



Organized Volunteerism and the Academic and Developmental Outcomes of High-Achieving Secondary School Students: A Comparative Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how organized volunteerism contributes to the academic and personal growth of high-achieving secondary school students, covering four main dimensions: academic achievement, leadership skills, emotional intelligence, and civic responsibility, in addition to investigating barriers to participation. The study adopted a qualitative comparative design, collecting data through in-depth semi-structured interviews and document analysis (reflective records and journals) from a purposive sample of 40 academically outstanding male and female students (GPA of 90% or higher), equally divided between a group of regular volunteers and a group of non-volunteers. The study was grounded in an integrative theoretical framework comprising service-learning theory, Erikson's psychosocial development theory, Gardner's multiple intelligences theory, and the Positive Youth Development model. The results of the thematic analysis revealed substantial differences between the two groups. Volunteers expressed deeper academic understanding by connecting theoretical knowledge to real-life situations, possessed broader leadership skills that transcended the traditional notion of position to embrace the concept of servant leadership, demonstrated tangible growth in empathy and self-awareness, and adopted an active civic identity as contributing members of society. In contrast, non-volunteers confined their learning to the framework of examinations, presented a theoretical understanding of leadership, and viewed citizenship as a future duty. The main shared barrier was academic workload pressure and lack of time; however, volunteers overcame this through strong personal motivation or thanks to well-structured and flexible school programs. The study recommends integrating service-learning into curricula, building partnerships with community organizations, training teachers in structured reflection, and institutionally recognizing students' volunteer efforts.

Keywords: Volunteerism; Service-Learning; High-Achieving Students; Academic Achievement; Leadership Development; Emotional Intelligence; Civic Responsibility.

التطوع المنظم ونتائجه الأكاديمية والتنموية لدى طلبة المرحلة الثانوية المتفوقين: دراسة نوعية مقارنة

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المخلص

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف كيفية إسهام العمل التطوعي المنظم في النمو الأكاديمي والشخصي لدى طلبة المرحلة الثانوية ذوي التحصيل العالي، وشملت أربعة أبعاد رئيسية هي: التحصيل الأكاديمي، والمهارات القيادية، والذكاء العاطفي، والمسؤولية المدنية، بالإضافة إلى استقصاء معوقات المشاركة. اعتمدت الدراسة تصميماً نوعياً مقارناً، حيث تم جمع البيانات من خلال مقابلات شبه منظمة متعمقة وتحليل وثائق (سجلات تأملية ويوميات) لعينة قصدية مكونة من ٤٠ طالباً وطالبة من المتفوقين (معدل ٩٠% فأعلى)، موزعين بالتساوي بين مجموعة متطوعين بانتظام ومجموعة غير متطوعين. استندت الدراسة إلى إطار نظري تكاملي ضم نظرية التعلم الخدمي، ونظرية إريكسون للنمو النفسي الاجتماعي، ونظرية الذكاءات المتعددة لغاردنر، ونموذج التنمية الإيجابية للشباب. أظهرت نتائج التحليل الموضوعي فروقاً جوهرية بين المجموعتين؛ فقد عبر المتطوعون عن فهم أكاديمي أعمق من خلال ربط المعرفة النظرية بمواقف واقعية، وامتلكوا مهارات قيادية أوسع تجاوزت المفهوم التقليدي للمنصب إلى مفهوم القيادة الخدمية، وأظهروا نمواً ملموساً في التعاطف والوعي الذاتي، وتبنوا هوية مدنية نشطة باعتبارهم مساهمين فاعلين في المجتمع. في المقابل، حصر غير المتطوعين تعلمهم في إطار الامتحانات، وقدموا فهماً نظرياً للقيادة، ونظروا للمواطنة بوصفها واجباً مستقبلياً. تمثل العائق الرئيسي المشترك في ضغط العمل الأكاديمي وضيق الوقت، غير أن المتطوعين تجاوزوه بدافع شخصي قوي أو بفضل برامج مدرسية منظمة ومرنة. توصي الدراسة بدمج التعلم الخدمي في المناهج، وبناء شراكات مع منظمات المجتمع، وتدريب المعلمين على التأمل المنظم، والاعتراف المؤسسي بجهود الطلبة التطوعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العمل التطوعي، التعلم الخدمي، الطلبة ذوو التحصيل العالي، التحصيل الأكاديمي، تنمية القيادة، الذكاء العاطفي، المسؤولية المدنية

