"Voluntary Social Year" of High School Graduates in Germany

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Abstract. The research was to investigate the impact of a “Voluntary Social Year” on high school graduates in Germany during a voluntary social year when they provided social work at their selected locations in Germany or in foreign countries. The author employed qualitative research method collecting data from a convenient sample: (1) 14 German high school graduates who participated in a “Voluntary Social Year” and (2) the parents of some of the German high school graduates. Data analysis replied on coding and content analysis. The results indicated that the participants were in favour of a “Voluntary Social Year” and that the experiences made positive impacts on the high school graduates in Germany, for example, increasing their independence, self-confidence, maturity, and knowledge of other cultures. The experience also helped them decide what they would do for their future study or career. Parents of the students who participated in a “Voluntary Social Year” also were in favour of a “Voluntary Social Year” mainly due to the changes they observed on their children after they returned from the social work conducted during their social year.

Introduction

The purpose of the research was to investigate the impact of a “Voluntary Social Year” on high school graduates in Germany. What is a “Voluntary Social Year”? It is “a period of time, generally from six to 18 months, spent doing voluntary work … [d]esigned to offer young adults the chance to find their vocational or academic orientation while contributing to the greater social good…” [1] While a “Voluntary Social Year” is common for high school graduates in Germany, it is not well accepted in the USA.

In 2016, the White House announced that Malia Obama would be delaying her college start date to take a “gap year” or a “bridge year”, which is similar to a “Voluntary Social Year” in Germany. Interesting enough, the majority of Americans viewed such a delaying to enter universities differently. McPhate (2016) stated that “Still, despite growing acceptance of the gap year, or bridge year, by university administrators … many Americans continue to view it with trepidation.” [2]

This research project is needed to help educators better understand the “Voluntary Social Year” in Germany by learning about its impact on high school graduates and on society. This understanding will allow educators to better serve our high school graduates and, at the same time, contribute to the modern society by supporting students in conducting social work.

Methodology

The author employed qualitative research method for the study. The research questions were:
1) What do German high school graduates who have participated in a “Voluntary Social Year” think of their experiences?
2) What social work did they conduct?
3) How is a “Voluntary Social Year” program structured in Germany?
4) What do parents of German high school graduates who have participated in a “Voluntary Social Year” think of their children’s experiences?
To answer the research questions, a convenience sample was used to collect data from two groups of participants. One group was comprised of 14 German students who graduated from high schools within the past 6 years, 2012-2018, and who participated in a “Voluntary Social Year”. The other group was the parents of the aforementioned German high school graduates. All of the student participants are currently enrolled in the universities in Germany in the fields of Medicine, Education, or Engineering.

Data collection relied on semi-structured interviews. The author used a digital recorder to record the interviews with the participants’ permissions. The guided questions for student interviews included, but were not limited to:

1. How did you learn about the “Voluntary Social Year”?
2. What social work did you conduct?
3. How did you choose where to go?
4. Were you given clear information prior to going there?
5. What did you have to pay for being part of the program?
6. How did the “Voluntary Social Year” program impact you?
7. Based on your experiences, how many percentages of your classmates participated in the program? What did the other students think of the social year? Did some students view the social year as delaying and negative?
8. Looking back, would you do anything differently? If yes, what would you do differently?
9. Is the experience connected with what you are studying/doing today?

The guided interview questions for parents included, but were not limited to:

1. Were you aware of the social year? Did you learn it from your children?
2. What were the roles you play in the social year program of your children, e.g., telling them what to do, guiding, advising, supporting, or not being part of it?
3. What did you think of the social year initially (before your children took it)? What do you think of the social year now (after your children took it)?
4. How did the “Voluntary Social Year” program impact your children?
5. Looking back, would you do anything differently? If yes, what would you do differently?
6. What do you think of the social year in general?

After the interviews, data analysis was conducted using qualitative research method: coding and content analysis.

Results

The results indicated that a “Voluntary Social Year” was and is still common for high school graduates in Germany. Many of them were aware of the opportunities. They learned about the opportunities from their peers, siblings, or the Internet. At least two websites provided enormous information about a “Voluntary Social Year”, for example, hosting organizations, funding sources, locations of social work conducted, and meetings/training on a better preparation for embarking the social work journey. Some of the instructors informally introduced a “Voluntary Social Year” to students in class. However, based on the interviewees’ experiences, few instructors talked about this topic in class.

