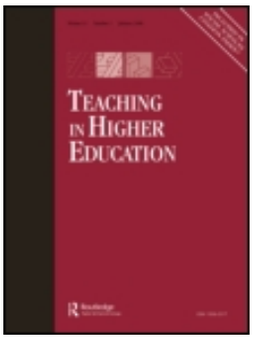

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Delaying the academy: A gap year education

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This investigation serves as one of the first empirical analyses to examine the international volunteering gap year from an educational perspective, concluding an in-depth case study of a prominent gap year organisation in the UK. Contrary to widespread industry promotion of international development, the findings suggest that the experience can be better understood as an educational endeavour for the volunteers. However, the ways and rates at which learning takes place in these experiences are complex and require a synthesis of multiple educational paradigms to capture. The study presents the international volunteering gap year as an experiential educational pedagogy that fuses civic engagement with significant personal, moral, civic and intellectual development.

Keywords: gap year; experiential education; civic education; character development; volunteering

Introduction

In the UK, US and elsewhere there is an increasing trend for young people whom, after leaving secondary school, delay their higher education and instead choose to learn outside the academy. They seek adventure, a chance to live independently in a world far different than they have ever known. They are drawn to this path for a number of reasons, but most feel that there is something lacking in their lives. They choose to take an international volunteering gap year, spending a year in a developing community teaching or doing social or community work.

The rise of the gap year phenomenon, particularly the increasingly popular international volunteering gap year, has been of growing interest to policy makers and researchers – and with good reason: these pre-university gap years occur in foreign environments at transitional points in young people's lives. But despite its cultural prominence, the international volunteering gap year has been the subject of little academic research.

This investigation serves as one of the first empirical analyses to understand the international volunteering gap year from an educational perspective, concluding an in-depth case study of a prominent gap year organisation in the UK.

Gap years

Scholars suggest that the Grand Tour was the historical precursor to the modern gap year (Heath 2007; King 2007; Simpson 2004). The Grand Tour was a form of travel

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for young British aristocratic males from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries that served as an extended educational experience: 'the travel [practice] of a young man of rank often in his teen, undertaken as the "crown" of his liberal education' (Cohen 2001, 129). Today, the gap year is a notable feature of the contemporary British social landscape (King 2007), and its popularity is increasing. Current estimates suggest that each year, up to 250,000 young people in the UK take domestic or international gap years either before or after university in 200 countries through over 800 organizations (Jones 2004). The providers of these experiences purport to help create better prepared and more highly motivated students over a short period of time. In 2009, Princeton University launched a fully subsidized international volunteering gap year option for incoming undergraduates to encourage an international perspective and commitment to public service among its students (Arenson 2008).

Studies of the gap year experience

Unfortunately, despite the gap year's high cultural visibility in the UK, only a handful of studies have examined it. Critics of this form of educational experience have been writing since the days of the Grand Tour. Some are very critical of the modern international volunteering gap year, arguing that even structured international service placements amount to little more than 'volunteer-tourism', have negligible developmental impact on low-income countries, are poorly organized, and inculcate in participants (who often spend a significant amount of time socializing with peers from their home countries) limited and simplistic conceptions of the developing countries where projects are undertaken (Huxley 2005; Simpson 2004).

However, other researchers suggest that young volunteers on the gap year can derive a 'range of benefits from the transformative experience that these placements offer' (Jones 2005). In a small study, Jones listed some developments, including the acquisition of 'soft skills' and learning associated with a cross-cultural experience in host country communities. He added that provider organizations could do considerably more to improve the gap year's quality but suggests that its outcomes are 'distinctly beneficial and unlikely to be as pronounced in a volunteering experience in their home country or a more culturally familiar environment' (Jones 2005). Finally, King suggests that gap years can operate as a 'zone of transition' for young people to do identity work and negotiate the shift from one life stage to the next (King 2007).

There is a clear lack of in-depth research on the international volunteering gap year and its purported benefits, especially in its pre-university form. Most of the research is on the gap year industry itself, while a small amount of evidence from mostly shorter-term experiences suggests that the international service gap year can promote personal development and learning.

Methodology

This study employed multiple methods of qualitative inquiry to examine the learning involved in a case study of the international volunteering gap year. To help illustrate the case study organisation involved in this study, an outline of the organisation is below.