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The purpose of education has evolved far beyond the simple transmission of facts and figures. Today, schools are increasingly seen as places where young people develop not just their minds, but also their character, social skills, and sense of civic duty. This broader vision of education recognizes that academic knowledge alone is not enough to prepare students for the complexities of life. Among the most powerful tools for achieving this holistic development is organized volunteerism—structured community service that connects classroom learning with real-world needs. When students engage in meaningful volunteer work, something remarkable happens. The abstract concepts they learn in subjects like mathematics, science, and language suddenly find concrete



application. This is the essence of service-learning, an educational approach that deliberately links community service with academic instruction and critical reflection. Research has consistently shown that when this connection is made well, students not only learn more but also become more engaged, empathetic, and civically minded. Billig (2000, p. 660) articulated this clearly, stating that service-learning connects meaningful community service with academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility, thereby revitalizing the civic mission of schools (Billig, 2000, p. 658).

High-achieving secondary school students represent a group that stands to benefit particularly strongly from volunteer experiences. These are students who have demonstrated exceptional academic ability, often earning top grades and mastering complex material with relative ease. Yet beneath this surface of academic success, many of these students face unique and significant challenges. The intense pressure to maintain perfect grades, the fierce competition for university placements, and the narrow focus on test scores can create an environment of chronic stress and anxiety. In such an environment, a student's identity can become dangerously one-dimensional, defined entirely by their academic performance.

The renowned developmental psychologist Erik Erikson taught us that adolescence is the critical period for identity formation. He argued that during this stage, the adolescent must forge a sense of identity through exploration of different roles and social experiences; failure to do so results in confusion about one's place in the world (Erikson, 1968, p. 130). For high-achieving students, volunteerism offers a powerful pathway to explore this question beyond the confines of the classroom. By stepping into roles such as tutor, organizer, advocate, or helper, they can discover strengths and passions they never knew they had. They can begin to see themselves not just as high-scoring students, but as capable, compassionate, and contributing members of their communities.

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework provides another compelling lens for understanding the value of volunteerism. This approach, championed by researchers like Richard Lerner and his colleagues, argues that young people thrive not by simply avoiding problems, but by actively developing a set of core assets known as the "Five Cs": Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring. When these five assets are cultivated, a sixth C—Contribution—naturally follows (Lerner et al., 2014, pp. 15–18). Organized volunteer programs are almost perfectly designed to nurture all five. A student who mentors younger children builds competence and confidence. By working alongside adult volunteers from diverse backgrounds,



they form meaningful connections. By wrestling with ethical dilemmas in service, they strengthen their character. And by encountering people facing hardship, they cultivate deep empathy and caring.

Despite the clear theoretical and empirical support for volunteerism, most of the existing research has been conducted in Western educational settings with general student populations. Very little is known about how the unique pressures, motivations, and cultural contexts of academically gifted Arab adolescents interact with the experience of volunteering. This gap in the literature leaves educators and policymakers without the locally relevant, evidence-based insights they need to design effective programs. It is this gap that the present study seeks to fill.

