others scale of Braithwaite and Law's values inventory (1985), which is based on the Rokeach values survey (1979). Assertiveness was evaluated with Rathus assertiveness schedule (1973). Finally, self-confidence was evaluated with the Spanish adaptation of the General Self-Efficacy Scale of Bäßler and Schwarzer (1996). In all cases, a 5-point Likert response scale was used, and the reliability of the instruments was considered appropriate in order to be able to use it in this research.

The questionnaire was completed by a total of 66 young people at risk of social exclusion. These young people had left school for family and/or personal circumstances, and did not have enough resources to get a secure job. All of the participants were enrolled in training programmes organised by the Cultural Association "Norte Joven" and they came from the same training centre managed by this organisation. Norte Joven is a Spanish not-for-profit organisation that was founded in 1985. Its objective is to promote the personal development and socio-occupational integration of individuals at risk of social exclusion through education, their access to employment and raising public awareness. It mainly works with

young people aged between 16 and 25 offering comprehensive, personalised training pathways for increasing employability. This includes professional education in offices, academic training in adult secondary education centres, and personal and social development training. It also has a job-placement support department and a job board for students who complete the training.

In addition to taking part in the curricular activities comprising Norte Joven's training courses, 60.6% of the total number of participants also took part in a volunteering programme to visit older persons in retirement homes, as part of their personalised pathway, as well as part of their personal and social development training. The rest of the sample only participated in the activities included in the curriculum of the training pathways. Some 32.5% and 19.2% of the volunteer and non-volunteer groups respectively, were female. As mentioned above, ages ranged between 16 and 25. The average age was 18.71 years (DS=2.03) and 19.48 (DS= 2.64) in the volunteer and non-volunteer groups, respectively. No significant differences in gender and the average age of the two groups were found. This indicates that the two groups of young people were comparable. None of the participants had completed elementary school at the time of starting their pathways.

The data collection procedure was longitudinal and the one followed to select the participants was not random. This means that only those young people who agreed to do so participated. Young people provided information at three points in time: before starting volunteering and after indicating their decision to take part or not take part in the volunteering programme (completing the questionnaire); after completing the academic year and, depending on the case, the volunteering programme (completing the same questionnaire); and lastly, 6 months after completing their studies (responses to a follow-up phone call about their current work situation).

The questionnaires were managed by Norte Joven staff trained in the use of this data collection tool. Initially, the questionnaire was self-administered. However, given the students' low educational level (none of the participants had completed elementary school), in most cases the staff administering the questionnaires assisted them so that they could fully understand the various items covered.

## Results

The results shown below are derived from the use of the software package: IBM SPSS Statistics 22.

### *Profile of those who choose to take part in voluntary activities and those who do not.*

The results of the descriptive analysis of young volunteers and non-volunteers at the start and end of the course are recorded in Table 1. Given the small sample sizes and the fact that in the preliminary analysis it was observed that most of the variables used did not meet the assumption of normality, the Mann-Whitney U test was used to assess whether significant differences existed between young volunteers and non-volunteers in both the before and after results. This allows an analysis of the profile of the young people who volunteer in comparison with those who do not, seeing the previous differences between them before participating in the organisation's programmes, and the existing differences once the programmes are completed.

On the whole, young people who took part in the volunteering programme scored, on average, higher than those who did not in many of the variables analysed. Analysis of the

statistical significance <sup>1</sup> of such differences, by using the Mann-Whitney U test, shows that the profile of young volunteers is characterised by their perception of being more likely to volunteer in the future; a perception of greater support of their volunteering from the people important to them; and the placing of a greater importance on interpersonal values, such as being tolerant, cooperative, trustworthy, etc. In contrast, the young volunteers show significantly lower assertiveness (see Table 2).

Table 1. Descriptive analyses of the variables assessed in the first and second points in time.

