

Short Report

The Views of ‘Volunteer’ of Japanese University Students

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Abstract

A questionnaire survey was given to Japanese undergraduate students to determine their personal experiences of ‘volunteer activities’. And their views and images of ‘volunteer’ in Japan. The results showed that almost 80% experienced ‘volunteer activities’ in schools before entering university. The details of their experiences did not relate to their views and images of ‘volunteer’ and the ‘volunteer activities’ at schools did not seem to play an important role in developing the concept of ‘volunteer’ of young people. This study suggested the importance of learning ‘volunteer activities’ at schools.

Introduction

The fundamental and purpose of this study was to determine how the concept of ‘volunteer’ in Japan? ‘Volunteer’ is a term which has several English meanings. When used as verb, an English dictionary defines it as follows: 1. To offer to do something without expecting any reward, often something that other people do not want to do, 2. To tell someone something without being asked, 3. To offer to join the army, navy, or air force, 4. To say that someone else will do a job even though they may not want to do it. As a noun, it is defined as follows: 1. Someone who does a job willingly without being paid, 2. Someone who is willing to offer help, 3. Someone who joins the army, navy, or air force without being forced to do it [1]. In Wikipedia in USA, ‘a volunteer’ is explained as ‘someone who serves in a community primarily because they choose to do so’, and that ‘volunteer work is when a person gives or ‘volunteer’ something clothes, services, or money, which helps others without expecting anything in return’ [2]. These explanations show that the basic concept underlying the term ‘volunteer’ is an act people do for somebody else willingly without being forced to do so.

In Japan, a ‘volunteer’ is also called ‘*borantia*’ which is the Japanese *Katakana* form. The pronunciation is similar to the English word, the meanings of the words seem to be the same, and ‘*borantia*’ activities are similar to those performed in English speaking countries. But there seems to be some confusion in the concepts of ‘volunteer’ and ‘*borantia*’. In Japan, only 12 years have passed since people began to use the word ‘volunteer’. When the great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake occurred in 1995, many people visited the area voluntarily to help the victims. It is said that this was the first time Japanese became aware of the power of ‘volunteer’. It has become very popular in Japanese society, among especially young people who have begun to actively participate [3]. However, there is a Japanese word ‘*houshi*’ meaning ‘service’,

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that also includes the meaning ‘to offer something to objects of worship’ [4]. ‘*Houshi*’ can be an obligation for people that goes beyond ‘volunteer’ good will, but this word is sometimes translated as ‘volunteer’ in English, causing confusion in the meaning of ‘volunteer’ in Japan [4]. Some people, especially the elderly, do not have a good image of this word because the word reminds them of the cruel forced labor called ‘*houshi*’ during the World War II [5].

Now the word ‘volunteer’ has become a term which has complex and ambiguous in Japan. Including beneficence, donation, social service, faith-based institution, and international volunteer, everything relating to actions done for others by good will is called ‘volunteer’ in this country.

To clarify the Japanese original concept of ‘volunteer’, the data of young people seems to be valuable, not only because they are the very people who create the future of this country but also because the Japanese government recently began to use ‘volunteer’ for the education of these generations progressively. The effect of education should not be ignored. Previously in 2004, we had already conducted a study on university students’ views on volunteer, and it was clear that the students who experienced ‘volunteer’ before entering university (36% of 501 students) no longer did so [6]. Clearly, the ‘volunteer’ experiences in elementary, junior high, and senior high schools seemed to have no effect to cultivate ‘volunteer’ spirit of young people.

In 1998, the Japanese government rewrote ‘The Course of Study’ (government curriculum guidelines) [7] for elementary schools and junior high schools (officially ‘junior/senior high school’ is called ‘lower/upper secondary school’ by The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) and in 1999 the one senior high school was revised, on the advice of a report by the Curriculum Council (in this Council report, it was decided to ignore the differences in the meanings of ‘*borantia*’ and ‘*houshi*’ because they were ‘meaningless’) [8]. Instead, ‘comprehensive school hours’ were established to develop ‘zest for living’ in students. The schools were strongly required to give students opportunities for ‘hands-on activities’ in these hours. After a transition period, this program implemented in 2002 in elementary and junior high schools, and in 2003 in senior high schools [9]. In this study the ‘volunteer’, which is performed in school education is referred to as ‘volunteer activities’, to distinguish from ‘volunteer’ in general meaning.

