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Dimensions of the voluntary service of disabled students in the social environment

Wymiary wolontariatu studentów z niepełnosprawnością w środowisku społecznym

Abstract: The notion of student voluntary service involves charitable activity for those needing performed by all volunteers interested in it, including disabled students. This paper focuses on participation in the voluntary service of this group of students and the level of their commitment on an everyday basis. The disabled students who regularly perform their daily charitable activity are aware that their contribution to the environment is voluntary, selfless, useful, permanent and internally deliberate. The paper presents the author's findings concerning the participation of both able-bodied and disabled volunteer students in activities for those in need. The obtained findings provide the basis for the conviction that in most cases disabled students through participation in student voluntary service gain personal satisfaction, better results in social re-adaptation, and the quality of their activities is not at all different from the quality of able-bodied students' work.

Keyword: student voluntary, disabled volunteer students, activities

Streszczenie: W ramach wolontariatu studenckiego uwzględnia się aktywność charytatywną na rzecz osób potrzebujących zainteresowanych nią wszystkich wolontariuszy, także studentów z niepełnosprawnością. W artykule zwrócono uwagę na udział w wolontariacie właśnie tej grupy studentów oraz poziom ich zaangażowania na co dzień. Studenci z niepełnosprawnością podejmujący regularnie swoją codzienną aktywność charytatywną mają świadomość, że ich wkład na rzecz otoczenia jest dobrowolny, bezinteresowny, użyteczny, ciągły i wewnętrznie przemyślany. W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badań własnych dotyczących udziału studentów w działaniach na rzecz osób potrzebujących zarówno wolontariuszy sprawnych, jak i wolontariuszy z niepełnosprawnością. Uzyskane wyniki badań dają podstawę dla przekonania, iż w większości przypadków studenci z niepełnosprawnością poprzez udział w wolontariacie studenckim odnoszą osobistą satysfakcję, lepsze rezultaty w readaptacji społecznej, a ich jakość dokonywanych czynności w niczym nie różni się od jakości pracy studentów sprawnych.

Słowa kluczowe: student, wolontariuszy, wolontariat studentów niepełnosprawnych, działania

Introduction

The difficult situation of disabled students during realization of their chosen programme of studies does not mean as part of resilient voluntary service (e.g. university, hospice, social voluntary service) there cannot be any possibilities and mechanisms for active support of disabled students' participation. At present both institutions which form the social policy tool and the third sector are oriented at counteracting the results of disadvantageous and critical living conditions of individuals and groups, and reducing them. This fact means, among other things, that also masses of disabled students have every opportunity to take including, integrative and supporting actions for those who require providing for their special needs, chronically ill and elderly, lonely and disabled people who desire support from the environment. It turns out that practically today one can notice increased interest from a considerable group of active students who, while in search of their sense of life, personal fulfilment and satisfaction of their need for functioning in the environment, undertake mutual support activities and take the initiative to solve other people's problems in their environment. More and more frequently these students feel fulfilled helping where such help is necessary, and their support exceeds their family and friends relationships. Disabled students undertaking regularly their daily charity work are aware that their contribution to individuals and the environment is voluntary, disinterested, useful, continuous and deliberate. As stressed in the literature of the subject, voluntary service means goodwill which is tantamount to a decision to be committed and dedicated to something that was acknowledged as important, necessary and worth committing, and that expresses social care about those who are in need the most and providing support associated with it [Danielak-Chomać, Dobrowolska, Roguska, 2010; Gawroński, 1999; Kanios, 2010; Ochman, Jordan, 1997, s. 15].

