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The Role of Teachers in the School Community Service¹

INTRODUCTION

In 2010 an American meta-analysis comprising 62 studies that involved 11,837 students pointed out that students who participated in service-learning scored a significant progress in five areas compared to the control group: attitude towards themselves, relation to school and learning, social responsibility, social skills, and scholastic achievement. This result could be the driving engine of the expansion of service-learning and community service programmes worldwide, and induces researchers to explore these programmes in depth in order to have a clearer idea of how students benefit from community service and what conditions promote their growth and strengthening. Hungary started to phase in community service in the 2012/13 school year drawing from the community service which is part of the core programme of the international baccalaureate and Waldorf schools, and the diaconate ministry and charity service embraced by Church schools. In the Hungarian system, performance of 50 hours of community service is a precondition for the commencement of secondary school leaving examination. Following the pattern of service-learning programmes, five hours are spent with preparation and five hours with reflection. At the same time, it follows the logic of community

¹ Compulsory community service was introduced in Hungarian secondary schools in 2011 by the Act on Public Education. The Act defines community service to be performed by secondary school students as “social and environmental protection activity, as well as its educational processing, carried out individually or in groups for the advantage of the local community of the student, which is carried out within an organised framework and is independent of financial interests.” The Hungarian school-related community service programme is a mixture of service-learning and community service programmes, hence the term School Community Service is used in this paper.

service in that it is not integrated into the curriculum and is primarily undertaken as an extracurricular activity. The primary purpose of the programmes is to instil volunteerism in students.² Through experiential learning it aims at promoting social sensitisation, personality development, effective citizenship and career guidance. School Community Service activities can be deployed in the following eight areas: health care, social services, culture, education, disaster management, crime and accident prevention, environmental protection and nature preservation, and leisure activities for various age groups.

The teacher is a key figure in the effectiveness of all community service type programmes. Our research was focused on learning as much as possible from the teachers organising the activities in the framework of the recently introduced Hungarian programme. The target group of the research³ conducted in the first half of 2015 comprised teachers in secondary schools where students graduate with a certificate of secondary school leaving examinations CSSLE (vocational secondary school and grammar schools). The teacher respondents included School Community Service (SCS) coordinators, form teachers, heads of institutions. The students involved in SCS also constituted a respondent group. A total of 571 schools' SCS coordinators and 529 school heads participated in the survey. The respondent schools are representative of the distribution of schools in Hungary by school operator (maintainer) and region. In seven schools, focus group interviews were conducted with the SCS coordinators and the staff of host organisations, and with students of the school. The paper also relies on the findings of other qualitative research. In the context of the SCS monitoring programme aimed at situational analysis, consulting and support⁴ heads, SCS coordinators and students from 50 secondary schools were interviewed.

² In Hungary, volunteerism and community service are entirely separated by law.

³ Revita Foundation was commissioned by the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development (HIERD) to conduct the research project titled "Experiences of the introduction and implementation of School Community Service in public education." The research took place in the context of Phase 2 of the SROP 21st Century School Education (Development and Coordination) programme's priority project 3.1.1-11/1-2012-0001.

⁴ Monitoring was based on Cooperation Agreement No. 2311/2014 between the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development (HIERD) and the Nation Corps of Teachers (NCT) and followed a protocol specially developed for the purpose, and comprised 3% of the Hungarian secondary educational institution operating a full-time CSSLE programme.

FINDINGS

Let us first consider the problems related to introduction. To the question of “What difficulties do you think you may encounter in the course of your activities related to the School Community Service?” SCS coordinators⁵ mentioned administrative burdens in the first place (74.7%), and overburden of teachers in the second place. In the current Hungarian system, most teachers organise community service over and above their 22–26 hours weekly teaching load, which is often a non-reconcilable difficulty. It is important to bear in mind that community service related activities do not fall within the current typical duties of teachers, therefore support and, in the coordinators’ opinion, an extra five hours per week are necessary (source: HIERD, coordinators questionnaire). Another question is how the school can effectively organise community service in the case of commuter students.