The case study organisation

The case study organisation is a prominent (and the oldest) 'gap year' organisation in the UK. Founded in 1967 and housed on a remote Scottish Island, the organization specializes in sending secondary school leavers on pre-university, 12-month overseas gap years in developing countries. Over the past 40 years, almost 6000 young people have taken a gap year through this organization.

Volunteers, the majority of who are middle class and English but who also come from Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and the Netherlands, begin with a week-long selection course on the Scottish Isle where volunteers 'give [the organisation] an idea of how they might cope in new and different situations' (Maclean-Bristol 1998). Outside of scheduled activities at the organisation's headquarters, volunteers are housed with local families on the island, and information about the volunteers from local families is sent back to the organisation before selection decisions are made (Maclean-Bristol 1998). Once selected, volunteers fundraise for their year in their home communities, returning to the island for a brief training prior to their year overseas.

Volunteers go in pairs and live in various types of settings (some in cities and some in small, rural communities), reporting back to the organisation most thoroughly in their mid-year and final report and in debriefing sessions a few weeks after returning to the UK. Placed in a country in Africa, Asia or the Americas, these gap year volunteers often work as teachers, but many also work in community placements such as orphanages, care centres, and newspapers. Furthermore, although country representatives from the organization are available, volunteers largely operate independently. Alumni of the program often go on to university, and it has existed long enough to send the children of former volunteers on their own gap years.

In all, this qualitative case study included document analysis of organisational material and volunteer reports; participant observation at selection, training, and debriefing sessions; and semi-structured interviews with organisational staff members and gap year volunteers before and after the gap year experience. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of 29 returned volunteers, ranging from first year to final year students, at universities where they currently attended. Returned volunteers' gap year locations were distributed between Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

A constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was used to integrate a considerable amount of qualitative data and identify emergent patterns related to the learning experience of the gap year.

Findings

There are a variety of interesting findings when examining the learning experience for students taking an international volunteering gap year. The perceived outcomes and processes are unique to each person, but certain general educational patterns can be captured. In the end, volunteers nearly universally commented on the profound, often life-altering impact they felt their gap year had on their lives and personalities. This section illustrates key themes from the findings.

To begin, the learning experience of the gap year operates with the backdrop of motivations that volunteers have before and during their year.

Motivations for a gap year of international service

Findings indicate that volunteers aimed to use the gap year for different purposes, reflecting their various states in life. Despite widespread industry promotion of volunteer altruism, findings revealed largely egoistic motivations. Volunteers intended to use the experience to obtain a variety of perceived benefits, often to develop skills, perspectives, and traits that they felt they lacked and had not developed in school or home community. This reflects Zurcher's idea of the compensatory function of volunteer work (Zurcher 1978).

More specifically, volunteers often sought to use the gap year as a 'break from education' or the 'academic treadmill' or to get out of a 'bubble' or 'sheltered life'. Volunteers wanted a time of accelerated personal growth, and for some, to use the gap year as a rite of passage into adulthood. One volunteer reported: 'I want to figure out who I am independent of my parents and community', while another said he wanted the year to gain the 'independence to make decisions and to live on my own'. Volunteers desired to develop a broader or different perspective of the UK or the world, deepened appreciation of another culture and language, and to clarify future life plans (e.g. degree course, career goals and where to live). For some, they did a gap year partially because they felt young for their year in school, to have the pleasure of travel and friends, or to enhance curriculum vitae for university admissions or employers.

However, for some students the year was motivated by the desire to 'escape' from their home environment, family problems or 'fix' mental health disorders (e.g. depression). Interestingly, for some students who had the greatest, and perhaps unrealistic, expectations of the gap year and its ability to solve their problems often were not selected to take the gap year with the organisation, reflecting the experience that serious mental health issues can often be dangerous overseas and the year should not be used as a 'treatment'. Moreover, those with very high and specific expectations about the year were often volunteers who had difficulty adjusting to the new environment as reality did not meet expectations overseas, contributing to some leaving their gap year early.

Interestingly, volunteers' experiences suggest that a combination of both altruistic and egoistic motives was critical to help them invest in the gap year experience, sacrifice during the year, and overcoming hardships – forming an important part of the learning process. During the year, a powerful motivation to stay through the year was to not 'let down' those in their gap year or home UK communities who supported them, as well as the young people in their care as volunteers.

