

EDU WORLD2022**Edu World International Conference Education Facing Contemporary World Issues****VOLUNTEERING AS A COMPONENT OF NON-FORMAL
EDUCATION**

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Abstract

Volunteering is one of the non-formal activities with an important role in forming/shaping and developing students' personality. In Romanian schools, volunteering is not part of the compulsory curriculum, being left to the teachers or to the community. This research aims at looking at volunteering, not as a separate activity, subordinated to non-governmental organizations or to other public institutions, but as a component part of the educational activity of a school, carried out in a non-formal context. The objectives of the research were: (1) to identify teachers' perception on the role of volunteering as part of non-formal education; (2) to identify pathways of how to involve teachers in volunteering activities in schools; (3) to identify teachers' perceptions on the benefits of volunteering in shaping students' personalities. The research tool was a questionnaire administered to teachers from three counties in the western part of Romania. The results show that, although all teachers are involved in volunteering, there is a need to develop and implement a legal framework that regulates the volunteering activities in the Romanian educational system. Involving students in volunteering activities contributes to knowledge, mutual knowledge and self-knowledge - crucial aspects in the development of their personality, in building their own system of values that shall help them later. Through volunteering activities, students value the knowledge, the skills, the attitudes acquired/formed in a formal and informal context, but, at the same time, the experiences in which they participate develop the necessary skills in the classroom and in the daily life activities.

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1. Introduction

Non-formal education aims at activities carried out and coordinated by teachers or other trainers (animators, mountain rescuers, doctors, volunteers, etc.) in contexts different than the school ones. It is well-known that the term *non-formal* refers to “an educational reality less formalized or non-formalized, but always with *formative effects*” (Cozma, 1988, p. 50). Thus, the objective of non-formal education is closely related to the achievement of pedagogical goals (Bradea, 2012): to broaden and complete the horizon of culture, enriching knowledge in certain fields; to contribute to participants' recreation and relaxation as well as to the organized leisure-time activities; to provide the framework for practicing and cultivating different inclinations, skills and abilities, for showing talents.

Non-formal education is much more flexible and open in relation to students' interests and possibilities, the pedagogical design of extracurricular activities is less formalized, oriented towards interdisciplinary, integrated approach and lifelong learning, the assessment is non-formalized. However, non-formal education needs to be addressed and valued in conjunction with formal and informal education.

Analyzing the formative impact of non-formal education, Blândul (2015, p. 13) summarizes four defining characteristics of non-formal education: content-centred (health, education, culture, environment, sports, science, human rights, etc.), focused on the problems of daily life, focused on awareness on the need to know and respect the fundamental rights of the individual, focused on the problems of humanistic education (forming a correct image of one's own person, confidence in one's own capacities of initiative, insertion and decision, etc.). The advantages of non-formal education are numerous (Blândul, 2015; Cuceș, 2006; Ciolan, 2008; Marinescu, 2013; Orțan, 2003): it allows students to participate in educational activities carried out in a flexible training space, in a positive affective climate that is understanding, responsible, responsive, etc.; it allows students to achieve sustainable learning by assimilating the information generated by permanent interactions; it allows students to put into practice, in various contexts, the knowledge acquired in a particular field; it gives students the opportunity to transfer knowledge, methods, principles, language from one field to another; it encourages interactive learning by encouraging problem solving, decision making, etc.; it capitalizes on critical and creative thinking; it aims at developing cognitive skills and emotional structures; it aims at cultivating emotions; it involves capitalizing on and practicing different ways of communication: verbal, nonverbal, artistic, musical, corporal, relational, etc.; it aims at creating flexible and integrated mental and action-behavioral structures with great potential for transfer and adaptation.

Volunteering is one of the activities of non-formal education with extraordinary educational value, being a form of experiential learning.