The object of this study was to further clarify the view on so-called ‘volunteer’ in Japanese young people, and the factors which form the basis of their beliefs. This time, the freshmen who entered university in 2006 were chosen as subject, because they were most likely to have the experiences of ‘volunteer activities’ in schools after the government guidelines for teaching were revised. The data have already been analyzed for university students’ experiences of ‘volunteer’ in schools before the revised guidelines. Comparing the data of 2006 with those of 2004, the effects of education in schools are discussed and the students’ views on ‘volunteer’ are considered.

Method

1. Subjects

The subjects for this study were 716 freshman students, males (n=256) and females (n=460), enrolled in 2006 at X University.

2. Materials

A questionnaire survey was done to clarify the details of ‘volunteer activities’ experienced by the students in schools before entering university and their views on ‘volunteer’ including images. Questions were asked about their experiences of ‘volunteer activities’ (e.g. ‘Have you ever experienced ‘volunteer activities’ in elementary, junior high, or senior high school? What kind of ‘volunteer activities’ did you do? How did you feel about your experiences of ‘volunteer activities’ in schools?’), the activities which they recognized

as 'volunteer' (students chose all activities which they recognized as 'volunteer' out of 22 activities that were considered 'volunteer' in Japan), and their images of 'volunteer' (students chose multiple images from 22 choices, such as 'We need much time and money to do 'volunteer)'). The statistical analysis was made using SPSS 10.0J.

3. Procedure

The questionnaire survey was done in 2006. Upon receiving informed consent, the questionnaire sheet was handed out to each student at classes in which the teachers agreed to do this research. The following informed consent agreements were written on the head of the sheet and also read aloud: the object of this study is only to obtain collective data about your experiences of 'volunteer activities' before you entered this university. The data from the unsigned questionnaires will be calculated statistically and will only be used to write a paper. There is no obligation to answer all of the questions. There were 780 sheets were collected and 716 student responses (92.0%) available for analysis.

Results

1. Students' experiences with 'volunteer activities' in school

Five hundred fifty-five students (77.5%) experienced 'volunteer activities' in elementary, junior high, or senior high schools. When asked at which school level they experienced the 'voluntary activity', out of these students, 251 students (45%) experienced 'volunteer activities' at all three school levels, 170 students (31%) at two school levels (e.g. elementary and junior high schools), and 133 students (24%) at one school level (e.g. only in elementary schools). The analysis of their activities follows as below.

The contents of 'volunteer activities' are shown in Table 1. Three hundred ninety eight (n=398) students (72%) experienced: 'Cleaning of public areas' in some stages during their school life; three hundred fifty five (n=355) students (64%) experienced visiting some kind of 'nursing care home' to help the residents. The number of students who experienced this activity in junior high schools (n=213) was more than that in elementary schools (n=136) or senior high schools (n=158). The number of students who experienced the 'volunteer activity' relating to recycling was highest for elementary schools (n=149).

Table 1 Students' volunteer activities in school education

| school grade activities | elementary | junior high | senior high |
|---|---------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | n=416 ¹⁾ | n=437 | n=366 |
| 1. Cleaned public areas (n=398) ²⁾ | 271 ³⁾ | 235 | 155 |
| 2. Worked at a nursing care home (n=355) | 136 | 213 | 158 |
| 3. Joined an activity for recycling (n=254) | 149 | 79 | 41 |
| 4. Donated money (n=141) | 86 | 72 | 47 |
| 5. Joined other activities (n=70) | 12 | 28 | 34 |

1)The total number of students who experienced 'volunteer activities'

2)The actual number of students who experienced this activity through classes

3)The actual number of students who experienced the activity.

Students chose every activity that they experienced at each grade.