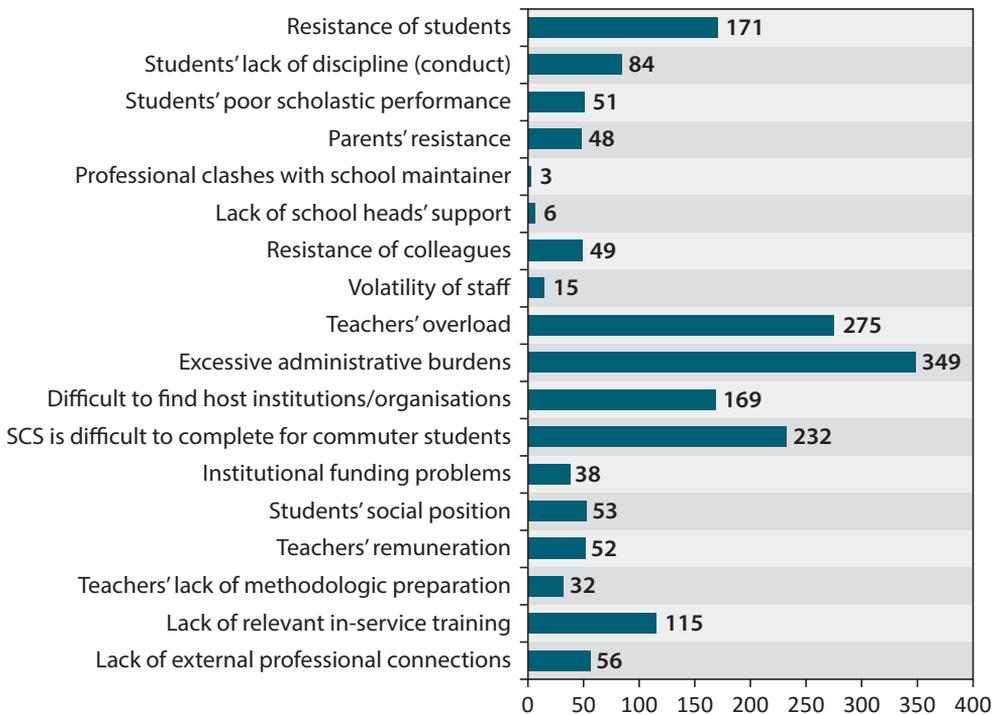


Figure 1 | What difficulties have you encountered as a coordinator in the course of your activities related to school community service? N= 560 (several answers are possible)
Source: coordinators questionnaire, HIERD

⁵ A coordinator is a teacher invited by the school principal to organise SCS, and who is responsible for its operation and the activities related to it. See: FAQ terms: <http://www.kozossegi.ofi.hu/Contents/ShowContentByTitle?title=GYIK>, letöltve: 2016.január 15.

In many cases, the respondent teachers were unclear about the experiential learning tool that was being introduced, so while the acceptance rate of the introduction of community service among teachers is above 95% the teachers charged with coordination are poorly motivated.

This is underscored by the findings of the qualitative survey: *“My first idea was, here’s another task that has to be done, that involves administrative chores and organisation. And only when I later learnt more about it, that’s when I had a clearer picture, but my first impression was, here’s another extra duty to tackle.”*⁶ *“... you are thrown in at the deep end, you don’t know what to do and those who are supposed to be in the know can’t answer any of your questions. You can’t communicate to the students that wow, this is something terrific, kids. At least I certainly couldn’t, I’ll give you that. All I saw at the beginning was that it was just a heap of extra paperwork.”*⁷

Schools are not in the position to remunerate or otherwise reward the coordinator for undertaking the SCS programme coordination. This, however, is not only a matter of funds but also of attitude. Recognition can take many forms but not all educational institutions seem to have it as part of their culture. Many school heads were uncomprehending when faced with this question in the survey: this is a task, they have to delegate it, and it has to be carried out – why should the teacher be praised for it? Compared to the 2015 online questionnaires (Bodó, 2015), the interviews indicate a starker reality: 46% of the teachers received at least verbal commendation in front of the body of teachers or the entire school staff, and about the same rate were granted reduced teaching hours or were exempted from other duties.