2. Problem Statement

The concept of volunteer refers to a person who voluntarily and deliberately decides to engage in an activity for the benefit of another person, a group of individuals or a community, without being remunerated in any way. The benefits of such a volunteer action are aimed at both those to whom it is addressed and at its authors. If in the case of the former, the gain could be represented by solving the

problem they are facing and for which they have requested support, the benefits for the authors of the charities are mainly of a professional and moral nature. They will be able to gain professional experience, develop specialized skills and interpersonal relationships, personality traits such as communicativeness, sociability, self-respect and respect for others, empathy, concern for the difficulties faced by other disadvantaged people or groups, take on roles in the community, fulfil responsibilities, etc. In addition, the status of “volunteer” and “beneficiary” are interchangeable which allows those who, at some point, helped to be helped, respectively to understand how their partners feel and to develop the above-mentioned personal qualities (Blândul, 2022).

Volunteering is still in development in Romania. The legal framework is represented by Law no. 78/2014 on the regulation of volunteering activity in Romania, published in the Official Journal, Part I, no. 469 of 26/06/2014. According to it, volunteering is an activity of public interest, unpaid, based on a freely agreed choice, for the benefit of the community. Participation in volunteer activities is based on the principle of equal opportunities and treatment, without discrimination. The activities of public interest specified in the law are carried out in areas such as: art and culture, sports and recreation, education and research, environmental protection, health, social assistance, religion, civic activism, human rights, humanitarian and/or philanthropic aid, community development, social development, etc.

It is recognized that volunteering is an important element in the development of vocational education and training, the state recognizing the social value of volunteering as an expression of active citizenship, solidarity and social responsibility as well as the professional value as an expression of personal, professional, intercultural and linguistic development of the persons conducting these activities.

Unfortunately, volunteering in Romania is still in its infancy in this area of non-formal education. The activities carried out by the students, under the guidance of their teachers and with the support of their parents, are sporadic.

The school, as an integral part of the community, may contribute to optimizing the quality of life in the community in which it operates not only by preparing well-trained graduates, able to actively and responsibly integrate into the labour market and social destinies, but also by providing volunteer activities in response to the problems faced by the society. By being connected to the current cognitive and relational universe, students perceive the demands that arise in the process of social adaptation. The daily relationship between students and teachers implies mutual knowledge and adaptation that requires effort, a lot of information, ways of reacting in various situations and certain strategies for building quality relationships.

Volunteering can be done in school, but especially out of school. From this perspective, Cristea (2018) claims that:

In both cases, volunteering should be supported, encouraged and stimulated by the school on the basis of common specific objectives which aim at acquiring new social skills based on knowledge, habits and social attitudes, perfectible in multiple social conditions, in open community, cultural and professional environments. (p. 56)

In this article, we aim to look at volunteering not as a separate activity, subordinated to non-governmental organizations or to other public institutions, but as a component part of the educational activity in schools, conducted in a non-formal context.

3. Research Questions

The problem that arises in the Romanian school is related to motivating teachers to get involved, together with their students, in volunteer activities. Unlike other countries in the European Union and not only, volunteering is not part of the compulsory curriculum for students. Nor is there an official document regulating volunteering in schools as part of the educational activity. There are only a few clarifications in the Ministerial Order 5660/2004 on Standards for teaching positions. In the category of communication and relationship skills needed for a teacher, it is recommended to carry out joint school-family-community projects, and in the category of psycho-social competences the following specific skills are laid out: developing effective strategies of school-family partnership; working with parents/community in order to achieve an authentic partnership in education; and the following activities are proposed: design and implementation of extracurricular activities; school-family partnership activities. These activities are optional and do not influence the score in the evaluation of the teachers at the end of the school year. But volunteering should neither be confused with any extracurricular activity nor with a school-family-community partnership (Pop, 2018, 2019). Therefore, from a regulatory point of view, teachers are not motivated to get involved in volunteer activities. Thus, the research focused on the analysis of the ways the volunteer activity is being carried out in the Romanian schools, highlighting what determines the teachers to get involved together with their students in such activities.

