STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION: ADULT LEARNING THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF VOLUNTEERING

Annotation. The article aims to show the influence volunteering has on strengthening social cohesion. This requires dealing with different theories and models to describe and explore the nature of volunteering. A pilot-research was carried out from the theoretical framework. The results of the research show a correlation between the important things in life and the level of influence in this field, the relevance of civic skills and competences, and the role of reflection. The study also provides insight into practice of volunteering in Lithuania.

Keywords: Adult learning, volunteering, participation, decision making, civic skills, knowledge, reflection

Introduction

When we talk about the ways to strengthen social cohesion, such as civic empowerment and social partnership, it’s always connected with a process of (lifelong) learning, especially when considering the individual and organizational perspective. The role of reflection in this context is fundamental. Without reflection, there is no development, improvement, innovation, or social cohesion. Volunteer work is a practical way of gathering experience and reflecting-in and on-action. Therefore, volunteers can expand their skills and competences that are needed for social cohesion. The aim of the research is to describe adult learning through participation in the practice of volunteering. The object of the research is the adult learning through participation.

The tasks of the research are to:
• analyze scientific sources in order to identify the main aspects of different theories connected with volunteering
• verify the theoretical considerations by describing the participatory reality of adults in the society

Participation

When we talk about civil empowerment and social partnership, we talk about various forms of participation (codetermination) of individuals and groups or organ-
When we talk about civil empowerment and social partnership, we talk about various forms of participation (codetermination) of individuals and groups or organizations in the decision making processes. To describe the nature of participation, Arnstein, for example, uses the “ladder of citizen participation.” He makes a three-fold division and differentiates between “non-participation,” “tokenism,” and “Citizen Power.” Within this tripartite division, he distinguishes eight stages. Arnstein defines participation as to be involved in decision-making. Just informing or explaining about decisions does not meet this criterion. In his opinion, the step “informing” is “<…> the most important first step toward legitimate citizen participation,” but he also mentions that no one has absolute control like the eighth stage. But he nevertheless identifies power as the main motive. Participation refers to the relation of actors to each other and the distribution of decision making power between these actors (Arnstein, 1969). By using this model, we can also identify a self-referential holistic side of participation. As a part of society, citizens live in different systems so that their influence on decisions may vary. In their own families, they will have more influence on decisions in contrast to decisions concerning the country, for example. When put in a management context, some barriers to innovation can be identified.

The different systems like family, community, city, country, etc. can be seen as hierarchical barriers while Arnstein’s model of participation describes functional barriers, which together lead to some kind of operational islands. Hörmann and Tiby use this illustration to describe barriers to innovation at an organizational level (Hörmann & Tiby, 1990). Following this theory, it is clear that citizens are acting in different contexts based on operational islands.

Another model illustrating participation and barriers is Hörmann and Tiby’s (1990) diagram that represents a simplified and adapted-to-the-topic model. The diagram (Hörmann and Tiby, 1990) illustrates the relationships between different levels of influence and barriers to innovation within an organization. The diagram shows how internal and external barriers can affect the level of influence on decision-making processes. This model helps to identify the different stages of participation and the barriers that might exist at each stage.
level (Hörrmann & Tiby, 1990). Following this theory, it is clear that citizens are acting in different contexts based on operational islands. The goal is to use the leeway and resources of each island to make use of the level of participation that is possible.

Another model illustrating participation and barriers is from Müller-Prothmann, et al. (2008). The diagram represents a simplified and adapted-to-the-topic model. In both models, it is clear how the level of participation corresponds to external factors and these are mutually dependent. But at the same time, it is clear that the level of the citizen (internal) is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of participation. What does a competent and responsible citizen need to participate in a democratic country? In a report produced by the “Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools” the use of civic learning is described as follows:

“Civic skills are the abilities necessary to participate as active and responsible citizens in democracy. They are necessary for critical thinking and collective action, and they include speaking, listening, collaboration, community organizing, public advocacy, and the ability to gather and process information” (The Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, 2003, p. 16). The report also notes that self-efficacy is a precondition in order to make a change (civic action) but, at the same time, this action can lead to more self-efficacy. The European Commission has also identified eight key competences in the context of lifelong learning. One of those is called “Social and Civic Competence.” This competence is based on knowledge and includes the ability to reflect critically and creatively (European Commission, 2006, p. 10). But what exactly does this mean? Living in a society where knowledge has high value forces citizens to learn how to deal with knowledge. That means, they have to know how to transform material knowledge into reflexive knowledge in a constructivist manner. To illustrate this process, Arnold and Lermen developed the following model (Arnold & Lermen, 2005, p. 47).

![Diagram of materials and reflexive knowledge](arnold-and-lermen, 2005)
Based on this model, it is clear that citizens actively manage their own learning process, including the evaluation of what is learned. Based on this knowledge the person then reflects on his real life.

Motivation is very important in this context. Why do people want to participate? How does one motivate them, fuel their desires, to participate? Going back to Adam Smith, different authors (Smith, 1950; Esser, 1993, p. 243) have assumed two main goals for human action: physical well-being and social recognition. Hence, similar goals should be present when people choose to participate. Moreover, participants should feel like they can make changes, which relates to the aforementioned notion of self-efficacy. But who assesses these opportunities and results?