From the maintainers’ side, while institutions run by the state maintainer Klebelsberg Institution Maintenance Centre (KLIK) lead in terms of verbal praise (54.1%) and exemption from other duties (31.9%), Church operated institutions are at the head of the list regarding reduced teaching hours (2.6%) and end-of-year bonus (22.2%). Institutions operated by business associations tend to give end-of-year bonuses in greater proportions (44.4%), but these institutions are few and far between nationwide, consequently they have a very minor impact on teachers’ attitude. We can only make guesses about the remuneration system of Church schools (as they were not included in the 2015 monitoring), but the differing scope of movement of Church and state school heads obviously makes a difference when it comes to recognition, and based on their previous experience, Church school heads may be more sensitive (Bodó, 2014).

⁶ Source: the research project described in footnote 3; teachers focus group interview, 5.1, HIERD.

⁷ Source: the research project described in footnote 3; teachers focus group interview, 1.1, HIERD.

Table 1 | Forms of recognition of coordinators' work by school maintainer (rate of choice, valid %) (N=513) Source: School heads questionnaire, HIERD

Method of recognition of the coordinator's work	Type of school maintainer					
	Foundation, association (NGO)	Church	Klebelberg Institution Maintenance Centre (KLIK)	Business association	Other (primarily state owned)	Total
Verbal commendation before the teaching staff	9.5	31.1	44.2	30.0	35.3	38.1
Exemption from other duties	26.2	21.1	31.9	10.0	15.7	27.7
Reduced teaching hours	4.8	25.6	16.4	0.0	24.0	17.5
Verbal commendation before entire school staff	0.0	7.8	9.9	20.0	2.0	8.1
End-of-year bonus	16.3	22.2	0.6	44.4	3.0	6.6

Teachers' attitude to SCS coordination is predominantly determined by their attraction to new professional tasks and their experiences in volunteering (Fényes, Kis 2011) .

Table 2 | Coordinators' involvement in students' SCS activities (valid %) N=547 Source: Coordinators questionnaire, HIERD

Coordinators' involvement in Students' SCS activities	Accompanies students to the host institution outside the school (without taking part in the activity there)			Takes part in the SCS activity at a host institution outside the school together with the students		
	I have been appointed SCS coordinator, it is my job to coordinate SCS activities in my school	I am not an SCS coordinator but I perform SCS related tasks	Total	I have been appointed SCS coordinator, it is my job to coordinate SCS activities in my school	I am not an SCS coordinator but I perform SCS related tasks	Total
Never	18.7	28.8	20.7	37.4	50.0	39.8
Rarely	61.9	52.9	60.1	49.7	40.0	47.8
Often	19.4	18.3	19.2	12.9	10.0	12.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The importance of participation in the activities cannot be overemphasized, as it is through participation that teachers too are sensitised to the particular activity. The task is new and not all adults are involved in volunteering, therefore it is particularly important that teachers gain first-hand experience of the concrete activities (Fényes, 2015). The law does not apply the term ‘educational monitoring’⁸ HIERD’s website (www.kozossegi.ofi.hu) has the following on its FAQ page: “The coordinator or another teacher, if any, responsible for the implementation of the programme (for instance form teacher) should preferably be there at the first activity sessions so that they see and familiarise with the students’ activities from personal experience. As regards *monitoring the programme*, the teacher should from time to time inquire about the students’ experience and difficulties. Regular contacts, cooperation and monitoring are necessary.”⁹

According to the research findings, very few of the teachers involved actually take part in the activities especially if there are many commuters among the students. In many cases, teachers did not have a clear idea of what ‘educational monitoring’ meant; they thought it involved the physical accompanying of students. It is to be noted that given the burdens on SCS coordinators, it is physically impossible for them to attend their students’ community service activities on a regular basis except where the school inserted this requirement in form teachers’ job description, but this happened only in very few cases. They are more likely to do all the paperwork and in most cases, there is no preparation and reflection, or if there is, it is haphazard. This was confirmed by the students who are the first, in 2016, to be subjected to the 50-hour school community service. The questionnaire-based representative survey depicts a somewhat more positive picture: 79.3% of teachers see their students to the host organisation at least once, and 60.2% participate in the activities of the host organisation at least once. To illustrate the contradictory situation, we quote from the transcript of a teacher’s and a student’s opinion: “*When we do something as a group, that’s when we go with them. Not just to supervise them but also to share the community experience, because we have to be there, too. Otherwise it’s we go*

⁸ Decree No. 20 of 2012 (31 August) of the Minister of Human Capacities on the operation of educational institutions and the use of name of public education institutions, Title 45: Provisions relating to community service, § 133 (5): “The teacher coordinating community service performed by a particular student shall offer no more than five hours of preparation and no more than five hours of reflection within the 50-hour time frame of the community service, together with the mentor if necessary.”