4. Purpose of the Study

The research has set out the following specific objectives: (1) to identify teachers' perception of the role of volunteering as part of non-formal education; (2) to identify how to involve teachers in school volunteering activities; (3) to identify teachers' perception on the benefits of volunteering in shaping students' personalities. The sample selected for this research consisted of 253 subjects (N = 253), all pre-university teachers from three counties in Romania. The subjects included in the sample were chosen using the simple random sampling procedure, and they belonged to the following categories: according to gender 92.6% females, 7.4% males, according to the school stage: 7.4 % preschool education, 27.5% primary school, 39% lower secondary school and 27.1% upper-secondary school, according to the environment they teach in: 70.4% urban area, 29.6% rural area. 69.5% of the subjects have more than 15 years of seniority in education, 23% between 10 and 15 years, 5.6% between 5 and 10 years, and 1.9% are in their first 5 years of teaching.

5. Research Methods

The main research method used in this study was the survey based on a questionnaire, and the related instrument consisted of 15 multi-choice, objective items and 5 open items. The questionnaire was developed by the specialists in education sciences from the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies,

University of Oradea, and was completed by each respondent online, between February and May 2022. The data were completed with details provided by teachers, principals, representatives of the local community and students participating in volunteer activities during the pedagogical training of the students from the University of Oradea (in the schools where they carried out their pedagogical practice).

6. Findings

The quantitative interpretation of the research results was performed by calculating the statistical frequency of the answers provided by the subjects. The first aspect highlighted the way teachers are involved in volunteer activities. 65.8% of them claimed to have initiated volunteering activities in schools many times, and 35.2% only sporadically. Fortunately, all the teachers included in the study had at least once the initiative of these activities, although it is known that the one who organizes non-formal activities must prove certain qualities (Blândul, 2015; Bradea, 2022; Kiss, 2022; Mândrea, 2022; Pop, 2022): specialized knowledge and a consistent general knowledge; ability to create learning situations; rich repertoire of practical skills; taking responsibility for the students' situation and for the quality of their work; internalization of a professional code of ethics; promotion of psycho-pedagogical qualities of the teacher, etc. The chart below (Figure 1) presents the motivation that led teachers to get involved in volunteer activities, given that these activities are not mandatory and teachers in the Romanian educational system are sometimes overwhelmed by administrative tasks (sometimes only tangent to the field of education) spending a lot of time and effort to analyse and report a wide range of quantitative data to decision-making forums (almost completely diminishing the attention paid to qualitative sources).