The students' comments on their experiences of these 'volunteer activities' are shown in Table 2. These comments showed the students' feelings about their experiences, and were not a self-evaluation. In elementary and junior high schools, more than 50% of students had 'fun' and almost 50% of students (48% in elementary, 46% in junior high) felt it was 'hard' to perform the activities. In high schools, 45% of students

had fun and 34% felt it was hard. At all levels, less than 30% of students felt their experiences were useful and from 5% to 16% of students even felt they were ‘nothing special’ or ‘nonsense’. The differences in comments depended on which activity they experienced. For example, in elementary schools, only 5% of students had fun when they did ‘cleaning’, but 55% of students had ‘fun’ when they visited a nursing care home. At all school levels, the percentage of students who felt the activity was ‘nothing special’ was the highest for the students who experienced ‘donation’.

Table 2 Students' comment after they experienced each volunteer activity

| | comments | | | | |
|--|--|----------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| | fun | useful | hard | nothing special | nonsense |
| Activities in elementary schools n=416 ¹⁾ | n=269 ¹⁾ (64%) ²⁾ | n=85 (20%) | n=202 (48%) | n=67 (16%) | n=31 (7%) |
| 1. Cleaned public areas (n=271) ³⁾ | 13 (5%) ⁴⁾ | 108 (40%) | 107 (39%) | 25 (9%) | 18 (7%) |
| 2. Worked at a nursing care home (n=136) | 75 (55%) | 25 (18%) | 27 (20%) | 3 (2%) | 6 (4%) |
| 3. Joined an activity for recycling (n=149) | 57 (38%) | 13 (9%) | 50 (34%) | 21 (14%) | 8 (5%) |
| 4. Donated money (n=86) | 24 (28%) | 21 (24%) | 17 (20%) | 21 (24%) | 3 (3%) |
| 5. Joined other activities (n=12) | 5 (42%) | 1 (8%) | 1 (8%) | 4 (33%) | 1 (8%) |
| Activities in junior high schools n=437 ¹⁾ | n=234 ¹⁾ (53%) ²⁾ | n=115 (26%) | n=204 (46%) | n=34 (7%) | n=40 (9%) |
| 1. Cleaned public areas (n=235) ³⁾ | 81 (34%) ⁴⁾ | 28 (12%) | 99 (42%) | 8 (3%) | 19 (8%) |
| 2. Worked at a nursing care home (n=213) | 92 (43%) | 57 (27%) | 55 (26%) | 3 (1%) | 6 (3%) |
| 3. Joined an activity for recycling (n=79) | 30 (38%) | 9 (11%) | 28 (35%) | 8 (10%) | 4 (5%) |
| 4. Donated money (n=72) | 17 (24%) | 18 (25%) | 16 (22%) | 14 (19%) | 7 (10%) |
| 5. Joined other activities (n=28) | 14 (50%) | 3 (11%) | 6 (21%) | 1 (4%) | 4 (14%) |
| Activities in senior high schools n=366 ¹⁾ | n=165 ¹⁾ (45%) ²⁾ | n=99 (27%) | n=127 (34%) | n=24 (6%) | n=20 (5%) |
| 1. Cleaned public areas (n=155) ³⁾ | 62 (40%) ⁴⁾ | 21 (34%) | 60 (39%) | 5 (3%) | 7 (5%) |
| 2. Worked at a nursing care home (n=158) | 62 (39%) | 53 (28%) | 34 (22%) | 3 (2%) | 6 (4%) |
| 3. Joined an activity for recycling (n=41) | 10 (24%) | 8 (20%) | 16 (39%) | 4 (10%) | 3 (7%) |
| 4. Donated money (n=47) | 15 (32%) | 13 (28%) | 7 (15%) | 10 (21%) | 2 (4%) |
| 5. Joined other activities (n=34) | 16 (47%) | 4 (12%) | 10 (29%) | 2 (6%) | 2 (6%) |

1) The number of students who chose the comment/the activity.

In each activity, students chose only one comment out of five choices.

Students chose all activities that they experienced.

2) The percentage of students who chose this comment out of the students who experienced ‘volunteer activities’ in these grades.

3) The number of students who experienced the activity.

4) The number of students who chose both the activity and the comment.

The numbers in () shows the percentage of students who chose the comment out of students who experienced the activity.

