TWEENAGE VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT IN PEEL:

A COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

How young is “too young” when it comes to volunteerism? If you were to look to the majority of research on volunteerism and volunteer opportunities to answer this question, you might conclude that high-school age (or about the age of 15) is when youth should start volunteering. Volunteering research includes the exploration of youth volunteering but, often, the research excludes youth under the age of 15. For example, the 2007 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, uses the age bracket of 15-24 to refer to young people (Hall et al., 2009). There remains, then, a significant gap in research about volunteers under the age of 15. One of the few Canadian examinations of younger youth volunteering is Shannon’s (2009) examination of volunteers aged 8-12 in Atlantic Canada. This research observed that young volunteers are an “untapped resource”. Citing evidence that “involving younger volunteers and ensuring they have positive experiences could be an important goal for the non-profit and voluntary sector and a key one in sustaining their organizations in the future” (2009, p.844). Shannon’s research made a strong case that younger Canadians can and should be approached to volunteer. Similarly, Tessier et al. (2006) undertook research for the purpose of documenting the volunteer engagement of youth aged 12 to 17 in Quebec.
These studies provided important background information for how we approached this community-based research project for “tweenaged” or (pre-high school) youth in Peel. Inspired by motivated younger youth volunteers and a curiosity about this subject area, Volunteer MBC engaged Professor Abigail Salole from Sheridan College to lead a community based research project to answer the following research questions about volunteering for youth aged 12-14:

- What makes community involvement/volunteerism meaningful?
- What volunteer activities do youth want to engage in?
- What are the particular strengths and barriers to volunteering for younger volunteers?
- How can strengths of young volunteers be built on? How can barriers be overcome?

In order to answer these questions, we triangulated our findings by consulting with three key stakeholder groups:
1) young people aged 12-14 attending school in Peel Region);
2.) volunteer coordinators;
3.) parents.

This research is exploratory and not meant to be generalized to the population. In this report the term “tweenagers” and “youth” are used interchangeably to refer to youth aged 12-14. This paper provides a summary of the findings from each of the three stakeholder groups: namely, tweenagers, volunteer coordinators and parents. This briefing concludes with some recommendations to improve Peel’s capacity to support youth volunteers.

“Given the evidence that hooking youth as volunteers early can influence their ongoing involvement as volunteers throughout the life course, involving younger volunteers and ensuring they have positive experiences could be an important goal for the nonprofit and voluntary sector and a key one in sustaining their organizations in the future” (Shannon 2008: p.17).
WHAT PEEL TWEENAGERS HAD TO SAY ABOUT VOLUNTEERISM

HIGH LEVELS OF ENTHUSIASM TO VOLUNTEER
The young people we spoke to unanimously and enthusiastically agreed that volunteering was a social good that has the potential to also benefit the volunteer. While there was some lack of consistency with their understanding of the concept of volunteering (sometimes including paid altruistic acts like shoveling snow and babysitting), there was also a strong sense that volunteering helps to build strong communities.

Volunteering.....

helps communities be strong.
means you get to meet more people.
is helping people.
is being kind.
is learning new things.

- Quotes from youth participants

WIDE RANGE OF MOTIVATIONS AND RECOGNITION OF BENEFITS
Mirroring findings from other research, a wide range of motivations and benefits were identified for volunteering (Handy et al. 2010; Hall et al. 2006). Youth participants expressed instrumental/career-related motivations (“Volunteering will help me find work”), altruistic/value-driven motivations (“Volunteering is the right thing to do”) and social motivations (“My volunteering would make my parents/teachers proud”). From the focus group feedback, it seems as though all three motivations (instrumental, altruistic and social) are important to the tweenagers group and all three contribute to their ideas about how volunteering could be made meaningful.
MANDATORY VOLUNTEERING INFORMS PERCEPTIONS OF VOLUNTEERING