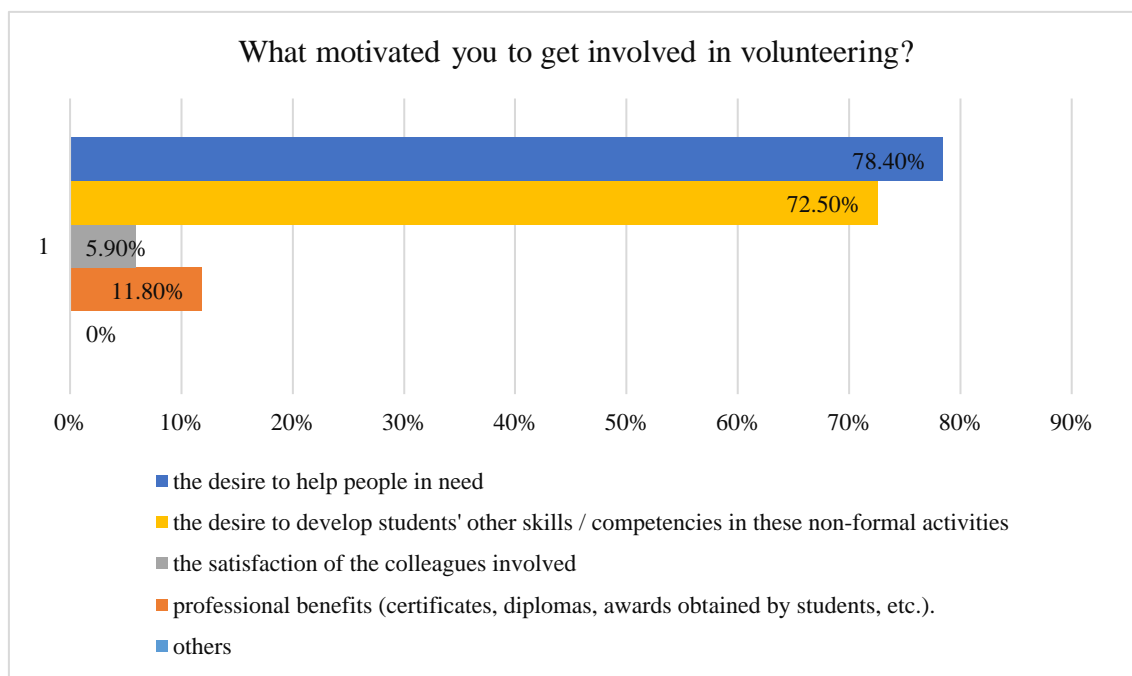


Figure 1. Motivation of teachers' involvement in volunteer activities

The dominant motivation (78.4%) is an altruistic one: the desire to help people in need. Equally, teachers are aware of the role they can play in the context of these non-formal activities, in terms of

developing students' skills (72.5%) through experiential learning, specific to non-formal education, and implicitly, to volunteering. According to Kolb's theory, described in *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (1984) (based on ideas of the theories formulated by John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and others), experience plays an important role not only in the learning process, but also in the human development. Knowledge results from the accumulation and transformation of experience. The experiential learning model describes two ways of accumulating experience - concrete experience and abstract conceptualization - and two ways of transforming experience - reflective observation and active experimentation. And the role of the teacher in this type of learning is essential. Although the evaluation of teachers in Romania focuses exclusively on individual results, without quantifying in any way the common results (Bradea, 2017), a small percentage of the respondents (11.8%) claim that they were motivated by individual professional benefits that involved obtaining certificates, diplomas, etc. that would be later quantified in results that improved their evaluation.

Another item directly related to this one was the identification of the benefits that teachers felt as a result of getting involved in volunteer activities, in a non-formal context (Figure 2). The answers with the highest frequency were: "I have become more receptive to the needs of this category of people" (74.5%), "I have become more tolerant with people in need" (52.9%), "I have developed my skills in planning, organizing, assessing school and extracurricular activities" (46.7%), "I have developed my skills in communication and relationships with other people" (33.3%), "I have become more active in extracurricular activities" (29.4%), "self-knowledge" (29.4%). Thus, the results confirm what the theory holds: in the field of education, volunteering contributes to the improvement of pedagogical activities designed and carried out under conditions of continuous adaptability to an open social context, because it requires greater involvement of non-formal forms of training/self-training, in the perspective of lifelong learning/ self-learning (strategic, but also operational dimension of lifelong learning and self-education). Given these aspects, volunteer activities must be carefully thought out, designed and carried out.

In the volunteer activities, participants' motivation and awareness are two very important aspects, regardless of the age category (Bradea, 2022). For that only thus the interactive strategies can be used to stimulate active knowledge, by search and discovery, by solving problematic situations where participants are put in a position to explore the differences between the competencies they have and the new demands they have to face. In this regard, the following item highlights teachers' perception of the benefits of volunteering for students.