Pro-social attitudes and the effects of the activity of disabled student volunteers raise growing interest in our country nowadays both by the broad environment and public benefit organizations and support institutions in the reformed system of social assistance. More and

more often the above mentioned organizations and institutions are interested in active inclusion of this group of people in their structures of internal functioning, especially in the area of providing spiritual support, based on maintaining close relationships with others, fulfilling the customers' subjective needs [Czetwertyńska, 2004; Lalak, Pilch, 1999; Marzec-Holka, 2003; Kromolicka, 2005]. Disabled student volunteers more and more often work in almost all areas of social life and it can be agreed today that they form a kind of responsible and uniquely important social service. In their activities they are characterized with sensitivity, patience, a sufficient level of endurance, they are emotionally disciplined, caring and understanding for their own charges. It is a well-known fact that it was Fromm who claimed that "the most important domain in which a man can give something to another man is not the sphere of material things but strictly human ones. What is given by one person to another? People give from themselves what is the most precious in themselves, they give their own lives. Obviously, it does not need mean that people dedicate their own lives to other people but they give what is living in them, they give them their own knowledge, humour and their sadness. (...) In this way, giving their own lives they enrich other people, increase the feeling of their existence" [Fromm, 1994, p. 30-31].

At present the areas in which disabled students find an opportunity to commit themselves include such sectors as: supporting the disabled (especially during their school education); helping elderly people; their presence in families in difficult health situations; support for individuals with chronic diseases; accompanying their student friends suffering from special physical limitations. As can be observed in practice, volunteers' commitment to aid activities involves first of all their nearest friends and concerns first of all difficult situations in their lives. These initiatives are realized by different groups and teams among which the leading ones are parish charitable teams. In few cases so far these initiative groups has been surrounded by care from representatives of student and university organizations.

When characterizing such student voluntary service, it ought to

be stated that it is a very important and specific chain link in the system of realized in our country aid activities for individuals and families in various life difficulties. Their social meaning results from several important premises of civil activities. Firstly, the initiative of student voluntary service, composed of disabled students, has a uniquely valuable ethical and social dimension, and at the same time supplements the network of aid initiatives realized by other units and non-government organizations. Secondly, access to support provided by this group is not hedged by strict rules concerning the uncompromising fulfilment of regular duty, which from the perspective of those students is a very essential value. Thirdly, the kind of support offered by students can be defined in each individual case of organizing it on the level students' own possibilities and can be conditioned by a predetermined type, place and time of realization. Last but not least, the proposed form of aid does not need to concern the material area, but protective and spiritual aid, realized both through enabling active participation in different forms of individual meetings and strengthening interpersonal bonds, otherwise weakening the feeling of solitude and social isolation [Marzec-Holka, 2003; Moroń, 2009; Wilk, 2003].

Taking into consideration the fact that the universality of participation of disabled student voluntary service is an absolutely new phenomenon on the Polish ground, one can hardly be surprised that the problem of preparation and organization of such non-government initiatives is neglected in the literature of the subject. It must be stressed that still the social environment is confirmed in the belief that it is the disabled who need aid and support and are not able to provide aid and support to other people. What is often discussed is the issue of the state of readiness and competence in aid activities offered by those volunteers. The situation is complicated also by the poverty of information in the literature of the subject, which, as it were, additionally entails a need for clarifying some problems connected with the establishment of presence of such social initiatives in a newly created syllabuses for additional education of volunteers, both on the level of university organizations and lower and upper secondary schools.

Following the designed code of general rules of voluntary work it is worth indicating those which are directly obeyed as important also by disabled student volunteers. More precious rules include:

1. In their practical activities volunteers present first of all what they know best; they always have their own ideas which infect charges.
2. Volunteers - remember that your charges are always the most important partners though you are aware that you must immediately decide about the importance and selection of forms in the subsequent stages of the aid conduct.
3. Volunteers take full responsibility in direct contacts with their charges both for their safety and the quality of the content and the form of proposed scopes of assistance.
4. In their relations with their charges volunteers prefer first of all such values as: protection of life, dignity, freedom, tolerance, the truth, justice, love, good, elimination of superstitions and stereotypes based on irrational premises.
5. In their daily relations volunteers maintain a proper distance with their charges and know the limits of the ethical conduct, cherish good manners and protect the intimacy of their functioning.
6. Activities undertaken by volunteers are planned, individualised and carried out in an interesting and able-bodied manner; these activities are always accompanied by the atmosphere of empathy and stabilization in the exposure of extreme attitudes of the emotional character.
7. Volunteers always respect their charges, listen carefully to their utterances and do not ignore them; volunteers prefer the rule that every thought is precious, important and demands enough thorough attention from the listeners.
8. In relations with their charges volunteers develop together clear rules and manners of mutual conduct, consolidate them on an everyday basis and together with them strengthen the feeling of mutual understanding, support and frankness, and also warrant equal opportunities of mutual recognition.
9. Volunteers avoid critical thinking and attitude in their work with