All of the participating students conducted social work and provided service at the locations they selected: twelve of them in Germany, one in Bolivia, and one in Brazil. The social service they provided in Germany included, but were not limited to, helping children in youth hostels, teaching pupils in schools, and being involved in emergency rescues for hospitals. In the youth hostels, the interviewees stayed at the hostels with children, taking care of their lodging and food. They also designed and organized activities for the children. In schools, the interviewees assisted teachers in teaching and planning activities for pupils. For emergency rescues, the volunteers drove ambulance and provided medical assistance to professional medical teams. The two participating students who
went to Bolivia and Brazil worked with children in daycare facilities and helped parents of the children. They did not only work in the facilities but also travel to visit families in the regions.

They chose the locations and service mainly based on what they were interested in. For example, a student interviewee expressed that she was interested in teaching pupils with special needs; however, she was not sure if she could do it as a career. For her social year, she chose to work with teachers who taught students with special needs. At the end of her social work, she decided to pursue her study in Education, and she is currently a university student in Education, specializing in Special Education. Similarly, the participating student who worked with the emergency rescue team stated that she was always interested in working in a medical treatment facility specializing in emergency medicine and helping patients with urgent needs. Currently she is a student in Medicine. All of the participating students are currently enrolled in the universities in Germany in the fields of Medicine, Education, and Engineering. What they are studying is well connected with the social service they provided during their voluntary social year.

The results indicated that the voluntary social year programs in Germany were well organized and planned. All of the participants received clear information or instructions prior to providing the service at their selected locations, including service hours and schedules, lodging, payment, travel, and orientation about cultures, especially for the participants who went to foreign countries. All of them worked in average 40 hours per week as working full-time and received a small amount of payment that was used for their food, lodging, and travel. At the end, they didn’t pay for their participation in the voluntary social year programs, and they also didn’t earn money from the service they provided.

Although they didn’t obtain financial gains from the voluntary social year programs, they all expressed that they greatly benefited from the programs and that the programs impacted them enormously. They stated that, after the voluntary social year experiences, they became more independent and mature and they could better communicate with strangers. They also commented that the experiences increased their self-confidence and knowledge of other cultures. The experiences also helped them determine if they would pursue education in universities and, if yes, what they would study. Looking back, all of them had no regrets about their decision on participating in the voluntary social year. They firmly and unanimously expressed that they would choose the voluntary social year again if they could. Some of them wished that they could spend longer period of time at their selected locations. Some of them have been continuing their social work after the “Voluntary Social Year”, for example, the participating students working at the youth hostels.

Regarding the percentage of their classmates who participated in the voluntary social year program, the student interviewees expressed that approximately 10 to 15 percentage of their classmates participated in the programs. Although many of their classmates did not participate in the programs, they accepted and respected their decision on taking one year off and rethinking their future study/career through the voluntary social year experiences. Thirteen out of the fourteen interviewees expressed that none of their classmates viewed the social year as delaying or negative.

By the time this paper is written, only two parents have been interviewed. More parents are currently planned to be interviewed. The preliminary results indicated that the parents were in favor of the “Voluntary Social Year”. They observed the changes on their children after their children returned from the “Voluntary Social Year”. The parents noted that their children became more independent, mature, and self-confident. Their children also could better communicate with people and had a better sense of direction about what they wanted to do next and what they wanted to study. They were very pleased that their children spent a year in the “Voluntary Social Year” programs.

Discussions and Limitations

The original plan of this study was to seek input from German high school graduates who participated in a “Voluntary Social Year” as well as graduates who did not participate in the program. A survey was sent out June 2019. Due to a low response rate, this part of research is not
included in this paper but will continue. Similarly, more interviews are planned to be conducted from the parents of the students who participated in a “Voluntary Social Year” to gain a better understanding of the views of parents.

This study focused on high school graduates in Germany and their parents, looking into the social work the German students conducted and the impacts on them. The study did not investigate the impacts of the German students on the host families and communities. For example, how did the children and communities in Brazil and Bolivia be impacted by the German students? How did the life of children in Brazil and Bolivia continue after the German students left? It is critical to examine impacts on the host families and communities to ensure that the social work conducted benefit both parties.

Conclusions

The research was to investigate the impact of a “Voluntary Social Year” on high school graduates in Germany during a voluntary social year when they provided social work at their selected locations in Germany or in foreign countries. The author employed qualitative research method collecting data from a convenient sample: (1) 14 German high school graduates who participated in a “Voluntary Social Year” and (2) the parents of some of the German high school graduates. Data analysis replied on coding and content analysis. The preliminary results indicated that the participants were in favor of a “Voluntary Social Year” and that the experiences made positive impacts on the high school graduates in Germany, for example, increasing their independence, self-confidence, maturity, and knowledge of other cultures. The experience also helped them decide what they would do for their future study or career. Parents of the students who participated in a “Voluntary Social Year” also were in favor of a “Voluntary Social Year” mainly due to the changes they observed on their children after they returned from the social work conducted during their social year.

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