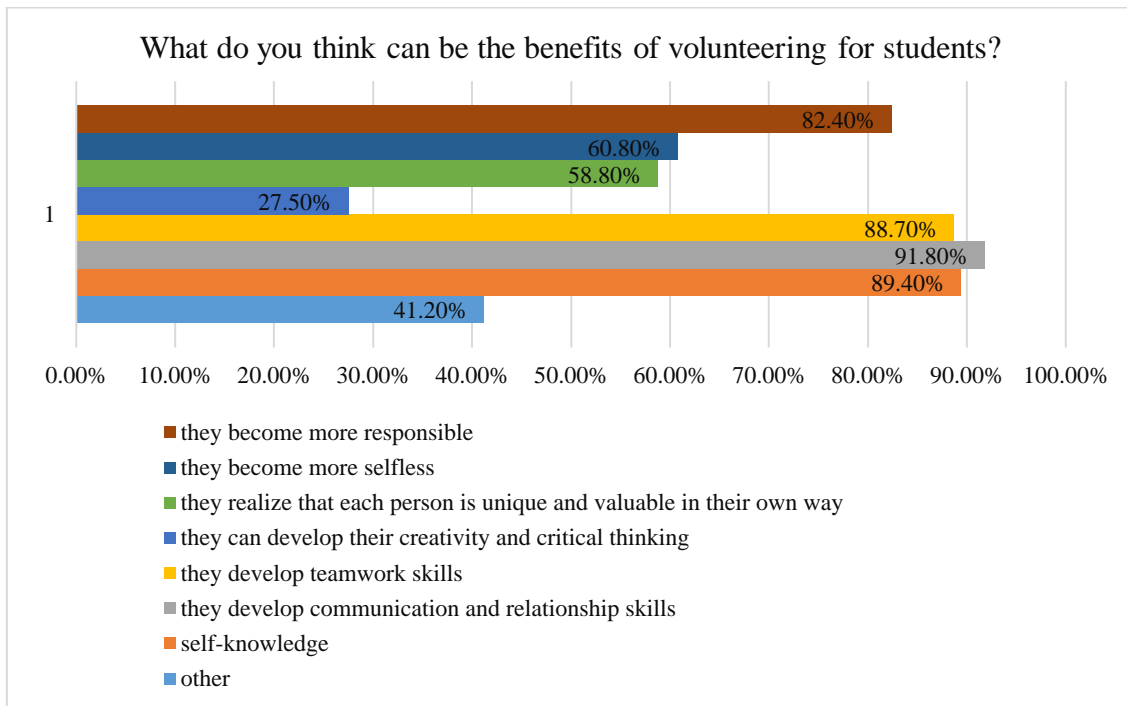


Figure 2. The benefits of volunteering for students

It is known that the training profile of a graduate (of different levels of study) involves reporting on learning outcomes – represented by key competencies, specific competencies and transversal competencies. The formation/development of these competencies involves the combination of formal, non-formal and informal education. If we look at volunteering from this perspective, it is obvious that this activity can provide formative values corresponding to both key and transversal competencies. These aspects are summarized in Figure 3. In the context of volunteer activities, teachers consider that students: can become more responsible (82.4%), develop communication and relationship skills - can communicate assertively and persuasively; can adapt their communicative discourse according to contexts, situations, circumstances, audience (79.5%); can assume roles and responsibilities within teams (66.7%); can analyse and critically assess facts, problems, situations, can explore innovative ways of solving problems (64.5%); use self-assessment and self-analysis capabilities of their own potential in the activities carried out (41.2%). In addition to these benefits, which totalled the highest percentages, teachers added others: students take action to capitalize on their potential to achieve their goals; show flexibility and adaptability to change; demonstrate conscientiousness and perseverance; demonstrate skills in planning, organizing and assessing the activity; take responsibility for the made decisions and their consequences over time; show courage, take action and get involved in defending what is moral; assume the important general-human values for the society, etc.