	VOLUNTEERS				NON-VOLUNTEERS			
	BEFORE		AFTER		BEFORE		AFTER	
	MEAN	SD*	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
VOLUNTEERING IMAGE	4.20	.97	4.50	.66	3.69	1.22	3.77	1.06
FUTURE VOLUNTEERING	3.81	1.18	3.64	1.04	2.76	.95	3.05	.97
SOCIAL SUPPORT	4.35	.98	4.46	.71	3.69	.76	4.17	.88
POSITIVE EMOTIONS	3.98	.60	3.73	.62	3.70	.64	3.69	.65
NEGATIVE EMOTIONS	1.96	.63	2.16	.82	2.13	.65	2.16	.67
HAPPINESS	2.01	.97	1.56	1.12	1.5711	.79	1.53	.90
LIKELIHOOD OF FINDING A JOB	3.15	1.25	3.55	.85	3.34	.97	3.65	.93
VALUES	4.42	.44	4.28	.53	3.99	.59	4.11	.50
SELF-CONFIDENCE	3.88	.63	3.71	.92	3.86	.51	3.81	.47
ASSERTIVENESS	2.99	.46	3.03	.33	3.33	.49	3.22	.43
			FREQUENCY				FREQUENCY	
ACTUAL JOB OBTAINMENT	-----		18 (54.5%)		-----		13 (52.0%)	

\*Standard Deviation

<sup>1</sup> Differences statistically significant refer to differences that are really important. The value of the statistic (X<sup>2</sup>, for example) which allows evaluating the significance of such differences is usually accompanied by the associated probability (p). Probabilities lower than 0.05 assume the existence of significant differences.

Table 2. Results of the Mann-Whitney U test to demonstrate differences between volunteers and non-volunteers.

VARIABLES	BEFORE	AFTER
IMAGE OF VOLUNTEERING	340.50	184.00*
FUTURE VOLUNTEERING	200.00**	216.50*
SOCIAL SUPPORT	189.00**	224.00
POSITIVE EMOTIONS	338.50	329.00
NEGATIVE EMOTIONS	377.50	318.00
HAPPINESS	329.00	327.50
LIKELIHOOD FINDING A JOB	399.50	302.00
VALUES	241.50**	277.00
SELF-CONFIDENCE	435.50	324.00
ASSERTIVENESS	274.50*	243.50

\* Indicating a 95% confidence level ( $\alpha=0.05$ ).

\*\* Indicating a 99% confidence level ( $\alpha=0.01$ ).

It was found that after completing the programme, the volunteers had a significantly more positive image of volunteering and showed greater willingness to volunteer in the future (see Table 2).

In relation to actual job obtainment (see Table 1), the data shows that at after six-months volunteers have a job more often than non-volunteers. But the use of  $X^2$ , which is another statistical test that allows identification of significant differences when evaluating frequencies (in this case, to have a job or not), shows that no significant differences are found between volunteers and non-volunteers in their employment situation at the time of follow-up ( $\chi^2=.037$ ;  $p<.05$ ).

#### *Benefits of volunteering in young people*

In order to assess to what extent volunteering could improve the above-mentioned constructs, the Wilcoxon test was used to analyse whether significant differences existed between before and after completing the training pathway and volunteer programme, respectively in non-volunteers and volunteers. In other words, these analyses will allow a check on whether or participation in volunteering has generated some kind of effect.

The analysis of statistical significance of differences found between the before measurements and the after measurements taken for each group (volunteers and non-volunteers), shows that there are only significant differences in the group of volunteers, and not in the group of non-

volunteers. The volunteers experienced a decrease in positive emotions and happiness, but an increase in their perception of the likelihood of finding a job (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of the Wilcoxon test for samples of volunteers and non-volunteers.

VARIABLES	VOLUNTEERS	NON-VOLUNTEERS
IMAGE OF VOLUNTEERING	-1.61	-1.60
FUTURE VOLUNTEERING	-.99	-1.02
SOCIAL SUPPORT	-.18	-1.54
POSITIVE EMOTIONS	-2.19*	-.08
NEGATIVE EMOTIONS	-1.57	-.37
HAPPINESS	-2.16*	-.08
LIKELIHOOD OF FINDING A JOB	-2.91*	-1.23
VALUES	-1.11	-.56
SELF-CONFIDENCE	-1.24	-.08
ASSERTIVENESS	-.63	-.14

\* Indicating a 95% confidence level ( $\alpha=0.05$ ).

\*\* Indicating a 99% confidence level ( $\alpha=0.01$ ).

## Discussion

Studies on the benefits that young people gain from volunteering are still limited. This study sought to analyse the benefits of volunteering in young people using a longitudinal design, which compared young volunteers and non-volunteers with similar profiles and with data collected before the young people started volunteering.