⁹ Translator’s note: In Hungarian the word *kísér* can mean *accompany*, *follow*, *track* or *monitor*. *Educational monitoring* is the same in Hungarian as *educational accompanying*, i.e. being accompanied by a teacher; hence the misunderstanding among some of the surveyed teachers.

this way, they go that way, it doesn't work like that"¹⁰ "Has it ever happened that someone from school went with you to the host institution? (giggles) Well, no. What is this supposed to mean, this giggle? Yes, I would like you to translate the giggles for me. Well, obviously, no. It would be so absurd. Why would it be absurd? Because they just don't care, least of all to shepherd us around to a place like that. And okay, I'll be accompanied to ... but by whom? The teacher? There is nobody who would be responsible for it. It's not organised."¹¹

Based on the antecedents, these answers require some interpretation. The teachers have learnt how to answer. From the question they glean the "right" answer, the sort of answer expected of them, which, however, does not tally with their actual educational practice. The rate of teachers frequently accompanying students seems to be closer to reality in the quantitative questionnaire: 19.2% indicated they often accompany their student but don't participate in the activities at the host organisation, and 12.4% stated they also participate. Another possibility is that since the quantitative data referred mainly to those who graduate from secondary school and they were the pioneering year, in their case preparation and reflection were shakier than in subsequent years. If this is the case, the reality is closer to the online respondents' answers than to the facts as indicated by them and the students. In any case, for teachers to be motivated to participate in SCS and to be able to identify the potential host organisations whose activities are not in line with the goals of the programme, and above all, to be able to support their students it is important that they should be familiar with the activities in which the students participate. Based on the quantitative data, the number of teachers involved in the activities will hopefully steadily increase, and it is also hoped that teachers are aware of participation being part of their duties even if they have not yet managed to implement the theory in practice.

The question is exciting but not because of what it is about at first sight. The answers suggest a more positive picture of students' attitude to a newly introduced compulsory activity than it first appears. As to teachers, 40% are of the opinion that students consider SCS an intrusion on their leisure time; 79% think students see SCS as another duty to meet, 69% find they are interested in it, and 71% of teachers think students are engaged in the experience they gain in the SCS programme. Clearly, this result reflects teachers' opinion about what the students' attitude it towards SCS, and it is not the students' opinion.

¹⁰ Source: the research project described in footnote 3; focus group with the participation of school and host institution staff 1.1.

¹¹ Source: the research project described in footnote 3; focus group with the participation of students 1.2.

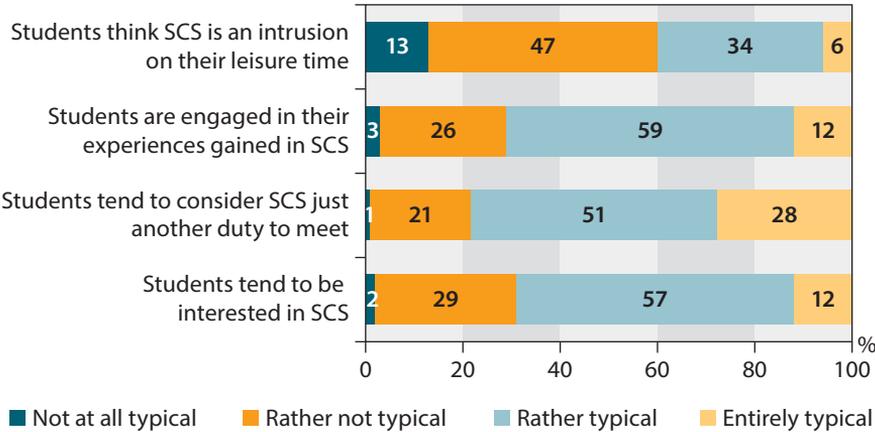


Figure 2 | What is the students’ attitude to school community service in your school (N=562, %, respondents answering on the merit of the question)
 Source: coordinators questionnaire, HIERD