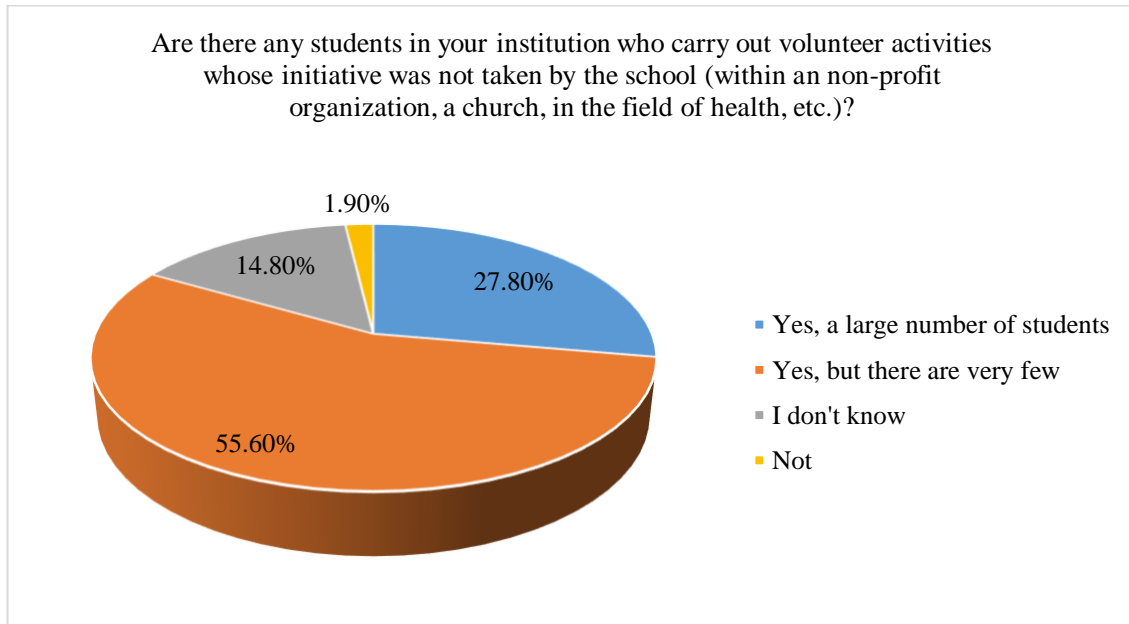


Figure 3. Volunteer activity of students out of school

The fact that volunteering is a voluntary activity, carried out on their own initiative can be an asset for students, because it is conducted without any external constraint. It is often parents' example, family concerns, the values promoted within the family that lead students to get involved or not in volunteer activities. There are students who constantly carry out volunteer activities within NGOs (Romanian Scouts, Red Cross, religious organizations, sports clubs, etc.). Their activity is not directly related to the school curriculum. The graph above shows that teachers in schools are familiar with the students' volunteer activity outside the school. The 27.8% of the teachers who answered that there is a large number of students in their school who volunteer at various organizations are all high school teachers. It is certified once again that in Romania, most of the students involved in volunteer activities are high school students. Voicu (2005) developed a profile of the Romanian volunteer, stating that those who are involved in such activities are young, with a high level of education, they are sociable people and often come from families with an average or above average income. At the same time, the author states that there are more volunteers in urban than in rural areas (where volunteering opportunities are fewer). There are many studies on the types of motivations that motivate individuals/students to engage in volunteer activities (Bang & Ross, 2009; Batson et al., 1988; Clary & Snyder, 1999; Musick & Wilson, 2007; Phillips & Phillips, 2011; Pierce et al., 2014; Schondel & Boehm, 2000; Stukas et al., 2016). All research has shown that social motivations are accompanied by those that address the needs of the individual: the idea of experimentation; social contact - the desire to get in touch with different people, different cultures, different places so that the individual can develop and broaden their horizons; offering help to disadvantaged people; meeting the expectations of the people around; promoting civil rights and freedoms; professional career development etc.

The teachers included in the study claim that an increasing category is represented in Romania by high school students who engage in volunteer activities in order to obtain the necessary evidence for admission to universities abroad which place a special emphasis on skills training, mainly transversal,

through volunteering. However, research has shown that, regardless of their motivation, as long as it generates prosocial behaviour, the personality of those involved in volunteering undergoes significant improvements. In most cases, after the decision to volunteer, the personal motive is left behind, and the social, civic, altruistic aspects shall prevail.

Another category of volunteer students is represented by those who are involved in organizing and conducting cultural and sporting events (large-scale, most often). There are students who are passionate about these fields, or with proven skills in this regard, and who want to be actively and responsibly involved in carrying out, under exceptional circumstances, these events. In very few cases this involvement is due to the school, based on a partnership agreement with the organizing institution. Most of the time, participation is individual, based on a volunteer contract, and the quality/status of volunteer is obtained following an evaluation (most often based on an interview).

According to the teachers in the research, the current context has greatly changed high school students' outlook on volunteering. A large number of students have been working as volunteers in helping refugees from Ukraine. Not only by collecting aids, but also by being actively involved in supporting refugees socially, educationally, morally or psychologically. Sometimes with the whole family.