The data collected not only allowed for an analysis of the impact of volunteering, but also of whether the profile of the young people who took part in the volunteering programmes differed from those who did not. The results show that such differences do exist. In this respect, the importance attached to social support and values, specifically those related to relationships with others, such as tolerance and trust, were significantly more prevalent in the young volunteers. They also perceived themselves as more likely to volunteer in the future, which could perhaps be a result of a greater perceived social support and the greater importance given to certain values.

The two latter variables which help define the profile of young volunteers could also explain their greater motivation to take part in volunteering. According to functional motivation



theory (Clary et al., 1998), volunteering can be a way to express values related to altruistic and humanitarian interest towards others. In fact, studies have shown that interest in others is typical among volunteers, and is a characteristic that differentiates volunteers from non-volunteers. (Allen & Rushton, 1983; Anderson & Moore, 1978). In the same vein, volunteering can also have a social function by presenting opportunities to spend time with friends or to do things that will be viewed positively by the people who are important to us. In relation to the benefits gained from engaging in volunteering most of the young volunteers described their experience in very positive terms to the staff who administered the questionnaire. For example, some frequent comments were *"I'd like to spend all my life with them, at their side"*, *"I have been able to devote my time to people who needed it"*, *"It has allowed me to learn from them"* or *"It makes me feel a better person"*. Despite this, quantitative analysis reveals only that after completing the academic year, the young volunteers had a more positive view of volunteering and showed greater willingness to volunteer in the future than their non-volunteer counterparts (the second difference was found also before initiating the academic year). In accordance with this, Ling and Chui (2016) identified prior experience in community service as a main predictor of the willingness of students to participate in future volunteering. However, there is no support for what was previously described by other authors. For example, volunteers were not found to be happier; quite the opposite. No increase in self-confidence or improvements in communication skills, such as assertiveness, were observed, either (Dosomething.org, 2012; Eley, 2003; Smith et al., 2002; Wilson & Musick, 1999). Perhaps the type of volunteering and the features of the specific activity carried out (the people assisted, duration of the activity etc.) might explain these results. In this study, the volunteering activity involved accompanying older persons who have a functional limitation and/or lack a social network which results in living in a retirement home. In general, these individuals were in a state of dependence, to a greater or lesser degree. Being exposed to this reality can lead the young volunteers to think about topics or issues they had not previously considered, such as the lack of social support available to people at this stage of their life, the deterioration of the human body etc. It is also possible that, in some cases, the type of communicative relationship established with older persons was so basic and limited that it did not facilitate the development and/or improvement of certain communication skills. Furthermore, although the young people may perceive their contribution to have some impact on the wellbeing of older persons, they might think that they are not generating any significant changes in these people's lives, which would not nurture their sense of self-sufficiency in this regard. Lastly, certain uncontrolled variables, such as financial difficulties or dysfunctional family relationships, may have had an effect on how the findings turned out. Taking into account that both social risk and employability are influenced by multiple factors, the interventions aimed at reducing social risk or increasing employability through the promotion of volunteering must provide support and training to consolidate the positive impact of these experiences (Kail et al., 2013). In this case, such support and training were not made available. Tessier, Minh-Nguyet and Gagmon (2006), show that the vast majority of young people volunteering programmes reviewed by them generated positive experiences in young people when three criteria were present: the proposed activities provide a learning experience for young people, the objectives and tasks meet young people's expectations, and the experience provides enough satisfaction to motivate participants to continue volunteering.

Blais, McCleary, García and Robitaille (2017) reviewed the benefits of intergenerational interactions between young volunteers and residents of long-term care homes and found that the benefits for young people include developing new communication and career-related skills, improved attitudes towards older adults, and the development of meaningful

relationships and friendships. The results of the present study show the need to further research the impact of intergenerational volunteer programmes.