their charges, they always notice their valuable strong aspects, positively favour them and systematically cherish revealing their in daily living situations.

10. Volunteers accept all friends of their charges and in relations with them they do not reveal any attitudes of the segregating character or deteriorating their individuality and social values, they avoid marginalising and preclusive situations.
11. Volunteers systematically correct their conduct based on their charges' current opinions, follow their good advice and are open to the eventuality of making necessary changes in the strategy of their own activities.
12. Volunteers systematically share thoughtfully their own personal observations and experience obtained in their relationships with their charges without violating their dignity and ethical and moral values. Volunteers are always careful in formulating their opinions, assessments, advice, tips and instructions.
13. Volunteers introvertively accept their charges, irrespective of the level of their functioning independently, their life resourcefulness, the degree and the type of their disability, their register age.
14. In their relations with their charges volunteers provide emotional stability; the form of their assistance is not constrained, and is not on the border between tolerance and pity – it is characterized with devotion, the commonality of aspirations and plans [Ciesiołkiewicz, 2002; Czetwertyńska, 2004; Danielak-Chomać, Dobrowolska, Roguska, 2010; Kanios, 2010; Kromolicka, 2005; Wciórka, 2008].

Therefore, the presented problems entail the need for finding the answer to the question how student voluntary service is perceived by students, especially with disability, in reference to other forms of spending their free time. It can be stated that the attractiveness and the voluntariness of the choice of forms of voluntary work and the possibility to extend future perspectives, which emerge in the contemporary world, should positively affect the popularity of the student voluntary service among the discussed group of students. On the other hand, the specificity of the subject of aid activities, the variety of the population of

individuals who need to be provided direct support and the scope of requirements involved in acquirement of competences associated with volunteer service (a high level of work intensity, systematic and consistent activity outside the place of residence, a need for courageous communication with charges and frequent achievement of the expected result by the trial-and-error method, the intensive frequency of the occurrence of diseases occurring among those students) can cause a number of intellectual and emotional and functional blockades whose presence negatively affect the quality of commitment as part of voluntary service.

Research problems

One of the most obvious questions which occur in the discussion over student voluntary service, comes down to defining the place of activities of voluntary service among other forms proposed by the environment in students' perception, including disabled students. The major problem selected by the author was in this instance: how disabled students perceive voluntary service in comparison with other forms of activity in their own free time, and how able-bodied students perceive it, taking into consideration:

- disabled students' and able-bodied students' interest in each of the forms of activity proposed in the environment;
- students' assessment of the usefulness of each form in everyday life, proposed in the environment;
- the difficulty level limiting the participation of students in the proposed forms;
- the quantity of time devoted by students to preparation for conducting an activity as part of the proposed forms.

Taking into account the specificity of work and the multidimensionality of voluntary service the author take into consideration information concerning the place of individual aspects of the awareness of the expected features of a volunteer in students' perception. On this basis an elaborated additional research problem was distinguished, formulated as follows: how students perceive certain properties of activity within the framework of voluntary service with regard to the expected

model of attitude characterizing individually the specificity of work in student voluntary service (reliability, orderliness, commitment, dedication, persistence, solidity) taking into consideration the above mentioned areas, i.e.: interest, the assessment of usefulness, the level of difficulty in maintaining the properties. Therefore, when defining the characteristic properties of activity as part of voluntary service the accepted properties were those which especially emphasize an individual model of the volunteer student's attitude. Consequently the following properties were selected: reliability (showing the feeling of necessity to do something resulting from the order and moral internal, fulfilling an obligation); orderliness (order according to a determined schema, orderliness, scrupulosity; accuracy, exactitude, particularity); commitment (moral bonds with something, being in favour of something, engaging into something, taking part in something); dedication (dedication in perseverance, readiness to incur sacrifice); persistence (persisting while persevering for some time, persist without quitting, endure); solidity (a person worth being trusted, reliable, honest, thorough, exact).