Next, they were asked about the reasons for performing these volunteer activities in school (Table 3). Students could choose all applicable answers and they chose 2.2 answers on average. Sixty-six percentage (66%) answered ‘Because it’s an obligation’ and 47% chose ‘Because I was interested in the activity’. Twenty three percent (23%) of students did it ‘Because I expected my teacher to give me a better grade’. The ‘volunteer activities’ in schools were considered a kind of ‘obligation’ for some students and sometimes was related to their grade in a particular.

The importance of pre and/or post learning when the students do ‘volunteer activities’ at schools is emphasized by The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [10]. An analysis was done on whether the students experiencing ‘volunteer activities’ in schools had a chance to

Table 3 Reasons students joined the volunteer activity

| Reason | Number of students |
|--|-------------------------|
| 1. Because it's an obligation | 365 (66%) ¹⁾ |
| 2. Because I was interested in it | 263 (47%) |
| 3. Because teachers advised me to do it | 147 (26%) |
| 4. Because I wanted to do it voluntarily | 127 (23%) |
| 5. Because I expected teachers to give me a better grade | 126 (23%) |
| 6. Because I wanted to do the same as my friend(s) | 37 (7%) |
| 7. Because of other reasons | 42 (8%) |

1) The number of students who chose the reason;
The number in () shows the percentage of the students who chose the reason out of students who experienced 'volunteer activities' (n=555).

do pre and/or post learning (Table 4). Three hundred seventy nine students 68% had a chance to do pre and/or post learning relating to the 'volunteer activity'. Eighty four percent (84%) of these students took both pre and post learning classes. The contents of pre-learning class were varied and almost 50% of students learned the following: 1. How to do the activity, 2. Making a plan for the activity, 3. Developing their social skills through group work, 4. General information about 'volunteer'. The contents of post-learning class were not as varied and more than 80% of students wrote an essay about the activity after completion.

Table 4 Opportunities to learn about volunteer: pre/post volunteer activities

| | Either ¹⁾ | Both ²⁾ |
|--|-----------------------|--------------------|
| [pre-learning] | 56 | 322 |
| contents | | |
| 1. We learned how to do the activity | 8 (14%) ³⁾ | 165 (51%) |
| 2. We laid out the activity plan | 30 (54%) | 182 (57%) |
| 3. We developed our social skill through group work. | 29 (52%) | 218 (68%) |
| 4. We learned about 'volunteer' in general | 22 (39%) | 205 (64%) |
| 5. We learned other things | 5 (9%) | 30 (9%) |
| [post-learning] | 16 | 322 |
| contents | | |
| 1. We wrote an essay about our experience | 13 (81%) | 263 (82%) |
| 2. We assessed our activity by ourselves | 3 (19%) | 170 (53%) |
| 3. We had a presentation about our activity | 8 (50%) | 226 (70%) |
| 4. We did other things | 0 (0%) | 28 (9%) |

1) The number of students who experienced either pre-learning or post-learning

2) The number of students who experienced both pre and post learning

3) The percentage of students who chose the content

2. The view on 'volunteer'

To learn about the students' views on 'volunteer', first, we surveyed which activities the students considered to be a 'volunteer'. They chose all activities that they recognized as 'volunteer' out of 22 choices [11,12,13,14,15]. All activities selected were those, which were considered as 'volunteer' almost in all of Japan, including Japanese internet web site. The ranking of choices for the actual actions recognized as

‘volunteer’ are shown in Table 5. More than 60% of students thought that a ‘volunteer’ gave something to somebody. For example, 85% of students recognized ‘Sending pencils to children in developing countries’ as a ‘volunteer’ and 78% answered that, ‘Sending towels to disaster areas’ was a ‘volunteer’.

Table 5 Activities recognized as ‘volunteer activities’