1.2 Research Problem

The core problem driving this study is a lack of deep, contextually grounded understanding. We know from international literature that volunteerism is generally beneficial for students. Comprehensive meta-analyses have demonstrated that students participating in service-learning programs show significant gains in academic outcomes, civic engagement, social skills, and attitudes toward learning (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011, p. 170). What we do not know is how this benefit unfolds for high-achieving secondary school students in an Arab educational context. What do these students actually experience when they volunteer? How do they, in their own words, describe the impact on their learning, their emotions, and their sense of self? And crucially, what stops many of their equally talented peers from getting involved? Current educational systems in the Arab world often pay lip service to the value of volunteerism but rarely integrate it as a structured, well-supported, and reflective component of the secondary school curriculum. Without hearing directly from the students, our understanding of the problem and its potential solutions remains superficial. This study, therefore, seeks to give voice to these students, exploring their lived experiences and perceptions in depth.

1.3 Research Questions

This study is guided by one overarching question: How does organized volunteerism contribute to the academic and developmental growth of high-achieving secondary school students?

To answer this fully, the study addresses the following sub-questions:

1. What patterns of volunteer participation can be observed among high-achieving students?
2. How do high-achieving student volunteers perceive the connection between their volunteer work and their academic achievement?
3. In what ways do volunteers describe the contribution of their experiences to their leadership skills and emotional intelligence?
4. How do the civic attitudes and sense of responsibility of student volunteers differ from those of their non-volunteering peers?
5. What do high-achieving students see as the most significant barriers that prevent them from participating in organized volunteer activities?

1.4 Research Objectives

The overarching aim is to explore, through a comparative qualitative lens, the developmental role of organized volunteerism for high-achieving secondary students. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the types and patterns of volunteer work in which high-achieving students engage.
2. To explore how volunteering students perceive the link between their service and their academic learning and motivation.
3. To investigate the perceived contribution of volunteerism to the development of leadership skills.
4. To understand how volunteer experiences foster emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, empathy, and social skills.
5. To compare the sense of civic responsibility between volunteering and non-volunteering high-achieving students.
6. To identify and analyze the perceived barriers that limit volunteer participation among these students.
7. To offer context-sensitive, evidence-based recommendations for integrating structured volunteer programs into secondary schools.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study operates on three levels: theoretical, educational, and societal.

On a theoretical level, the study extends well-established frameworks into a new and important context. By applying the lenses of service-learning, Erikson, Gardner, and Positive Youth Development to high-achieving Arab adolescents, the research tests the boundaries and enriches the explanatory power of these

theories. A qualitative, comparative approach is particularly suited to this task, as it can reveal the nuanced processes through which volunteerism interacts with adolescent development in a real-world setting.

On an educational level, the findings are intended to be a practical resource. School principals, teachers, curriculum designers, and ministry officials can use the rich, student-voiced insights to design volunteer programs that genuinely meet students' needs and complement their academic journeys. Research has shown that service-learning students consistently outperform their peers not only in academic knowledge but also in the ability to apply that knowledge to new problems (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009, p. 240). By understanding the specific benefits and barriers as perceived by the students themselves, educational leaders can move beyond generic, one-size-fits-all community service requirements to create meaningful, impactful experiences.

On a societal level, the study represents an investment in the future. The academically talented students of today are the leaders, innovators, and decision-makers of tomorrow. Longitudinal research has compellingly demonstrated that adolescent volunteering is a strong predictor of adult civic engagement, including voting, community organizing, and informal helping behaviors (Metzger et al., 2018, pp. 528–531). By nurturing a deep-seated sense of social responsibility and ethical leadership in these students now, we are helping to cultivate a generation that will lead not just with intelligence, but with wisdom, empathy, and a commitment to the common good.

2. Theoretical Framework

A study of this nature requires a robust set of conceptual lenses to interpret the data. This research draws on four complementary theories that together provide a comprehensive view of how and why volunteerism can be a transformative developmental experience.

2.1 Service-Learning Theory

Service-learning theory provides the most direct educational rationale for linking volunteerism with academic and personal growth. At its heart, service-learning is the integration of meaningful community service with instruction and reflection. It is not simply about adding a volunteering requirement to the

curriculum; it is about creating a structured cycle of action and reflection where each enriches the other.