This brings us to the value of reflection. The idea of reflective practice goes back to Schön. He distinguishes between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action means reflecting during the action about the action. Reflection-on-action occurs after the action is completed when we review what we have done and how we performed. Schön mentions that knowledge is necessary for both types of reflection (Van den Bossche & Beausaert, 2011, pp. 82–83). Out of this theoretical framework the following three theoretical outcomes can be identified, resulting in the theoretical basis by which we developed a questionnaire for measuring participation.

The theoretical outcomes

I. A citizen is motivated to participate dependent upon the level of influence he or she has in decision making.
II. Citizens need civic skills / competences to participate.
III. Citizens need knowledge and the cognitive tools to reflect.

Results of the research

Based on a sample size of 88 participants, 80.7% are females, 83.9% are students, 24.4% are working. Of those who are working, 95.23% are volunteers. A majority of the respondents are single (88.6%). Two groups could be identified, the group of volunteers and the group of people who are not volunteering at present.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which field are you volunteering in? If you are not a volunteer, which field would you like to participate in?</th>
<th>What personal benefits do you get through volunteering? What are your thoughts about why people become volunteers?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="chart1.png" alt="Bar chart" /></td>
<td><img src="chart2.png" alt="Bar chart" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What hinders you from becoming a volunteer? How important are the following things in your life?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="chart3.png" alt="Bar chart" /></td>
<td><img src="chart4.png" alt="Pie chart" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Result Summary

- If volunteers have a placement, they are also more willing to engage
- The social field is the most interesting for respondents. The main motivation is personal development
- The ways of volunteering should be more flexible (home-office, flexible time planning etc.)
- New measures are needed to improve the information process

Theoretical outcome I

A citizen is motivated to participate dependent upon the level of influence in decision making.
Results from the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you think that being a volunteer can make a change in the environment?</th>
<th>What could be your influence in these fields? How important are the following things in your life?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes 72%</td>
<td>Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No 18%</td>
<td>Importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50/50 10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Result Summary

- There is a correlation between the importance/interest and the degree of influence
- The respondents think that volunteering is a way to change things
Theoretical outcome II

Citizens need civic skills / competences to participate.

Results from the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What knowledge, skills, values and personal characteristics does a volunteer need for civic action?</th>
<th>How important are knowledge, skills, values and personal characteristics in this context?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>65%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Features/Attitudes</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge/Information</td>
<td>Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Features</td>
<td>Personal Features</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Result Summary

- For civic action, personal features seem to be more important than in general
- Civic skills and competences seem to be very important for the volunteers. In context of LLL these skills and competences can be continuously expanded through volunteering
Theoretical outcome III

Citizens need knowledge and the cognitive tools to reflect.

Results from the research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How are you supported by the institution?</th>
<th>What can you say about reflecting on the practice of volunteering?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What kind of support do you expect from an institution?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Graph showing support categories: no support, information/on the job training, personal support, material support, experience]</td>
<td>[Graph showing importance of reflection: important for personal development, don’t know the meaning]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Result Summary

Volunteers expect different types of support. The most important types are personal ones (personal support and on-the-job-training), which leads to personal development. It’s assumed that volunteering is a practical field for reflection and an opportunity to transform material knowledge into reflexive knowledge. The ability to reflect is mentioned as very important and a precondition to achieve these goals.

Conclusions

The practice of volunteering (civic participation) is a fundamental part of our everyday life. In different situations and systems, we must deal with a variety of decisions. The research shows that the level of participation can vary. In the context of strengthening social cohesion skills, competences, the ability to reflect, motivation and knowledge are basic to taking an active part in the decision making process. These factors are interdependent. To develop sustainable ways to strengthen social cohesion, action plans need
to deal with these factors. Volunteering is a very important field necessary to expanding civic skills, which are needed for civic action. To achieve this, the nature of volunteering has to be adapted to the needs of possible volunteers. The research also shows a gap between supply and demand. If we take these conditions into account, it could create a win-win situation. On the one hand, implementing these strategies may strengthen social cohesion while, on the other hand, developing the personality of volunteers.

List of References

Santrauka
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SOCIALINĖS SANGLAUDOS STIPRINIMAS: SUAUGUSIŲJŲ MOKYMASIS SAVANORIAUJANT

Straipsnyje siekiama parodyti savanoriškos veiklos svarbą socialinės sanglaudos kontekste. Aptariamos skirtinės teorijos ir modeliai, padedantys atskleisti savanoriškos veiklos pobūdį. Atliktas bandomasis tyrimas patvirtina, kad pilietinis žmogaus aktyvumas pasireiškia dalyvaujant savanoriškoje veikloje. Pilietiniam veiksmui atlikti svarbios žmogaus asmeninės savybės. Žmogaus gebėjimas reflektuoti, motyvacija ir žinios yra pamatiniai pilietinio dalyvavimo, sprendimų priėmimo procese.

Esminiai žodžiai: suaugusiųjų mokymasis, savanorystė, dalyvavimas, sprendimų priėmimas, pilietiškumas, refleksija.

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