The gap year experience: an overview

Although each gap year experience is unique, the case study organisation's model – what one volunteer described as the 'throwing you into the deep end approach' – entails sending pairs of volunteers to distant locations for a full year in a professional capacity. This model is designed to encourage volunteers to integrate into the local community and develop the qualities and skills to do so. Spending a full year in a dramatically different environment than the UK, volunteers often report progressing through stages of cultural shock as they try to assimilate to a new way of life, develop

relationships, and grow into professional roles as teachers or social care workers. In this process of adaptation and intercultural learning, volunteers are pressured to develop skills, virtues, and new perspectives as they lead more integrated lives.

The ways and rates at which learning takes place in these experiences reflect a number of important factors about the volunteer and the programmatic setting, not the least of which are previous volunteer motivations, personal development and confidence, volunteer reflection (e.g. conversations with others, journaling, etc.), and rate of intercultural adaptation. While some volunteers spend more time early in the year developing personal skills, others spend less time in culture shock and adaptation, enhancing or modifying already developed personal qualities to learn more about the specific culture.

While sometimes the learning is immediate, it often occurs gradually as they adjust and are shaped by their environment. Volunteers described a learning process from the gap year (both cognitive and affective learning) that continued well into their university education – as situations presented themselves in the year or two after the gap year, volunteers recognised how they were different than peers because of their gap year experiences. A returned volunteer back in the UK remarked: 'I have progressively come to realise just how significant an impact the environment of Chenapou village and the people within it have had upon my personality'.

Reviewing findings from interviews and other qualitative data to understand the educational experience of the gap year revealed the following prevalent themes:

Civic education

Early in their gap year, volunteers often experience frustration with their inability to perform their job, integrate, or make a meaningful difference to the community, which leads to a more limited, pragmatic, and realistic perspective of their potential impact, one informed by the complexities of social and political change. Although not universally, volunteers often leave feeling *they* were helped more than they were able to help others.

Volunteers described learning about various socio-political issues over the year by living and experiencing them, such as corruption in the school system in Uganda, racism in South Africa, party politics and lack of freedom of speech in China. Findings also reveal that while many volunteers developed a more realistic understanding of the role of international development, charities, and volunteerism, many also became very critical of these institutions and practices – and more sceptical donors in the future – in part as a result of the volunteers' increased appreciation of the difficulty of changing communities. Regardless, many volunteers did develop secondary projects in the latter part of their gap year, creating a community-based project designed to alleviate some social problem they have come to understand during their year (e.g. a tutoring or after-school sports scheme). Moreover, along with a general improvements in self-confidence, volunteers reported greater degrees of perceived self-efficacy from their year, often proud that they know they can 'make a difference' in the life of another.

Furthermore, volunteers tended to develop a simultaneous awareness, appreciation, and criticism of culture and political structures (e.g. public transportation, media) of the UK, as well as a higher desire to participate in civic life through volunteering or other community affairs. At the same time of their increasing

understanding of Britain, volunteers also described becoming more aware of the larger world and international affairs, often feeling a greater sense of connection with humanity and global affairs.

Changing religious perspectives

Away from their home community in the UK, many volunteers described becoming more aware of their own religious beliefs. In addition, returned volunteers often modified religious perspectives as a result of living in poverty, witnessing injustice, or interacting with foreign religious practices. Some volunteers expressed accelerated doubts or loss of faith during their year as result of their experiences. For instance, after hearing about a rape of one of the orphans in her care, one volunteer recalled her religious doubts: 'How could God let this happen?'

Some volunteers recalled experimenting with other religions and attending local religious services – or even conversion to another religion: one volunteer became a Buddhist during his year away. On the other hand, a few volunteers reported that the year allowed them to grow stronger in their Christian faith, a result of increased time for reading and thinking about religion. Regardless, volunteers almost universally perceived that they developed an increased appreciation of the role that religion can play in sustaining personal and community life.

Appreciation for community and family life

Volunteers reported a greater appreciation for community, friends, and family life as priorities shifted away from material goods. Volunteers often described developing a more robust sense of community, especially reflective of the degree they were involved with and helped those around them.