The methodology of the author's own research

The questions formulated for the research work were put to a diagnostic survey which used an anonymous survey questionnaire among fifty-one disabled students and forty-nine able-bodied students [Pilch, Bauman, 2010]. The survey involved a hundred individuals altogether. Every student involved in the survey the received a questionnaire composed of three parts.

In the first part, used for defining the place of voluntary service among other forms of spending free time proposed in the environment, each respondent was to rate the proposed forms of spending free time from 1 to 10, taking into consideration the student's interest in a particular form, the usefulness of these forms for the respondent, the level of difficulty in realization of tasks for the respondent and the quantity of time allowed by students for preparation of each of the possible forms.

In the second part, concerning individual properties of activity as part of voluntary service, with regard to the preferred model of an

individual volunteer attitude, every respondent was to assign a suitable number of points to a particular area of a property, taking into account the respondent's preferences for the given properties, their usefulness for the realization of an activity as part voluntary service, the difficulty level of preservation of suitable features especially characterising the expected model of the respondent's attitude.

The third part included an open question in which students were to respond with their own words to the following question: Was it that, as part realization of tasks during student voluntary service, there occurred an incident especially important for you? Did that incident impress you unexpectedly and why?

Before filling in the questionnaire, students were informed that it is anonymous and is conducted exclusively for scientific aims. The students were asked to respond sincerely, according to their own beliefs. It was also indicated that this questionnaire has no "bad" or "good" answers [Łobocki, 2011]. The investigations which were conducted very efficiently during university activities for twenty minutes.

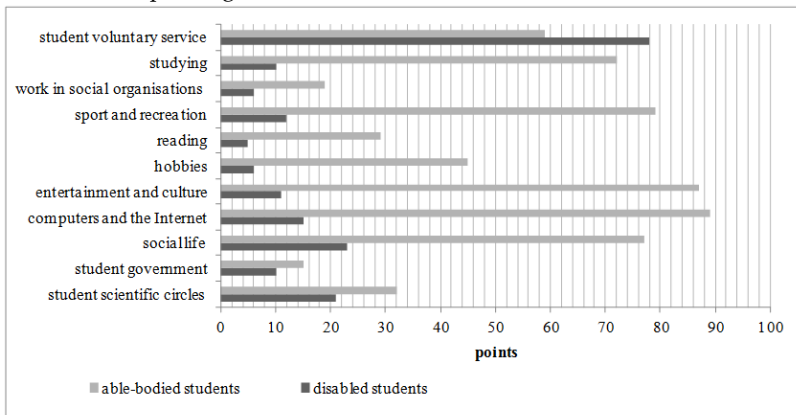
The interpretation of results

After obtaining filled in questionnaires from all the students who participated in the survey it was stated that the task was conducted fully correctly and then there was summing up points received in every form of spending free time proposed in the environment the in individual categories, beginning from students' interests in particular proposals. As regards the scope of proposals offered to students in the environment, there appeared differences between the investigated disabled students and able-bodied students. The repertoire of proposal for able-bodied students there appeared additionally such forms as: computer science, technology, tourism, professional work, intensive training, competitive sports. The findings were presented in individual diagrams.