Table 1. Parents' involvement in school volunteering

How do you think parents should be involved in volunteering?	
By the participation of the parents together with their children in a volunteer activity	98 %
By the participation of the parents together with other parents in an activity with the beneficiaries	74.50%
By participating in an activity carried out together with volunteer students and their parents, the beneficiaries and their parents	56.90%
By getting involved in fundraising and donating activities	45.10%
Another way	2 %

In Romania, as we have already shown, there is no culture of volunteering as an activity carried out constantly with the support of families, an aspect signalled by all the teachers included in the study. The table above (Table 1) highlights the activities in which the school wishes to be supported by the family. 98% of the respondents want parents to participate with their own child in at least one volunteer activity initiated by the school. There are numerous studies in the literature that address this issue. Joyce Epstein (1988) proposes the model of overlapping spheres of influence and many of the analysed studies report to this model. The theory of overlapping spheres of influence states that students learn more when parents, educators, and others in the community share goals and responsibilities for student learning and work together, not individually. The overlapping areas are family, school and community. The following types of involvement have been identified in “overlapping” areas (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010): parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. The validity of the model is demonstrated by international analyses (Denessen et al., 2009). However, the model presents a number of challenges (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010) such as the need to involve the school counsellor in partnerships (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010), but also hypotheses about the differences between “high-performing and low-performing schools” (Kabarere et al., 2013) regarding the number of students involved. This last aspect is also analysed by Valentin Blândul (2015, p. 37) who

claims that in Romania the participation rate of students in non-formal education is higher when they benefit from family support, have positive academic results, accept the challenges of the new, learn in a renowned and well-organized school, are involved in the social life of the community. Starting from the specific functions of the school-family-community partnership identified in the literature, Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy (2004) propose a multilevel model which contains nine types of collaborative results. These are: mentoring programs, parent centres, volunteer programs, classroom support, home visiting programs, parent education programs, school management-business partnerships, and tutoring programs. Regardless of how we view these patterns of involvement, parents' role in shaping their children's personality is certain. The values taught within the family, the way in which children are valued and given responsibilities at home will determine the way students relate to others and, implicitly, their mode of action. And volunteering, in this context, can become the activity focused on personal development and on gaining satisfaction that are tied to increasing students' self-esteem.

7. Conclusions

Considering the analysed aspects, we believe that there is a need to develop and implement a legal framework that regulates volunteering in the Romanian educational system. Involving students in volunteer activities contributes to knowledge, mutual knowledge and self-knowledge - crucial aspects in the development of their personality, in building their own system of values that will help them later. Volunteering can be a form of learning in the context of non-formal education through voluntary involvement in activities based on a school-community partnership. It is an opportunity to capitalize on, but especially to develop transversal skills, skills that represent value acquisitions and attitudes that go beyond a certain field/program of study and are expressed through: autonomy and responsibility, social interaction, personal and professional development. They provide: teamwork skills, oral and written communication skills in the mother tongue/foreign language; reasoning/argumentation and critical thinking skills; use of information and communication technology - ICT; problem solving and decision making; recognition and respect for diversity and multiculturalism; learning autonomy; initiative and entrepreneurial mindset; openness to lifelong learning; respect and development of professional values and ethics; skills to operate in an interdisciplinary manner with methodologies and concepts that come from the field of exact sciences, socio-human sciences and artistic creation, etc.

Linking theory to practice, emphasizing experiential learning, achieving intra-, inter-, transdisciplinarity in authentic contexts of learning and action, ensuring effective training/development of skills, active involvement in community life, promoting equal opportunities and non-discrimination, knowledge of one's rights and obligations - are aspects that lead students to processes of reflection, self-exploration and self-discovery. It is the metacognitive approach so necessary for the formation of the competence of learning to learn, and the path to personal and professional development.

What we all need to understand - teachers, parents, students, decision makers - is that the benefit of this type of non-formal education through volunteering is reflected in a formal and informal context. We know that we cannot look at the three forms of education separately because they influence and condition each other. Students will have to capitalize on the knowledge, skills, attitudes acquired/trained in the formal and informal context in the volunteer activities, but, at the same time, the experiences in

which they participate through volunteering will develop the necessary skills in the classroom and in the daily life activities.

We believe, therefore, that the formative values of volunteering prove to be indisputable: training people with self-confidence who are open to lifelong learning, who are active, proactive, creative and innovative, and who are responsible and civic-minded. That is, people that every society needs.

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