Returned volunteers almost universally described improved family relationships over the year and upon their return. Volunteers outlined a growth in the appreciation of family and parents that developed because of their absence, as well as changing dynamics in the relationships as parents shifted away from a parent-child relationship to ones built more on mutual respect as competent adults. One returned volunteer described her parents' surprise when she came home after her year and helped prepare dinner and clean afterwards, saying it felt so 'natural to help' and that she now understood how 'much work it takes to run a household'. Volunteers often recalled a common scenario during the gap year where this new dynamic was highlighted: when parents came to visit their child overseas during the latter part of their gap year, their child, the gap year volunteer, had to lead the parents in an unfamiliar cultural environment. However, as a result of this new level of independence for the returned volunteers, many described some tension back in the UK when parents sometimes reverted back to previous roles of caretakers and monitors of their activities.

Heading to university, volunteers frequently described a desire for fewer, more intimate relationships over having many acquaintances, and some said they developed an increased appreciation for face-to face communication. In addition, volunteers reported reduced materialism and consumption back in the UK, often evaluating products based on perceived 'need' rather than 'want'.

Understanding of culture

Gap year volunteers often perceived that they had greater specific knowledge of their gap year community, country, and culture, which often culminated in a community report about a particular element of the volunteer's community submitted to the case study organisation at the end of the gap year. For nearly all volunteers, the gap year experience helped engender a future interest in cultures, languages, and travel.

Living in a different culture, volunteers often reported understanding or identifying as British or a European citizen for the first time, resulting in a greater understanding and appreciation of UK culture. At the same time, many volunteers, especially upon returning to the UK after their gap year, were also critical of the UK culture's 'lack of community' or 'friendliness'.

For many volunteers, they reported that their trust in others and strangers increased over the year, especially after they relied on strangers to help them in times of need. This was most common with volunteers in more rural areas; however, some volunteers in larger cities became more fearful or cautious of strangers, especially if they were involved in a crime or mugged over the year.

Overall, volunteers reported exposure to different ways of living and people of different backgrounds over their year lead to a greater tolerance and appreciation of others – and for one volunteer, a reduction in his 'arrogance' about his own views. Interestingly, for some female volunteers, this even involved greater appreciation of the functional role that more traditional family and marriage structures can have. For one male volunteer living in a more conservative community, he reported becoming more conservative in his dress and ideas about sexual ethics.

Intellectual development and decision making

Returned volunteers reported greater perceived intellectual development and decision making. With more confidence, clarified personal values, and frequent experiences where volunteers had to make consequential decisions for themselves and others, returned volunteers stated they feel they are 'better' decision makers. In their current lives in university in the UK, returned volunteers claimed that the year has developed their desire and ability to understand others' perspectives and the implications of their decisions.

Volunteers also claimed that living in a different culture and the exposure to different ideas and ways of thinking over the year makes them more open to new ideas back in the UK. Volunteers often reported that they are more receptive to different ways of thinking about an issue and ways of living and that their judgments are more informed of possible perspectives others may have.

In making decision about moral issues, volunteers often described a movement away from thinking about moral issues as 'black and white' or simply right and wrong, but more complex and often more 'gray'.

Back in university, returned volunteers often recalled becoming more involved in their field of study (often relating the material to their gap year experience) and related extra-curricular activities. For many students, especially those who were volunteer teachers overseas, they expressed an increased appreciation for education and awareness of unequal access to higher education. As a result, some reported investing more in their academic studies, becoming more hard working and, for

some, more disciplined as students, implementing the 'work ethic' they developed over the gap year of volunteering.

Psychosocial development

Despite widespread experiences of culture shock upon return to the UK, volunteers frequently perceived that they have greater understanding of personal identity after having a year of very different – and very challenging – experiences that contrasted with their previous lives before the year. In completing the gap year, volunteers report that they 'feel more grown up', confident, and develop particular virtues – like toleration of differences, mutual respect, appreciation for community, ability to communicate with others, tenacity, patience, maturity, empathy, independence, reasoning, criticizing and acceptance of responsibility. One volunteer recalled that one morning when she 'did not to wake up and teach, she realised that she had a classroom of 80 children waiting for her who wanted to learn'.