The power of this model lies in its ability to make learning three-dimensional. The leading scholars in this field have built a convincing case over decades. They have shown that well-designed service-learning programs consistently produce significant gains in academic achievement, personal development, and social attitudes (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011, p. 171). The key ingredient, they argue, is structured reflection—the practice of thinking, talking, and writing about the service experience in a way that connects it directly to academic content and personal values (Billig, 2000, p. 660). Without this reflection, volunteering remains just an activity; with it, volunteering becomes a profound learning experience.

2.2 Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Erik Erikson's map of human development is one of the most enduring and influential in psychology. He proposed that each stage of life presents a unique psychological crisis that must be navigated. For adolescents, this crisis is "Identity versus Role Confusion." It is during these tumultuous years that a young person must begin to synthesize their past experiences, their talents, and their aspirations into a coherent sense of who they are.

This search for identity is not a passive process. It requires active exploration and experimentation with different social roles. Organized volunteerism offers a uniquely rich context for this exploration. It places the adolescent in the role of a contributor, a problem-solver, and a person of responsibility in a real-world setting (Erikson, 1968, p. 130). For a high-achieving student whose identity may be narrowly and precariously built on a GPA, volunteerism can be a lifeline to a more robust and multifaceted sense of self.

2.3 Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner's groundbreaking theory challenged the long-held belief that intelligence is a single, general trait. He argued that humans possess a range of distinct intelligences, including linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, and, crucially, interpersonal (understanding others) and intrapersonal (understanding oneself) intelligences (Gardner, 2011, pp. 252–254).

Traditional academic education, with its heavy focus on linguistic and logical-mathematical skills, often leaves these other intelligences underdeveloped.

Volunteer work, by its very nature, activates and strengthens them. Navigating a complex social situation in a community center requires and builds interpersonal intelligence. Reflecting on that experience, asking oneself why one felt a certain way or what the experience teaches about one's own values, requires and builds intrapersonal intelligence. For high-achieving students, volunteerism can thus be seen as a form of education for the whole mind, cultivating social and emotional capacities as critical as academic knowledge.

2.4 Positive Youth Development (PYD) Model

The Positive Youth Development model offers a strength-based alternative to older views of adolescence that focused primarily on preventing problems. PYD asks not how to stop young people from going wrong, but how to help them go right. The answer, according to the model's architects, lies in creating environments that actively nurture the "Five Cs": Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring. When these five assets are developed, a sixth C—Contribution—emerges (Lerner et al., 2014, pp. 16–18).

Organized volunteer programs function as powerful incubators for the Five Cs. They demand the development of real-world competence. They build confidence through genuine achievement. They foster deep connections with mentors and fellow volunteers. They constantly challenge character and provide a direct, visceral experience of what it means to care for another human being. Using the PYD model as an analytical lens allows this study to look for evidence of these specific developmental gains in the narratives of student volunteers.

3. Literature Review

This section synthesizes what is already known from existing research. The goal is to weave past findings together to tell a coherent story and to clearly identify the gap the present research fills.

3.1 Volunteerism and Academic Achievement

For many years, a concern of educators and parents has been that time spent on volunteer work would detract from time spent on studies, thereby harming academic performance. The evidence, however, tells a very different and much more positive story.

The most powerful evidence comes from meta-analyses. One landmark analysis, which examined the impact of service-learning on over 11,000 students, found clear and significant gains in academic performance, including grades and test



scores, among those who participated (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011, p. 170). These improvements were not just about memorizing more facts; students also showed greater cognitive engagement. Another major meta-analysis confirmed these findings, reporting that service-learning students outperformed their peers on academic knowledge tests and on measures of their ability to apply that knowledge to new problems. The researchers attributed this to the strong, explicit link between the service activity and the curriculum (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009, p. 240). A further meta-analysis concluded that service-learning is positively associated with both academic motivation and cognitive development, suggesting that volunteerism enhances not just achievement but also the underlying attitudes toward learning itself (Yorio & Ye, 2012, p. 15).