Youth participants made a strong association of volunteering with mandatory volunteer hours that are part of the provincial curriculum in Ontario. Through their own personal networks, and most often through older siblings, young people often associate volunteering with high school requirements. For many youth participants, coupling volunteering with high school suggests to them that volunteering is for older youth. While this does not necessarily stop youth participants from volunteering, it does seem to contribute to two approaches to volunteering. First, tweenagers frame and measure their volunteering quantitatively. For example, one youth focus group participant said, “I’ve already done three times the volunteering hours that I’ll need to do in high school.” Second, youth participants also understood volunteering as preparation to the more validated volunteer hours they would complete in high school. Youth participants who did not volunteer were under the impression that advertised volunteer opportunities were not applicable to them since the target marketing often mentions hours connected to high school requirements.

Mandatory volunteering encourages young people to understand volunteering instrumentally. Tweenage volunteers hope that hours spent volunteering will help them secure a desirable volunteer position in high school and/or were delaying volunteering until their volunteer hours would count. For example, one youth participant indicated, “I already know where I am going to volunteer for high school, but, I’m going to wait so my hours count.” This finding is aligned with an observation in Yang’s (2017) research which indicates that mandatory volunteer
policies result in a decrease in volunteering by those who were not subject to the mandate of the policy.

This quantitative framing may seem contradictory to the civic engagement value and motivation placed on volunteering described above, however, focus group participants could both place a high value on the altruistic nature of volunteering and also frame volunteering quantitatively. Indeed, an ideal youth volunteer opportunity would meet the altruistic, instrumental and social motivations of tweenagers.

The biggest barrier to volunteering for youth participants is that had not been asked to volunteer.

**JUST ASK!**

The majority of youth focus group participants agreed that not being asked was the biggest barrier to volunteering. This pattern is also reflected in the pattern that the tweenagers who do volunteer were often asked directly to volunteer by someone in their personal networks (e.g. someone they knew through a shared faith connection, or through sport/recreation). This is also reflected in other literature that suggests that a frequent reason for why volunteers do not volunteer more or earlier is because they were not asked to volunteer (Hall et al. 2006). The vast majority of young people in the focus groups regarded schools as the best places to advertise volunteer opportunities. Here, young people could be asked directly to volunteer by trusted and familiar adults. Social media and posters were also suggested as channels to outreach to youth.

Tweenagers in the focus groups were presented with different volunteering options and asked to discuss the strengths and limitations of each one. Youth participants made it clear that they were interested in a range of volunteer opportunities and they would like to be presented with
volunteer options frequently. Presented with a volunteer opportunity to complete outdoor work that described the opportunity as one where youth could, “hike through the woods with your friends”, one youth participant explained, “That’s not even volunteering. That’s just having fun”. Some youth participants in focus groups were surprised and intrigued at the range of volunteer opportunities especially when it came to the non-profit and social service sector. That volunteering could include working with a local organization that is connected to sports, seniors and community events was novel. Tweenage participants suggested that recruitment efforts should recognise young people’s interests and facilitate contacts between them and organizations. Some youth expressed an interest in volunteer opportunities that were more social in nature where they could volunteer with a group of their friends or so that they can volunteer with their family.

HOME SUPPORT
Some tweenagers also expressed the view that while they think their parents would be supportive of their volunteering, they were apprehensive about whether they would have permission to volunteer with an organization their parents were not familiar with. Youth perceptions about what volunteer opportunities their parents would be more supportive of varied according to family norms and expectations. For example, some youth thought that their parents would be especially supportive of any volunteer opportunity taking place outside because they are often encouraged to go outside by their parents. One youth participant explained, “My mom would love for me to get outside. She would do anything so that I didn’t play video games all day.” Other youth thought that parents would be more encouraging and accommodating about volunteer opportunities that are connected to academics (like tutoring). While it is difficult to make general claims about what types of volunteering would be supported by parents of tweenage volunteers, it is clear that their support is necessary for a range of reasons including permission and transportation. Another way parents can support youth volunteerism is by volunteering alongside their tweenager. The idea of volunteering as a group of young people and/or volunteering with their family especially appealed to youth volunteers. One youth participant explained that volunteering might ease boredom and explained that she could volunteer on Saturday with her mother “We don’t know what to do on Saturdays. We just go to the mall.”
WHAT PEEL VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS HAD TO SAY ABOUT TWEENAGE VOLUNTEERISM

Like the tweenagers we spoke to, three volunteer coordinators from different organizations spoke passionately and enthusiastically about volunteering as an important social value. This enthusiasm extends to volunteering for youth in this age group. This group of coordinators were open to volunteers under the age of 15 volunteering in their organizations and actively seeking to remove barriers to volunteering for this group.