| | n | % |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Sending pencils to children in developing countries ¹⁾ | 611 | 85 |
| 2. Sending towels to disaster area | 558 | 78 |
| 3. Donating blood | 451 | 63 |
| 4. Donating money | 438 | 61 |
| 5. Doing security watch for school children | 425 | 59 |
| 6. Visiting a nursery home to help residents in classroom lessons | 412 | 58 |
| 7. Helping the administration of the National Athletic Festival | 387 | 54 |
| 8. Cleaning public areas around your own house | 349 | 49 |
| 9. Visiting an organization’s web sight, where you can donate one cent by one click | 339 | 47 |
| 10. Helping a person on wheel chair get off the train | 310 | 43 |
| 11. Moving bicycles out of the way from the guidance block for persons with visual impairment ²⁾ | 293 | 41 |
| 12. Picking up cans left on the street and throw them into the trash box | 287 | 40 |
| 13. Buying a ‘White Band’ ³⁾ | 278 | 39 |
| 14. Helping victims in disaster areas as a paid volunteer | 263 | 37 |
| 15. Cleaning public space as a routine obligation to the community | 245 | 34 |
| 16. Collecting fund-raising items on orders from school teachers | 244 | 34 |
| 17. Pushing the button in the elevator for a disabled person | 236 | 33 |
| 18. Registering on the member list of organ donation | 232 | 32 |
| 19. Taking care of people taken suddenly ill or injured when I happened to be on the spot | 135 | 19 |
| 20. Giving my seat to elderly people on the train | 132 | 18 |
| 21. Asking and assist a stranger who is lost for | 106 | 15 |
| 22. Keeping the room temperature at about 28 degree Celsius | 88 | 12 |

1)2) There were significant differences between percentage of students who experienced ‘volunteer activities’ (n=555) and who did not(n=161).

1) The number of students who experienced:482(79%)

The number of students who did not experience:129(21%), $\chi^2=4.507$ p<.05

2) The number of students who experienced:237(81%)

The number of students who did not experience:56(19%), $\chi^2=3.238$ p<.05

3) <http://www.whiteband.org/>

Donations of blood and money were also seen as ‘volunteer’. There were relations between their experiences in schools and the choices they recognized as ‘volunteer’. The percentage of students who chose ‘Sending pencils to children in developing countries’ and ‘Moving bicycles away from the guidance block for persons with visual impairment’ as a ‘volunteer’ was significantly higher in those who experienced a ‘volunteer activity’ in schools than in students who did not (79%>21%, 81%>19%). No significant relations between the view on volunteer and the actual ‘volunteer activities’ experienced in schools.

Second, they were asked about the image of ‘volunteer’ and the result is shown in Table 6. The students chose all images caused by the word, ‘volunteer’ out of 22 choices. These choices were obtained from different publications about ‘volunteer’ in Japan [5,16,17]. Seventy five percent of students imaged that ‘volunteer’: ‘Help to develop consideration for others’. Sixty seven percent of students imaged ‘The activity is performed for charity’. And 61% imaged ‘The activity is performed voluntarily without anyone forcing you’.

There were relations between the above three choices of images and the students’ experiences in schools.

Table 6 Images of 'volunteer activities'

| | n | % |
|--|-----|----|
| 1.Helps to develop consideration for others | 540 | 75 |
| 2.The activity is performed for charity | 481 | 67 |
| 3.The activity is performed voluntarily without anyone forcing you | 436 | 61 |
| 4.The activity is performed for mutual support | 360 | 50 |
| 5.The activity helps to develop communication abilities | 338 | 47 |
| 6.The activity demands time and energy ¹⁾ | 318 | 44 |
| 7.The activity gives us satisfaction | 304 | 42 |
| 8.The activity requires a mental state free from pressure | 299 | 42 |
| 9.The activity is performed to establish personal connection | 292 | 41 |
| 10.The activity requires a sense of responsibility | 292 | 41 |
| 11.The activity is performed for strangers | 260 | 36 |
| 12.The activity needs to be continued | 232 | 32 |
| 13.The activity is an act of self-sacrifice | 194 | 27 |
| 14.The activity is an act of self-satisfaction | 150 | 21 |
| 15.The activity allows everybody to join easily | 120 | 17 |
| 16.The activity is a great way to spend your spare time | 112 | 16 |
| 17.The activity requires that you have money | 82 | 11 |
| 18.The activity is a responsibility of every citizen | 79 | 11 |
| 19.The activity deserves to be paid | 76 | 11 |
| 20.The activity requires special technique and knowledge | 74 | 10 |
| 21.The activity should not be part of school education | 56 | 8 |
| 22.Others | 7 | 1 |

1)There were significant differences between percentage of students who experienced 'volunteer activities' (n=555) and who did not (n=161).
The number of students who experienced:234(74%)
The number of students who did not experience:84(26%), ($\chi^2=5.067$ p<.05).