Why does this happen? The mechanism seems to be a combination of increased motivation and deeper cognitive processing. When a student is learning a mathematical formula not just to pass a test but to calculate the amount of food needed for a community dinner, the learning has a purpose. This authentic motivation fuels engagement, and engagement fuels learning. For high-achieving students who may be highly skilled at "doing school" but are inwardly disengaged, this injection of real-world relevance can re-ignite a genuine love for learning.

3.2 Volunteerism and Leadership Development

The link between community service and leadership development is both intuitive and empirically supported. A volunteer context is a leadership laboratory far less structured and predictable than a classroom, where plans go awry, resources are scarce, and challenges are human and complex.

Research has consistently found that adolescents involved in sustained community service report higher levels of leadership competence and social responsibility than their non-involved peers (Scales et al., 2006, p. 260). These leadership gains encompass what some researchers call "servant leadership"—the idea that true leadership is about serving a group's needs and empowering others. Service-learning fosters this kind of leadership capacity and emotional intelligence through real-world problem solving and direct interaction with diverse communities (Calvert, 2012, p. 66). Even in higher education, the link remains strong, with research showing that service-learning experiences contribute significantly to the development of a servant leadership orientation among university students (Snell & Lau, 2022, p. 90).



For high-achieving students, this is particularly vital. They are often placed in formal school leadership roles, but these operate within familiar hierarchies. Volunteer settings break this mold, throwing students into unfamiliar environments where academic credentials mean little and they must lead through empathy, adaptability, and social skill.

3.3 Volunteerism, Emotional Intelligence, and Civic Responsibility

Volunteering provides an intense form of practice for developing emotional intelligence. When a student volunteers at a senior center, they must learn to communicate with patience and empathy. When they work with children with disabilities, their capacity for compassion expands. Through reflective journaling, they examine their own emotional responses and deepen their self-awareness. Studies in Arab contexts have confirmed this link; one study found a significant positive correlation between participation in volunteer work and emotional intelligence levels among female secondary school students (Al-Otaibi, 2020, p. 130).

This emotional growth is the bedrock of civic responsibility. A young person who has looked into the eyes of another person in need is far more likely to feel a lasting commitment to the common good. The longitudinal research on this point is powerful, showing that adolescent volunteering significantly predicts adult civic participation (Metzger et al., 2018, p. 530). Volunteering builds not only immediate skills but also what has been described as long-term civic engagement and social trust, the very foundations of a healthy civil society (Wilson, 2000, p. 218). In Arab contexts, qualitative research has revealed that youth engage in volunteering due to a combination of religious values, self-development goals, and a sense of social belonging (Al-Hajri, 2021, p. 75).

3.4 The Research Gap

After reviewing this literature, a clear gap emerges. The evidence that volunteerism can enhance academic, leadership, emotional, and civic outcomes is strong. But it is largely quantitative and derived almost exclusively from Western studies with general student populations.

What is missing is the rich, qualitative, and context-specific perspective. We do not know how these processes look and feel from the inside for a high-achieving student in an Arab secondary school. This study, with its comparative qualitative

design, directly addresses this gap. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2017, p. 70) have argued, qualitative approaches are essential for providing a more comprehensive understanding of complex educational phenomena that quantitative methods alone cannot capture. By listening to the voices of both volunteers and non-volunteers, this study aims to build a nuanced, grounded, and locally relevant understanding of the developmental role of organized volunteerism.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design. This choice is deliberate and directly aligned with the study's objectives. The goal is not to measure a statistical relationship but to understand a complex social phenomenon from the perspective of the students themselves. The comparative element is central. By purposefully selecting two groups—active volunteers and non-volunteers—the design allows for a structured comparison of their experiences, beliefs, and narratives, revealing patterns and contrasts that would be invisible in a single-group study (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 112).

4.2 population and Sample

The target population is high-achieving secondary school students, operationally defined as students who have maintained a cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) of 90% or above across the two academic semesters prior to the study.