Perception of lack of maturity and responsibility

There is a general perception that younger volunteers are less responsible and harder to supervise as a result of their lack of maturity. Since non-profit organizations are often stretched for resources, there is an attitude that organizational bandwidth does not permit supervision of young volunteers. This sense is heightened in organizations where volunteer duties involve the outdoors where potential risks increase. If a tweenage volunteer shows maturity, they would not immediately be dismissed. Instead, exceptions to policies might be made based on discretion for younger volunteers who are mature and eager. The flip-side to this perception of lack of maturity and responsibility is that volunteering can play an important role in instilling a sense of maturity and responsibility. Indeed, tweenage volunteering serves an important socialization function for youth in which youth can foster maturity and strong decision making. While there are significant barriers to volunteering for young people aged 12-14, these challenges are not unsurmountable. Volunteer Coordinators explained how even policies can change based on evidence and purposeful decision making.
RISK AVERSE ORGANIZATIONS AND FAMILIES

Organizations are constantly seeking to reduce the risk of harm and provide proof that they are screening and training volunteers appropriately. Similarly, parents are also seeking to reduce the risk of harm coming to their children. As a result there is a tendency for organizations to not have volunteer opportunities for youth under the age of 15 and parents to not allow their children to volunteer due to concerns for safety. For parents, this concern for their children’s safety extends to transportation to and from volunteer activities. This risk aversion results in a tendency to keep young people in familiar settings even when there are considerable benefits for exploring new connections and experiences. While there are significant barriers to volunteering for young people aged 12-14, these challenges are not unsurmountable. Volunteer Coordinators explained how even policies can change based on evidence.

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UNIQUE STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Volunteer Coordinators spoke about the unique strengths of young volunteers. Since they are not completing volunteer hours due to mandatory requirements, they are more likely to seek out volunteering due to personal motivations. Volunteer coordinators spoke passionately about how mandatory requirements have a tendency to subvert other motivations for volunteering and how a priority should be placed on the value of volunteering as civic engagement. Youth who volunteer only to complete the 40 hour requirements for school earn a reputation for being the “40 hour volunteers” which means that organizations might be less likely to engage and invest in these short term volunteers. In contrast, young volunteers have an open mind and seem to earnestly be learning and exploring through volunteerism. Tweenage volunteers were described as social, enthusiastic and curious volunteers who have skills and resources to offer their community. Their propensity to want to volunteer with their friends mean that volunteer organizations can benefit because these young volunteers are more likely to bring their friends to volunteer with them.
FIT BETWEEN VOLUNTEER AND VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY

It’s important for there to be a strong fit between the volunteer and the volunteer opportunity. Organizations might, therefore, require support and/or evidence in order to develop volunteer opportunities for tweenage volunteers. Some volunteer coordinators thought young volunteers might be better suited for short term and/or occasional opportunities. This observation matches an observation made by previous research. Tessier and co-authors (2006) found volunteer activities should be concrete and produce visible results in a short amount of time. Another aspect of fit between volunteer and volunteer opportunity from this research relates to giving youth the opportunity to design their volunteer engagement. Youth are interested in participating and organizing volunteer projects, rather, than being part of pre-planned projects. Importantly, it takes organizational resources in order to design these more creative volunteer opportunities. Volunteer coordinators spoke about the importance of their entire organization embracing the ethos of volunteerism in order to cultivate a strong organizational culture surrounding volunteerism. In order to reduce risk associated with youth volunteers described above and to help build a positive volunteer experience, mentoring and special age specific orientations for younger volunteers would be a strong way to incorporate them into an organization.

