Creating a giving culture among teenagers in Europe; push or pull?

A comparative analysis of service learning programs in the UK and in the Netherlands.

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Over the last years, various countries worldwide have introduced so-called service learning programs in schools. The goal of these programs is to promote civic-mindedness among adolescents, by means of an increase in civic engagement, awareness of values and norms, and active citizenship.

These programs vary by country in terms of student responsibility, type of beneficiaries and duration. It is clear that these different types of service learning programs lead to a difference in effectiveness in fostering civic-mindedness (Meinhard & Brown, 2007). One of such difference that could possibly lead to a difference in effectiveness is the division between mandatory (push) and non-mandatory programs (represented by internal control, see figure 2).

Students dislike having no choice and simply being assigned to an organization or a number of tasks. This will diminish their service motivation and their satisfaction with the program as a whole. They will develop negative associations with service in general. However, one could also argue that non-mandatory programs will only mobilize those who already score high on civic-mindedness, making no difference in the general development of awareness among teenager at all.

The main question that will be examined in this study now is: Is there a difference in effect of ‘push’ versus ‘pull’ in relation to the promotion of civic-mindedness among teenagers?

Figure 1. Hypothesized model of service learning impacts on civic-mindedness
Prior
volunteering
experience

Internal control

CONCEPTS

If participation in service learning programs is voluntary, it is likely that only those teenagers who already show high awareness for others’ need will participate. The effect of voluntary programs would then create differences between those from backgrounds that encourage civic engagement and those from backgrounds that do not at an earlier age. If the program is effective, it will strengthen pre-existing social values and tendencies to participate, and the differences will also become stronger.

Mandatory service programs could serve to reduce pre-existing differences in social values and tendencies to participate in voluntary associations. Those who are less familiar with civic engagement because of a lack of participation in their home environment may learn to participate through the school’s program. If the program is successful, their participation level will increase during and after the program. They will catch up with those who were already inclined to participate before the program.

However, there is controversy on whether ‘mandatory volunteerism’ is beneficial for civic engagement in the long run. A common argument is that mandatory service programs have less positive or even negative effects on civic-mindedness because they undermine intrinsic motivation to display socially desirable behavior. Forcing people to ‘volunteer’ may in fact create an aversion against volunteering.

Intrinsic motivation is likely to be undermined when people voluntarily engage in prosocial behavior that is not directly in their own interest. A meta-analysis of laboratory studies has shown that material incentives indeed lower performance in interesting tasks and the evaluation of how interesting these tasks are (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999).

Moreover, if volunteering is mandatory, this may be taken as a signal that one cannot expect people to volunteer if they were not required to do so. This would reduce the legitimacy of volunteering for those who already do volunteer. From this line of argument, a negative effect of mandatory service is predicted for students who are already involved in volunteering.

METHODS
In order to make a comparison in effect between mandatory and non-mandatory programs, two countries are taken into account that represents the two different program types: Netherlands (push) and the UK (pull).

The Dutch National Service Learning Program at the level of secondary education is encouraged by the Department of Education in the Netherlands since 2006.

Giving Nation (‘GNation’) is an independent project of the Citizenship Foundation, a charitable organization that aims to empower individuals to engage in the wider community. It invites teenagers, teachers and schools to join voluntarily. The project is offered in an attractive media formula; it is highly interactive and depends on strategies of network grouping.

For both studies, the effect of the program on the general (development of) civic-mindedness of the participants will be estimated. The G-Nation project has been evaluated in 2003, using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

For the Netherlands, evaluation data were collected among 2,491 students in 34 schools in secondary education, in two stages. The main data collection period was October-November 2007, when 2,187 students in 28 schools participated.

Both data will be used to make an evaluation. These evaluations will be compared considering there impact on the development of civic-mindedness in general. The results will give insight about the desired outlook of a service learning program that will promote civic-mindedness best.

References:


(Meinhard & Brown, 2007).