The data included in Diagram 1 indicate that the greatest differences between disabled students and able-bodied students as regards the level of interest in the proposed forms of spending free time appear

in almost every group. In the vast majority able-bodied students indicated computers and the internet (89), entertainment and culture (87), sports activities (79), and social activities (77). In the group of disabled students the greatest scoring percentage was revealed when indicating student voluntary service (78) whereas able-bodied students revealed 59. The least scoring percentage in disabled students was declared when indicating hobby (6), work in civic organizations and reading (5). If the proposed forms of spending free time by able-bodied students were grouped thematically, the dominant forms would be: entertainment and culture, sports and recreational activities, student scientific clubs, social activities, studying. Among disabled students the thematic group included, apart from declarations of participation in student voluntary service: social activities, sports activities connected with rehabilitation, computers and the internet, entertainment and culture, studying.

Diagram 1. Assessment of the students' interest in the proposed forms of spending free time

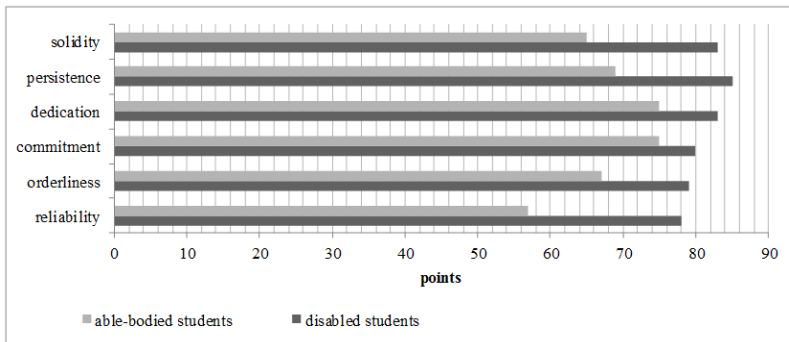


Source: the author's study

When characterizing the results included in Diagram 2 it can be claimed that the properties of activity for the expected model of volunteer attitude were generally rated high by students. However, disabled students significantly differentiate the properties defining their prefer-

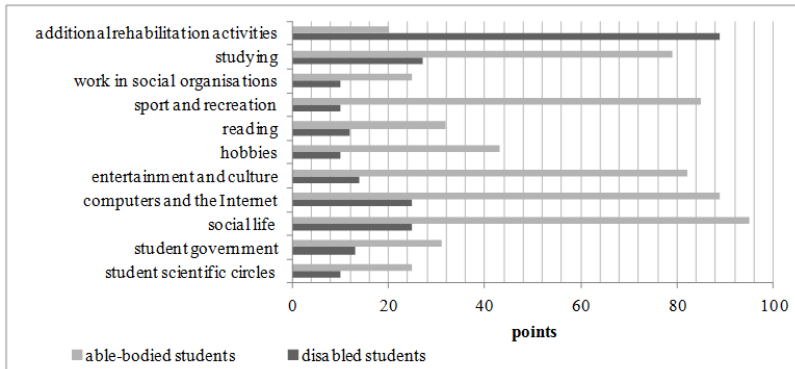
ences of their persistence in an attitude model with relation to able-bodied students. The properties rated the highest by disabled students was "persistence" (85), "dedication" (83) and "commitment" (80), whereas able-bodied students rated "persistence" 69, "dedication" 75 and "commitment" 75. At the same time those were the highest ratings provided by able-bodied students in the entire evaluation of the properties. The property rated the lowest among able-bodied students was "reliability" – 57.

Diagram 2. Assessment of the property of activity as regards the volunteer attitude



Source: the author's study

The obtained results presented in Diagram 3 allow stating that in the assessment of the usefulness of the proposed forms in everyday life disabled students rate "additional rehabilitative activities (89)", and next in a distance "studying" (27), participation in "social activities(25)", work with "computers and the internet" (25), participation in "entertainment and culture" (14). The scope of the usefulness of the proposed forms of spending free time in everyday life was rated definitely higher by able-bodied students. In their assessment they rate the most "social activities (95)", work with "computers and the internet" (89), "sports activities" (85), "entertainment and culture" (82) and "studying" (79). In this group the usefulness of rehabilitative activities (20) was rated the lowest.