WHAT PEEL PARENTS HAD TO SAY ABOUT TWEENAGE VOLUNTEERISM

We also had the pleasure of speaking with 24 parents of children aged 12-14 to discuss volunteering of their children. These parents were particularly supportive of their children volunteering and expressed a strong desire for exposure to a wide range of volunteer opportunities for their children. Like the young people from the focus groups and volunteer coordinators we spoke to these parents had a great deal of enthusiasm for their children volunteering.

Volunteering for tweenage volunteers is a way for them to foster their independence and to cultivate their skills, interests and identity. As such, a wide range of volunteer opportunities for youth under the age of 15 is important in order to find volunteer positions that resonates with their interests. The parents that were part of this focus group actively encouraged their children to volunteer. Many of these parents also led by example because they themselves were
volunteers. Parents spoke confidently that volunteering can become a habit and a value for even the youngest volunteers if they are encouraged, supported and are genuinely interested in the volunteer activities they undertake. A strong volunteer experience is the result of a three-way partnership between the young volunteer, the parent and the host organization.

Some hindrances for parents of young volunteers include lack of supervision during volunteering and transportation difficulties. Parents were particularly weary of volunteer opportunities becoming a responsibility and burden to the parent rather than an interest of their child. These parents also thought it was important to appeal to the altruistic nature of volunteering rather than to “coax” young people into volunteering by offering them incentives (e.g. t-shirt or food). One parent explained, “If volunteering appeals to their higher motivations, then they’ll get the best part of what youth have to offer.”

These parents were also particularly supportive of volunteer activities outside of school and academics in order to foster community engagement compared to school engagement. This means that community organizations have a special role to play in fostering volunteer opportunities and engagement. Noting that community organizations were difficult to navigate, parents explained that an enhanced community profile for volunteer opportunities would help parents and their children understand a range of volunteer opportunities. Parents explained that young volunteers should be recruited as young volunteers which means that a targeted approach for young volunteers which includes age friendly language for the young volunteer and information for parents.

While these parents have been able to negotiate the risks involved with their children volunteering, they explained that parents can be put at ease by providing information to the parents about the volunteer opportunity and organization. Parents were also supportive of their children volunteering in groups because it will help them to meet new youth outside of their
regular networks. For these parents, volunteering has been a way for their children to develop their independence and responsibility. These parents also suggest that some volunteer organizations require more resources in order to attract and retain young volunteers explaining that lack of supervision can lead to poor volunteer experience for both the youth volunteer and their parent(s).

CONCLUSION

The tweenagers, parents and volunteer coordinators we spoke with in this community based research project expressed a strong level of enthusiasm for a coordinated approach to enhancing tweenage volunteer experiences in Peel. In this final section, recommendations are put forward that aim to resolve some of the challenges for tweenage volunteering.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Improve organizational capacity to support tweenage volunteers through targeted recruitment and role design for young volunteers.
2. Enhance the profile of tweenage volunteering to youth audiences by sharing Peel success stories from the perspective of community organizations, youth and parents.
3. Promote the value and benefits of volunteering in schools starting in elementary school.
4. Increase the visibility of volunteer opportunities for tweenagers within the community by direct outreach and recruitment within schools.
5. Counter negative perceptions of tweenage volunteers in organizations by sharing success stories.
6. Enhance organizational capacity to educate and prepare parents about youth volunteering.
7. Explore how tweenagers can be more active in volunteer role design.
8. Increase specialized professional development opportunities that will contribute to increased tweenage volunteers. Possible subject areas include: Risk and Safety; Creating, recruiting and selecting tweenage volunteers, #volunteering & social media and creating volunteer-based mentorship programs.
9. Create volunteer opportunities that are well suited for group and/or family volunteering.
10. Utilizing a community development model, work in partnership with youth, parents, schools and community partners to develop a tweenage friendly program across Peel.
REFERENCES


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