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9. Who has the right to volunteer?

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One of the most famous Finnish families is the Moomins, created by Tove Jansson. Moomins live in Moomin Valley, in the blue Moomin house. Moomins are bohemian, free-spirited and open-minded creatures whose home is always open to friends and random passers-by. Moomins are always ready for an adventure and meeting new friends. One day, in the book *Invisible Child* (1991), a friend of the Moomins named Too-Ticky comes over with an invisible child, Ninni, who has been bullied so badly she has become invisible. "I brought her here, so that you can make her visible again," says Too-Ticky (Jansson 1991, 103).

Ninni is not alone in her experience of invisibility. The world is filled with her fate companions who have turned invisible due to bullying, unemployment or other hardships that make them feel unseen. One way to reduce loneliness and feelings of worthlessness is to take part in volunteer work, unpaid work based on one's free will and choice.

Many workplaces are eager to accept student volunteers in their organizations, and they value the students' input. However, there seems to be fewer opportunities for those aspiring volunteers whose threshold to volunteer work is far too high for one reason or another. What if life has led you to a state where you experience yourself as invisible and unworthy as Ninni did when she entered the Moomin house? Who has the right to perform volunteer work and on whose terms?

This article discusses who has the right to participate in voluntary work. Is it really available to everyone? Who has the opportunity to participate in society and with what kind of preconditions? What kind of values and attitudes are inherent to the act of volunteering, and how can it be supported? The article is based on experiences within the Supported Volunteering project and the Timeout dialogue held at Lahti Diaconia Institute in May 2019.

VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering can support participation and integration by strengthening self-esteem and trust in one's capabilities, as well as by opening up new paths for the future. For example, for immigrants, volunteering provides a way to informally learn new skills and get acquainted with the work culture of the host country and thus build human capital (Yeteshawork 2017, 6, 14).

Amartya Sen (1999) argues that poverty and disadvantage are not about lack of money but lack of capabilities. Capabilities mean a person's real freedom to choose from different opportunities. Some capabilities are inborn (capacity), some are gained (competences) and some are formed in the surrounding environment (Sen 1999). The core of the capabilities approach lies in the idea that human beings are dignified and free beings who are able to make choices and shape their own life, rather than being pushed around by the world (Nussbaum 2001). People with capabilities believe in their skills and abilities and are able to pursue life on their own terms.

As a volunteer, one can work with the knowledge and skills one already possesses and participate according to one's abilities, resources and interests. Volunteering is a two-way process in which both the volunteer and the target gain something. Volunteers can learn new skills, feel joy, gain new experiences and meet new people. Volunteering offers value, as it can prevent loneliness and social exclusion. Volunteer work enhances communal trust and social capital, which are the bases of economic development in society (Citizen Forum, no date). According to numerous studies, volunteering can raise self-reported life satisfaction, happiness, health and life mastery, as well as psychological flourishing (Li-Hsuan 2019, Appau et al. 2019, Santini et al. 2018).

Volunteer work has been a part of the studies at Laurea University of Applied Sciences for years: it is partly embedded in study modules, but students also have the opportunity to volunteer in a place of their choosing and earn credits by doing so. Even staff members are encouraged to use some work hours for volunteer work. It is indeed true that voluntary work enables work experience, which is especially valuable for young people. Volunteering also offers the possibility to test different work environments while thinking about one's own future.

SUPPORTED VOLUNTEERING PROJECT

Plenty of volunteering opportunities are available to students, but what about those who don't have the resources and capabilities to find their way to volunteer work? The initial steps to enter volunteering can be challenging to some people. Lahti Diaconia Institute wants to develop possibilities for volunteering for groups who might need support when engaging in volunteer work, such as immigrants, the long-term unemployed or people with disabilities.

People of all abilities can take part in volunteering with little support, orientation and guidance. Supported volunteering is based on the idea that voluntary work is a civil right. Everyone should have the chance to do something significant and to participate in one's community, regardless of language skills, health or one's life situation (Laimio 2017, 4). Supported volunteering could be one path toward gaining capabilities and assimilating into society.

The Supported Volunteering project (2018–2020) run by Lahti Diaconia Institute makes volunteer work possible for those who need support in order to find a place and get started with volunteering. When the project, funded by the European Social Fund, started in March 2018, the project coordinator asked Laurea

representatives to join the steering group, as Laurea was running the project Building Skills and Communities Together (2018–2020), which has a similar target group. Laurea's role in the steering group was to introduce theoretical and practical knowledge and viewpoints about participation and inclusion.

Supported Volunteering offers a structured path to volunteering. The project coordinator meets with the client, and together they chart the client's hopes and wishes for volunteering, as well as their strengths and resources. Hopes and capabilities are the starting point from which the coordinator starts to map out possible volunteering opportunities.

When a suitable opportunity is found, the client can start volunteering with the support of the project coordinator. The coordinator might, for example, take part in the first visit to the organization if the volunteer does not want to go alone. A site for volunteering is not always found though. Companies, public actors and organizations may appeal to the resource shortage and to the fact that they do not have time to provide volunteer orientation. Scarce resources are the reality in many places, but do they also serve as an excuse for not welcoming a supported volunteer? One main aim of the Supported Volunteering project is to tackle the attitudes and values that prevent volunteering possibilities to those in need.