The percentage of students who chose 'Demands time and energy' was significantly higher in students who experienced a 'volunteer activity' in schools than in those who did not (73%>27%). There were no significant relations between the images of volunteer and the actual 'volunteers activities' experienced in schools.

Discussion

Comparing the data of 2006 with those of 2004, the percentage of students who experienced 'volunteer activities' in schools in 2006 (78%) more than doubled that of 2004 (36%). Also, the percentage of students who did 'volunteer activities' due to feelings of 'obligation' in 2006 (66%) was more than twice that of 2004 (31%). It was found that the students experienced some 'volunteer activities' as obligation, regardless of whether they enjoyed it or not, since 'volunteer activities' are evaluated according to the government guidelines for teaching.

Interestingly, the contents of their 'volunteer activities' and their comments about their activities did not have any relation to their view on and image of 'volunteer' and their views on 'volunteer' were the same as that of the students in 2004. The students who experienced 'volunteer activities' in a school curriculum might have learned that 'volunteer' was a kind of 'obligation' of the citizens, but the activities did not seem to enhance the students' 'volunteer spirit' at all. For most of these students, 'volunteer' was just 'voluntarily' sending some surplus goods to people who needed them and 67% of the 2006 students answered that 'volunteer' was the same as '*houshi*' (service). In their minds, 'volunteer' was to help people who have problems, as in 'voluntary service'. They seemed not to consider whether it is forced or not.

This is the result of their experiences of ‘volunteer activities’ conducted at present in the present school education.

The students’ experience of ‘volunteer activities’ in schools did not have a strong enough impact to change their views. Even the pre/post learning did not effect their views and images of ‘volunteer’.

The education about ‘volunteer activities’ according to the new government guidelines for teaching started only five years ago, and it may be premature to discuss the outcome. However, the situation had been changed before the assessment. In fact, ‘*houshi katsudo*’ (service activities) became a compulsory subject in public high schools in Tokyo [18]. Compulsory ‘volunteer activities’ in schools were also proposed to the government by The Education Rebuilding Council (advisory council to the prime minister) in January 2007 [19]. Appropriate assessment of ‘volunteer activities’ in schools should be continued because developing the concept of ‘volunteer’ in young people is very important for creating the real ‘volunteer activities’ and spirit in this country. If the students who experienced ‘volunteer activities’ in schools should only learn that ‘volunteer’ is giving the needy people their surplus goods, the ‘volunteer activities’ in schools may be questioned from the point of good education. Not only how to educate students, but also objectives of through the ‘volunteer activities’ must be clearly defined.

What is the concept of ‘volunteer’ in Japan? The question cannot be answered by this study. At present, the education system did not play a sufficient role for developing the young peoples’ concept of ‘volunteer’. Then, what are the issues for the ‘volunteer activities’ in schools in Japan? The ‘volunteer activities’ in Japanese schools may not seem to be the same as ‘service learning’ in the US because there is no curriculum equivalent to the ‘service learning program’ in the US [20]. In follow-up study, the issues of learning ‘volunteer activities’ in schools will be analyzed to get a better understanding of the concept of ‘volunteer’ in Japanese young people.

Conclusion

The percentage of the students who experienced ‘volunteer activities’ in schools (78%) and chose ‘obligation’ as the reason for performing the ‘volunteer activity’ (66%) were more than double those of 2004 (36%, 31%). The views on ‘volunteer’ were not different between the 2004 and 2006 students, and most of them believed that giving surplus goods to needy people as ‘volunteer’. This belief might relate to their experiences in schools because the 2006 students had learned in schools after the new government guidelines for teaching were implemented. But the details of the experiences of their ‘volunteer activities’ did not relate to their views and images of ‘volunteer’. This means that the ‘volunteer activities’ did not play an important role in developing the concept of ‘volunteer’ in young people. Some factors that played a role in shaping their views or images of ‘volunteer’ might be found outside the schools. In Japan, the importance of ‘volunteer activities’ in schools is increasing. The results of this study suggest the importance of assessing the learning process connected to ‘volunteer activities’ at schools. The role of education for developing the concept of ‘volunteer’ in Japanese young people will be made clearer by further research.

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