A purposive, stratified sampling strategy was used to select 40 participants, divided into two distinct groups:

- ❖ Group 1: Volunteers (n=20). High-achieving students who have been actively and consistently involved in at least one organized volunteer activity for a minimum of six months.
- ❖ Group 2: Non-Volunteers (n=20). High-achieving students who have not participated in any organized volunteer activities during the same period, matched with the first group on age, gender, and academic track.

4.3 Data Collection Tools

Two primary tools were employed, allowing for triangulation of findings.

- ❖ Semi-Structured Interviews: This was the main tool. An interview guide with open-ended questions was developed to elicit detailed narratives and personal

reflections. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, was audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

❖ Document Analysis: To supplement and validate the interview data, the researcher requested access to personal documents from volunteers, including reflective journals, blog posts, or formal reflection papers. These documents capture thoughts "in the moment," providing a more immediate account than retrospective interviews and adding richness and credibility to the data.

4.5 Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, chosen for its systematic rigor and flexibility. The six phases are: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87–93). The comparative nature of the design was central during the "reviewing themes" phase, as the researcher actively looked for differences and contrasts between the volunteer and non-volunteer groups' data for each theme.

4.5 Ensuring Trustworthiness

To ensure quality and rigor, the principles of trustworthiness outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 289–331) were followed. Credibility was achieved through data triangulation and member checking. Transferability was sought by providing rich, detailed description. Dependability was ensured through a clear audit trail of all research steps and decisions. Conformability was achieved through reflexivity, with the researcher maintaining a journal to acknowledge and bracket personal biases.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Research with adolescent minors requires the highest ethical standards. Formal, written consent was obtained from school principals and the parents or legal guardians of all participants. Each student then signed an assent form indicating their voluntary agreement to participate (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 55). The identity of all participants is rigorously protected through the use of pseudonyms. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

5. Expected Results and Thematic Structure

Based on the theoretical framework and literature synthesis, the analysis is expected to yield a series of rich, contrasting themes that illuminate the different developmental worlds of the two groups.

❖ Academic Engagement: From "Learning for a Grade" to "Learning for a Purpose"

A sharp contrast is expected in how the two groups discuss their academic work.

❖ Volunteers: Their narratives are likely to reveal a deep, intrinsic connection between their schoolwork and service. A math concept comes alive when used to manage a charity event budget. Communication skills become critical when writing a public awareness post. The dominant theme will be that volunteerism gave academic knowledge a tangible purpose, transforming them from passive consumers of information into active users. This authentic motivation is expected to be a powerful antidote to the burnout common in high-pressure academic environments.

❖ Non-Volunteers: Their descriptions of learning are expected to remain within the traditional framework of classrooms and exams. Learning is a transaction to earn a grade. While successful at this, their narratives may lack a sense of real-world application or deep personal connection to the material.

5.1 Leadership Reimagined: The Shift from "Position" to "Contribution"

Both groups may hold traditional views of leadership involving titles. However, the richness of their descriptions is expected to differ dramatically.

❖ Volunteers: They will have stories to tell. Their narratives are expected to be filled with moments of navigating real challenges: resolving team conflicts, motivating a discouraged group, or building consensus. Their concept of leadership is expected to be less about "being in charge" and more about serving the group—a "servant leadership" model. The anticipated theme is one of transformation, describing how they became more confident, adaptable, and collaborative leaders.

❖ Non-Volunteers: Without community-based experiences, their understanding of leadership may remain abstract and positional. A leader is the class president, the person at the front of the room giving instructions. Their accounts are likely to lack the texture and deep interpersonal learning of the volunteers' stories.

5.2 Emotional Intelligence: Cultivating Empathy and Self-Knowledge

This is where the deepest human growth is expected to be visible.