Diagram 3. Assessment of the usefulness of the proposed forms in everyday life

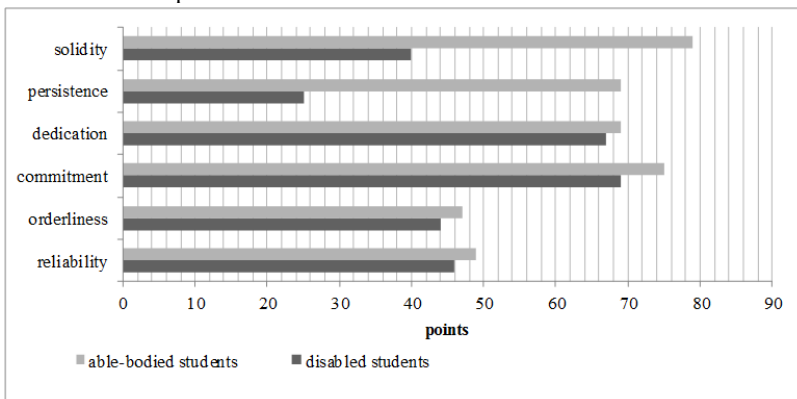
Source: the author's study

When analysing the gathered results presented in Diagram 4 it can be claimed that in the group of disabled students the assessment of the usefulness of the properties of activity taking into account preferences of the respondents for their usefulness in the realization of activity as part of voluntary service is comparably comparatively lower than the assessment of able-bodied students. It turns out that disabled students rate "commitment" (69) and "dedication" (67) the most, and "persistence" (25) the lowest. The group of able-bodied students were more favourable in this assessment and they rated "solidity" (79), "commitment" (75), "dedication" (69) and "persistence" (69) the most. The lowest rate in this group was "orderliness" (47) the highest, though in the general population of the respondents this property obtained in both groups high rates.

An interesting presentation of results was included in Diagram 5, defining the subjective assessment of the difficulty in using the proposed forms as part of one's free time in both groups of students. It could be claimed that generally students give low rates to the level of the occurrence of different kinds of difficulties, though in the group of able-bodied students this level is rated higher in comparison to the group of disabled students. In the opinion of able-bodied students they encounter the most difficulties in participation in working in student

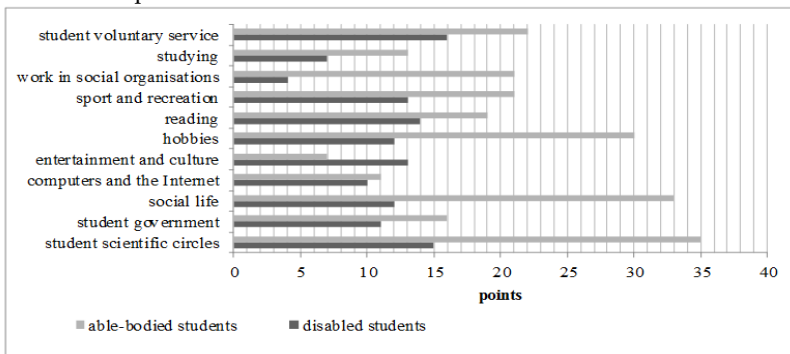
scientific clubs (35), organization of participation in social activities (33), realization of their hobbies (30), and then they mention participation in student voluntary service (22). The group of disabled students revealed difficulties in working in student voluntary service (16), student scientific clubs (15), reading (14), participation in entertainment and culture (13) and in sports activities (13).

Diagram 4. Assessment of the usefulness of the properties of activity in respect of the attitude model



Source: the author's study

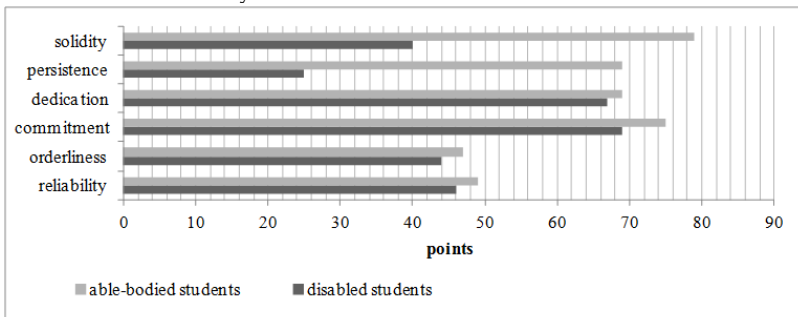
Diagram 5. Assessment of the difficulty in realization of the proposed forms as part of free time