Volunteers often described experiencing a range of intense emotions over the year due to living or work situations, but greater emotional self-understanding and regulation developed as a result. Moreover, some volunteers perceived that they have become more comfortable with their physical appearance because of her year. One noted that she stopped dying her hair and wearing make-up daily.

Upon return to the UK, volunteers often felt that attending university was a decision, whereas before it was simply the natural trajectory along an 'academic treadmill'. Moreover, volunteers often clarified their career desires or changed their degree course at university, often to incorporate some focus on culture or issue of their gap year country. However, sometimes this change was at the expense of feeling lost in their vocational future.

Nevertheless, volunteers reported that their transition to university was, in many ways, much easier for them after a year of independent living compared to others students, including sharing living arrangements with others and living away from family. Interestingly, many of the returned volunteers chose to live with other gap year students in private accommodation in their latter year of university, claiming they felt they could more easily 'relate' to them.

Difficulties returning to UK and university

Returned volunteers did face some difficulties returning to life in the UK, experiencing return culture shock and disorientation along with not feeling at home in the UK – many volunteers said coming back to the UK was harder than adjusting to their new country over their gap year. The idea that they would become a 'gap year casualty', a returned gap year student who repeatedly talks about his or her gap year, was commonplace among volunteers' worries, and many volunteers struggled to suppress discussion of memories about their gap year among their friends.

While at university, some volunteers reported difficulties readjusting to academic and social life at university, frequently feeling more 'mature' than their fellow students (e.g. reduced partying), selfish in their academic pursuits, or difficulty writing essays again. One returned volunteer interviewed during her first year at

university said of her impending trip back to her gap year country: 'If I couldn't go back to India this summer, I'd drop out of university'.

Even two to three years after returning from their gap year, some volunteers struggle to integrate their gap year experiences with their lives back in the UK. One volunteer described his challenge as 'trying to fit a 3rd world perspective into the 1st world', and another volunteer who spent his year in the rainforest in Guyana described an intense 'struggle to contemplate upon [his] year' and that his experience 'was so removed from normal life in Britain that, now that I have returned, the whole year now takes on a very dream-like state'. His struggle did not reflect a unique position; volunteers frequently report feeling out of place in the UK or even guilty about leaving the volunteering project (one volunteer felt she 'left her heart in South Africa with the kids' she was working with). Some described a feeling that their new found potential is not being reached in university, but many volunteers tried and 'keep their gap year alive' and stay involved in their gap year project, either through donations, research, awareness, or returned trips to the community years after their gap year. Nevertheless, many volunteers said they were able to overcome many challenges of readjustment in their first year of university, developing as better students in the long-term.

Discussion

Examining the international volunteering gap year from an educational perspective, the findings reveal that the gap year learning experience is often complex and multi-faceted – an experiential educational pedagogy that fuses civic engagement with personal, moral and intellectual development. This combination of long-term civic action in a foreign community with deep emotions and reflection – at an often impressionable age and in the context of a gap year – can make the experience a very powerful and transformative one for the volunteer. Given this complexity, we can examine the gap year in multiple lights, each illuminating an aspect of learning that occurs during a gap year of international volunteering.

Educational theory

In one light, we can understand the gap year as a time of liberation and transformation, one sympathetic to Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness (Freire 1970). Volunteers who sought this experience because they were somehow unsatisfied with their current state have the opportunity to live a very different life. It is a year of reduced social pressures from the UK when many of the practices of the developed world are shed. Experiencing such diversity, volunteers have more points of reference from which to understand the world and an increased ability to see more options for organising their lives. In comparing their lives in the UK with their current gap year life and community, volunteers are able to see and critique from a more objective position alternative ways of behaving. As a result, returned volunteers often described feeling that *they* are making *decisions* about the way they are organising their lives (e.g. choosing to attend university, or choosing to be a certain kind of neighbour or consumer, or desiring a certain type of community).

Completing a successful gap year can thus be seen as an educational challenge, one grounded in a series of problems to overcome as the volunteer forms an

understanding of and adapts to the local culture, reconfiguring conceptions from his/her life in the UK as he/she performs volunteering duties and establishes him/herself in a developing community.