Despite the fact that no improvements were found in the above-mentioned areas, the young people who took part in volunteering perceived themselves as more likely to find a job. It is possible that irrespective of the specific features of the voluntary activity, the act of volunteering itself made them feel useful, collaborative and willing, and helped them realise that they can make a contribution by volunteering, which in turn made them feel more optimistic and have a more positive outlook of their future prospects. Kail et al. (2014) describe how confidence in finding a job, the capacity to look for work and the ability to present oneself appropriately to employers is linked to successfully securing a job. Other possible explanations for this might be related to how volunteering can help expand their social networks. Increased social connections and the fact that such new contacts are likely to have different profiles from closer contacts in their network could have also contributed to their optimism. In this regard, Melkman, Mor-Salwo, Mangold, Zeller and Benbenishty (2015) note that volunteering helps young people to develop a sense of social connection and improves their capacity to deal with a disadvantaged past. But the analysis on actual job obtainment does not show any significant improvements among the young volunteers. Although the follow-up performed reveals that a larger number of young volunteers secured a job, differences with non-volunteers cannot be considered significant. Paine et al. (2013) found that volunteering had a weak effect on employability outcomes, in terms of moves into employment, job retention and progression. They described that “*While volunteering can enhance employability outcomes for some individuals in some contexts, the true value of volunteering, arguably, lies elsewhere*” (pp. 20).

To interpret these results appropriately, the current socio-occupational situation in Spain at present must be considered. Young people in Spain experience significant difficulties in finding work. These difficulties are multiplied for young people at risk of social exclusion; in many cases they also have to deal with social prejudice, which, no matter how much volunteering may have helped them grow in other areas, often remains a difficult barrier to overcome.

It is also necessary to consider the variety of factors which can influence youth employability. In this respect, Kail et al. (2014) underscore the importance of personal circumstances, emotional capacity, attitudes, employment skills such as teamwork and leadership, training and education, previous experiences (volunteerism, for example), and job search-related knowledge and skills. Securing a job is a non-linear process involving many factors which simultaneously interact with others, meaning that the process is different for each individual. In order to analyse the relationship between volunteering and access to employment, it is necessary to take into account the broad multiplicity of these decisive factors.

The results obtained on the psychological benefits of volunteering paint a rather inconclusive picture in relation to studies on young people. The benefits gained appear to be less pronounced among young people than among older persons (Anderson et al., 2014; Dávila & Díaz-Morales, 2009). The findings discussed are mainly taken from self-report questionnaires, as has been the case in most previous research, in which young people write about their perceptions of various topics. These perceptions may not necessarily be a good indicator of the changes that volunteering may have brought about. It is also possible that the instruments used to assess their perceptions were not sensitive enough to detect subtle changes in the constructs analysed, or that the problem was the size of the sample covered. Volunteering can have a significant impact. However, such impact can manifest itself in

relatively small quantitative changes. It is therefore essential to include a sufficient number of volunteers and non-volunteers for the impact to be reliably quantified (Hill & Stevens, 2010). In this study, the size of the sample was limited by the total number of young people participating in Norte Joven's training programmes held in the centre that took part in the study; the number of young people who voluntarily chose to participate in the study and the longitudinal nature of the study. Over the course of the data-gathering process, certain participants did not complete their training at the centre and left the programme.

## **Conclusion**

Young people who choose to volunteer have a different profile to that of young people who choose not to, and the results found in this study support this.

Regarding the benefits of volunteering, many of the results found are not consistent with those found by previous research. This should not be interpreted as meaning that volunteering is not having a positive impact on volunteers, but it should show, on one hand, show the need to study more specific characteristics of volunteering experiences and volunteers. It is likely that not all kinds of volunteering, and being a volunteer, contributes to empowerment in the same way for everybody. For example, a young person's social context, as well as the support and training received during their volunteering placement, are key elements to be considered. On the other hand, it should also show the need to assess the effectiveness of volunteer programmes to implement improvements in them that contribute to increasing their positive impact on all parties involved. In any case, the need to continue researching this topic is evident. Future research should consider the combined use of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, as each option has its pros and cons. The combined use of both can contribute to a more comprehensive delving into this topic.

Youth unemployment is a problem that has been exacerbated by the financial crisis in Spain, which may have serious long-term repercussions in areas such as health and wellbeing, social bonding and economic status (Eurofound, 2012; Kail et al, 2013). Even though the main aim of volunteering is to provide a service which helps to improve the lives of others, we should not lose sight of the fact that, *per se*, volunteering can be an empowerment tool for young people, which can help them overcome difficulties in accessing employment. This study offers practitioners, particularly those in training centres, such as the one used in this study, an insight into the role of volunteering in relation to the personal and social development of centre users.

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