Source: the author's study

In the assessment of the subjective difficulty in maintaining suitable features (Diagram 6) especially characterising the preferred attitude model of the respondent in the own activity as part of voluntary service in the group of able-bodied students, the most important difficulty was solidity (79), commitment (75), dedication (69) and persistence (69). Other specified properties were also rated significantly high (reliability 49, orderliness 47). It can be claimed that in their voluntary work able-bodied students are critical about evaluation of the own attitude model, and at the same time they are aware of the importance of the necessity of maintaining the socially expected high level in categories of ethics and the discipline of realization in the undertaken activities. Slightly different assessment of their threshold of difficulties was provided by disabled students, who gave the highest rates to commitment (69) and dedication (67) as properties involving the most difficulties. It turns out that maintaining persistence (25) brings them the least difficulties. It is worth adding here that though it can seem at least debatable, from the observation of volunteers' practical activities, it appears that disabled students reveal, during their own work on an everyday basis, a high level of determination apart from that they extremely strongly identify themselves with their own work for aid activities; moreover, having carried out their duties, they always carry out a thorough retrospection analysis of the correctness of their actions.

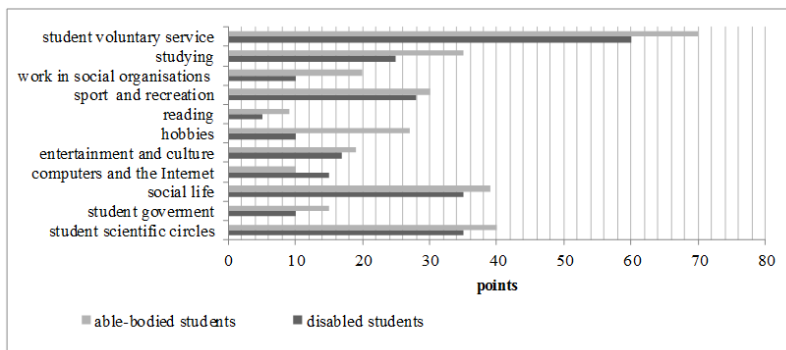
Diagram 6. Assessment of the difficulty in maintaining the properties of the activity of the attitude model



Source: the author's study

As for the time intended for preparation as part of realization of a preferred form of spending free time (Diagram 7), both disabled students and able-bodied students spend the least time on reading accepting the rule "I will do some reading when I have time", and they usually do it in public places, e.g. while queuing, in means of transport, waiting rooms. Students from both groups seldom indicate the place of reading at home or in reading rooms. From all the specified forms respondents in both groups spend most time on voluntary service (disabled students 60, able-bodied students 70), student scientific clubs (disabled students 35, able-bodied students 40) and social activities (disabled students 35, able-bodied students 39). It might be curious why young people spend so little time, compared to other specified forms, on studying (disabled students 25, able-bodied students 35), work in civic organizations (disabled students 10, able-bodied students 20) and entertainment and culture (disabled students 17, able-bodied students 19).

Diagram 7. The time intended for getting prepared as part of the realization of forms



Source: the author's study

What deserves special attention is the results of the third part of the questionnaire in which respondents provided in writing answers to the question: Has any incident especially important for the respondent occur as part of realization of tasks during student voluntary service,

and did it make any unexpected impression and why? As a result of the analysis of the obtained responses it could be claimed already at the beginning that both frankness and responsibility as regards efforts for respondents' serious approach to written work was on a very high level. All the provided answers were substantial and included elements of criticism, but also attempts of justifications of objective circumstances of events, situations, their uniqueness, the individualisation of the case and its uniqueness. All the respondents expressed their point of view and tried to provide their descriptions with a moderately objective image of described episodes and accompanying emotions. Both examined groups of volunteers were decidedly dominated by positive descriptions of episodes showing their special ethical, social, humane, emotional and motivational dimensions.