What is exciting is that teachers’ answers seem to be influenced by whether they volunteered to act as SCS coordinators or not. Those who did not choose the task of their own accord tended to underrate the options “*The students tend to be interested in SCS*” and “*The students are engaged in their experiences gained in SCS*” compared to those who volunteered to act as coordinators “through personal motivation” or because they “already have experience with this type of activity” or “play an active role in local events outside the school,” as transpired from their answers to the relevant question.

The same applies to the statement “*Students consider SCS just another duty to meet.*” Those became SCS coordinators because “the school heads so decided” or they were or are “form teacher of the student group concerned” or because of “equal sharing of burdens in the school” were more of the opinion that students’ attitude to SCS was “just another duty to meet” compared to those who are motivated to coordinating community service. The statistical significance test revealed (with significance values consistently below 0.05) that when they assess their students’ attitude teachers’ answers correlate with their own attitude to community service. Consequently, teachers play a crucial role in how students will relate to a particular activity. If teachers are enthusiastic about community service, they will be able to motivate students and the activities will be more useful for students; conversely, an unmotivated teacher emphasizing the compulsory nature of the task will alienate students from community service and may ruin the student’s chances of feeling useful and acquiring useful experience (Molnár, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The introduction of an innovation is always a process and currently the process is at its beginning in Hungary. As one of the respondent teachers put it, *“Sure, it’s definitely more work for form teachers. Still, I think students’ attitude to community work will change over time. When I asked my 12th graders they said well, it’s compulsory and they really weren’t keen at all, but they did it because they had to. Then I asked my 10th graders and they were a bit more enthusiastic, they thought perhaps they could make use of it somehow, but they weren’t mad keen. Then my 9th graders went and listed a whole range of areas they had chosen. So I the way I see it, after a while, I think maybe this takes some time but they will get used to it and they will accept it and it will get better.”*¹²

It can be concluded that teachers have realised the opportunities in the School Community Service programme but its implementation has difficulties. Making this task a part of teachers’ core duties has set up the programme on a long-term footing because funding problems are no longer a worry. Conversely, effectiveness is hampered by this setup. With an appropriate reduction of the weekly teaching requirement (by no more than five hours or one day) the effectiveness of SCS would be secured and the programme would be more than mere paperwork for coordinators. The programme would be efficient on a nationwide level and would be able to achieve its goal of acquainting students with voluntarism and make them potential future volunteers through their experiences in SCS. (Handy, Femida et al, 2010). The key to successful coordination of SCS activities is how heavy the load on the coordinator. At the same time, it is also obvious that schools have managed to organise community service with more or less success despite the difficulties, and as the years go by the level of organisation improves, students become better prepared, and there is a chance they would realise the benefit of such activities and experiences for themselves (Meszlény, 2015). At this juncture, because of the somewhat haphazard nature of preparation and reflection, the Hungarian model is closer to the community service programmes than to service-learning as known from international literature. In a few years, however, a shift will not be unlikely.

Of course, perfect standardisation is impossible, and it applies to this task too. Every teacher and every student is different and circumstances also change. New meaningful activities should be found, but the objective is that students conclude their community service with the kind of experience reflected in the following report:

“This story was an experience for life for all of us. We learnt that we are able to join our forces and we tested our limits. Everybody was nice to the other person, there were no differences, no dissent. The people in the villages thanked all of us for our help. It

¹² Source: the research project described in footnote 3; focus group interview, p 16.

was a lasting experience for us that the only thing that mattered at the time was that we control the flood. It was nice when the village people brought us food while we worked. We gave and we receive.”¹³

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¹³ The excerpt was taken from the following essay submitted to the competitions “Helping Students 2015” in the students category: A student’s Account of Flood Control by Dániel Rúza, Bercsényi Miklós Secondary School, Győr. See also: <http://www.kozossegi.ofi.hu/Contents/ShowContentById/102>

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