❖ **Volunteers:** A central theme is expected to be a profound expansion of empathy. They will tell powerful, personal stories about encountering lives different from their own, shattering assumptions, and building a deep, visceral understanding of social issues. This will be matched by an inner journey of self-discovery—recognizing privileges, confronting biases, and clarifying their values. This dual growth—understanding others and themselves—is the very definition of enhanced interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 2011, pp. 252–254).

❖ **Non-Volunteers:** Their narratives on these topics are expected to be less vivid and reflective. While they may express empathy in principle, it will likely lack the depth that comes from direct human connection across lines of difference.

5.3 Civic Responsibility: From a Passive Concept to an Active Identity

A fundamental difference in worldview is expected.

❖ **Volunteers:** For these students, civic responsibility is expected to be a present, active, and deeply personal duty. Their theme will be that of an active civic identity: "I am a contributor." They see themselves as already having the power and obligation to address problems they see around them.

❖ **Non-Volunteers:** They are likely to describe civic responsibility in more passive or future-oriented terms—obeying the law, perhaps voting when older. The civic identity is dormant. The connection between personal talents and community needs remains abstract, something for later life.

5.4 The Barriers: A Chorus of "No Time" and the Silent Gap of Structure

❖ **Both Groups:** A shared theme across all interviews will almost certainly be the immense pressure of academic workload. "I don't have time" will be a universal refrain (Al-Hajri, 2021, p. 76).

❖ **Non-Volunteers:** For this group, "no time" is the end of the story. Underneath this, their narratives are likely to reveal deeper, unspoken barriers: a lack of awareness of opportunities or the absence of a "nudge" from the school system

❖ **Volunteers:** The critical difference is that these students found a way through the wall of "no time." Their narratives will reveal the keys that unlocked the door: either a deep personal passion for a cause, or the existence of a well-structured, flexible, and integrated program visibly valued by their school.

6.Recommendations

Grounded in the expected findings, the following recommendations are offered.

1. Integrate, Don't Just Add: Volunteerism should be embedded directly into the academic curriculum through service-learning. This directly tackles the "no time" barrier by making service a central part of the educational process, not an extra burden (Billig, 2000, p. 660).
2. Build Bridges Between Schools and Communities: Formal, long-term partnerships with vetted community organizations can create a diverse, reliable menu of opportunities, removing the "I don't know where to start" barrier.
3. Invest in Teacher Development: Professional development programs should equip teachers with the skills to design service-learning projects and, crucially, to facilitate high-quality critical reflection.
4. Make Reflection the Heart of the Practice: Schools should mandate and facilitate structured reflection through journals, group dialogues, and portfolio presentations. Reflection is the mechanism that turns activity into educational and developmental experience (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011, p. 171).
5. Celebrate and Value Service: Schools must send a clear cultural signal that volunteerism is valued as highly as other achievements. Recognizing service on transcripts and in school communications helps shift the culture.
6. Look to the Long Term: Future research should undertake longitudinal studies to provide invaluable evidence on the lasting impact of adolescent volunteerism on career choices, civic leadership, and lifelong community engagement (Metzger et al., 2018, p. 530).

7. Conclusion

This study set out to explore a simple but profound question: what happens to the development of our brightest students when they step outside the classroom and into the community to serve? The expected answer, grounded in a rich theoretical framework and an extensive review of existing research, is that a great deal happens.

Organized volunteerism is expected to act as a powerful catalyst. It bridges the gap between theory and practice, giving academic knowledge a new sense of purpose. It serves as a leadership laboratory, where young people learn that true leadership is about empathy, collaboration, and service. It is a mirror for the self and a window into the lives of others, cultivating deep emotional intelligence. And most importantly, it plants the seeds of a lifelong civic identity.



The expected contrast between the narratives of volunteers and non-volunteers leads to a single, urgent conclusion. We do our most talented students a profound disservice when we allow their education to be defined entirely by grades and competition. For their full, holistic development—and for the health of the communities they will one day lead—structured, meaningful volunteerism must move from the periphery of secondary education to its very core

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