WE ALL HAVE SOMETHING TO GIVE

During the Supported Volunteering project, it has become evident how different backgrounds and life events may change the direction of one's life and even force one into the margins of society. The impact the project had on the participants' life was apparent: how even the smallest encounters, such as being greeted and thanked, could change a person's life.

After the first steering group meeting, project coordinator Mari Brunou and myself started to exchange thoughts about inclusion and participation in volunteer work. What started as short emails evolved into long face-to-face discussions. We found that we were facing a very important issue, and it was evident that participation and inclusion do not emerge from a vacuum but require support and action from the community.

We realized that supported volunteering can help maintain one's coping in everyday life. Immigrants and people recovering from mental health problems have been the main participants in the project. When one's ability to function decreases due to burn-out, depression or while adapting to a new culture, among many other reasons, it is extremely important to get support along the way.

Due to a challenging life situation, one's own resources can be almost non-existent. Based on project experiences, supported volunteering offers a low threshold to integrate back into society. With the right kind of support, one can recover from many situations where functionality has decreased. Supported volunteering is built on the notion that we all have something to give. At best, supported volunteering can lead a person towards academics or work, situations not previously possible or even realistic options for the participant.

It is a pity that strengthening participation and enabling volunteer work for those needing support can be seen as difficult or even impossible in today's hectic world. Sometimes, when the Supported Volunteering coordinator has contacted a place to ask whether they would welcome a supported volunteer, the answer has been, "That kind of person cannot volunteer at our organization." By welcoming volunteers with support needs into workplaces and social arenas, we diminish loneliness and exclusion. At the centre of the development work done in the Supported Volunteering project is the aim to tackle prejudice and negative attitudes that supported volunteering clearly evokes in some people's minds.

TIMEOUT DIALOGUE

In May 2019, the Päijät-Häme Volunteering Network and Citizens' Arena brought together volunteers who had been involved in the project, actors who provided supported volunteering opportunities from the public and NGO sectors, volunteer coordinators and others working in the field of inclusion for a Timeout dialogue.

The theme for the Timeout dialogue was volunteering opportunities for special groups, and it took place at Lahti Diaconia Institute. Timeout, a dialogue method for people from different backgrounds, was created over the course of 2016–2019 by the Finnish Innovation Fund (Sitra). Timeout is a facilitated discussion in which different people are brought together. Timeout breeds a feeling of inclusion between the participants and provides understanding of different perspectives (Timeout Foundation: What's Timeout about? no date).

The aim of the dialogue was to form a deeper understanding of the factors that enable and, on the other hand, prevent the volunteering of special groups, such as immigrants, people with disabilities, the long-term unemployed and people rehabilitating from mental illness. Many new perspectives on the subject were discovered during the dialogue. For example, a participant who had recently been diagnosed with an illness that makes him dependent on others described volunteering as a break from the diagnosis, a chance to help others instead of being helped.

This particular Timeout dialogue also included discussion about prejudices attached to supported volunteering. Participants shared the view that the biggest prejudices are the ones we create in our own minds: "We might think that a person with a challenge cannot do something, even if there would be no reason to think this way." One participant provided an example in which she as a service provider had tried to ease the way for a service user with a disability. She became aware of her own attitudes as the service user managed to conquer all the obstacles on her own. Another example was about a blind volunteer who wanted to post a newsletter in an organization – and in the end succeeded. Many participants shared similar experiences where prejudices and preconceptions proved nonsense.

A participant who provides volunteering possibilities for people with all abilities stated:

"Who else, if not we who provide volunteering possibilities, will take care of those who need support in order to be part of this society? It is our job to take them in for real and give them opportunities to do something useful and to have a break from being just a disability and diagnosis."

Participants in the Timeout dialogue saw volunteer orientation as extremely important, especially in order to prevent failure. As many of the supported volunteers have experienced hardships in their past, it is important to provide them with a good start to volunteering. The best part of supported volunteering is that, especially in the beginning, baby steps are enough. Positive experiences are more important than setting ambitious goals. Once a volunteer gains confidence, they can start taking on more responsibility and more demanding tasks.

CONCLUSIONS

While living with the Moomins and their friends and neighbours, Ninni experienced nothing but kindness and acceptance, even though no one could see her. As time goes by, Ninni gains back her self-esteem and bit

by bit becomes visible again: first her fingertips and toes, then legs, arms and finally her hair and face. “– Oh! Yells Ninni. – How funny! How amazing!” And she laughed, so that the pier she stood on shook and trembled. – As far as I know, she has never laughed before, said Too-Ticky in amazement” (Jansson 1991, 117). We have a lot to learn from the Moomins and how they accept everyone just the way they are.

Supported volunteering brings positive encounters, joy and content into one’s life. It is an excellent way to feel as if one belongs to a community and to gain positive experiences. Most of all, supported volunteering makes invisible people visible again, one fingertip and toe at a time – just like Ninni. One participant in the project described how amazing it was to have someone say “good morning” to her every morning and thank her for her input at the end of each day of volunteering. Thanks to supported volunteering, this young person is now applying to vocational education, something she didn’t even dream of some years back.

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