The voluntary service activities which students found attractive and motivating for further activities, included according to their ranking positions: acceptance of the realism of the situation of supported individuals; experiencing the feeling of pain and sadness, and simultaneously charges' gratitude, repentance, admiration and delight; gratitude for the opportunity to adapt to life in the environment in which one can feel isolation of the environment and neglect; support as regards learning how to redirect one's emotional life to others and turn towards life in optimism and hope; becoming confirmed in the need for persisting in patience and understanding; becoming prepared for failures, possible pain, disappointment and the state of helplessness; support from the nearest family and friends as regards common aid activities for the charges; consolidation in the need for self-care; eliminating situations of experiencing numbness and shock; avoidance of situations involving longing and sorrow, sadness, fear and conduct disorders of the neurotic character; avoidance of situations causing ailments, neuroses, depressions; authentic readiness to cooperate, coexistence, co-experiencing, sharing joy and the smallest life achievements; leading common conversations, discussions, games, artistic activities, reading, collecting. The respondents' descriptions pay a great deal of attention to statements like: "during meetings with my charges I could learn a great

lot", "these meetings are for me lessons in humility and a skill to remain patient", "I am eager to spend my time because in my charge's eyes I always notice gratitude and joy for the meeting", "my charge waits for me already in the morning and is very happy when he or she finds me in the doorway", "he or she treats me as a family member", "even my parents have not given me so much satisfaction in relations with them as I have been given by my charge". In most cases volunteers described their own achievements, which is confirmed by a great and often underestimated role of the feeling of personal success achieved during activity in student voluntary service.

The analysis of responses provided by disabled students enriches partly the general image of the specificity and the uniqueness of activities as part of voluntary service. This picture is especially supplemented by an interesting description of individual cases characterizing the motives of persistence in aid activities, joy of the possibility to provide aid acts and social support on an everyday basis as well as mutual understanding, respect, recognition, a desire to be together, safe support and revealing evident personal benefits of the volunteer and the charge.

Conclusions

The findings to date provide the basis for the conviction that in most cases disabled students, through participation in student voluntary service, achieve personal satisfaction, better results in social adaptation, and the quality of their activities does not differ in any respect from the quality level of able-bodied students' work. Thanks to their participation in voluntary service, disabled students naturally extend their space in the environment, directly experience a wide area of their altruistic activities, care as part of voluntary service, organized palliative and hospice care, support of the injured and victims of tragedies, work for individuals who are chronically ill, neglected socially, disabled or elderly. Consequently, working in student voluntary service contributes significantly to practical breaking of previous barriers, which are caused by the limited form of social communication with the

disabled, and above all actively supports the development of the perspective and enriches with positive experiences in the process of overcoming social exclusion, also of the described group of students. Without doubt attention must be drawn to the social and educational value of student voluntary service, which is a pass to the open circle of the environment, thus allowing observation of disabled volunteers in their open, wise, conscious and socially precious aid initiatives. With their perfect volunteer attitude those students intensely transfer good, acceptance, support and respect; they enrich the content of life filled with optimism and joy, and they inspire hope and a sense of security on an everyday basis.

The results obtained on the basis of the open questions of the survey questionnaire suggest that the examined group of students in the vast majority still wants to participate in aid activities intended for those in need, perceives the importance of their realization, the usefulness and the social and ethical dimension for improvement of the quality of also their own lives. A problem which might occur is maintaining the cyclical nature of continuation of activities of disabled students as part of voluntary service due to occurrence of periodic impossibilities to perform aid activities, due to their current health conditions or a temporary excess of tasks connected with the student's role. However, under no circumstances do those issues diminish the motivation of declared help to others.

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