The gap year can also be appreciated in light of ideas about civic education from John Stuart Mill and John Dewey. Both thought it was important for young people to develop as citizens by participating in their governance, to expand and strengthen their notion of community and the contributions they can make to it (Dewey 1916; Mill 1972).

Many gap year volunteers get this type of experience and education, especially teachers and social care workers in small communities who have levels of responsibility, make decisions, and create secondary volunteering projects in their schools, organisations, and communities. They are participating and contributing to a community, and many felt it was the first time in their lives to do so.

The civic education in the international volunteering gap year is unique precisely because it is international – a prolonged lived experienced in another culture. It is multicultural education, a growth in the ability to appreciate and critique other ways of living – developing what many volunteers conveyed as a 'connection with the larger world' – humanity – and its affairs. In Martha Nussbaum's terms, these students work toward developing a sense of cosmopolitanism; in other words, global citizens who 'make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern' (Nussbaum 1996, 9). With their practical experience in civic engagement and volunteerism, and newfound confidence that comes with completing something challenging and helpful to others, many returned volunteers developed a feeling that they can – and ought to – make a difference in the world. Thus, they cultivate a more active sense of citizenship.

The gap year can also be seen as a form of character development, another central part of civic learning. Any successful republic depends on the intellectual and moral virtues of its people (Battistoni 1985). Leaders need the prudence to discern the common good and the integrity to promote it when support is lacking; citizens need the empathy to put the common good above individual interests, the civility to deliberate openly about what that means, and the self-discipline, moderation, and justice to live accordingly (O'Shea 2010). This study suggests that these gap year experiences help cultivate these virtues. The duration of the gap year, a full 12 months, combined with the challenges and the intensity of the year, provide an opportunity to practice these virtues and to learn to appreciate their value in community.

Student development theories

Although the environment of the gap year is not a higher education setting, specific theories from higher education literature capture much of what participants in this study illustrated. First, Astin's theory of student involvement argues that the 'quality and quantity of the student's academic and personal development is a direct function of the student's degree of involvement in the academic experience' (Astin 1984, 297). Involvement is defined as 'the amount of time and physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the learning experience' (Astin 1984, 297). The effectiveness of a gap year as a pedagogical instrument thus appears to involve a

combination of several forms of involvement that capture the energy, reflection, and interactions that gap year volunteers have during their experience.

At the same time, there is a great amount of psychosocial development that occurs during the year, and the findings suggest that the gap year experience accelerated this development by presenting challenges in unique environments to the learner. Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of student development helps us to conceptualise the psychosocial development that occurs in young adults; they called these vectors 'major highways for journeying toward individuation – the discovery and refinement of one's unique way of being – and also toward communication with other individuals and groups, including the larger national and global society' (Chickering and Reisser 1993, 35). The findings suggest that these gap year volunteers develop along this theory's vectors, including developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, and developing purpose and integrity.

Stemming from psychosocial development, the findings also suggest that the gap year volunteers often progressed toward developing what Baxtor Magolda (2001) calls self-authorship. Self-authorship is defined as a 'relatively enduring way of understanding and orienting oneself to provocative situations in a way that: (a) recognizes the contextual nature of knowledge; and (b) balances this understanding with the development of one's own internally defined goals and sense of self' (Pizzolato 2003). According to Baxtor Magolda, universities too readily supply students with formulas for success rather than encouraging them to develop self-authored ways of knowing (Pizzolato 2003). The findings suggest that the gap year volunteers develop along the continuum toward self-authorship as they are presented with opportunities to make decisions and mistakes with little guidance, and as a result, reconfigure a more confident self with a stronger internal set of values.

Limitations of the learning

John Dewey believed education could be rated on an 'experiential continuum' (Dewey 1938, 28, 33). The experiences that he wanted to promote were those that inculcated a greater desire to learn and that built upon prior experiences (Dewey 1938). Given the findings of the study, this type of gap year seems to be one which inspired and inculcated within the volunteers a further desire for greater learning, especially about cultures, languages, societies, or development. In Ronald Barnett's terms, the gap year helped to develop 'a will to learn'. (Barnett 2007). However, volunteers often felt the gap year was 'removed' from UK society or they needed to suppress their gap year memories because other students did not want to listen or they feel the need to move on. This signals that more assistance with transitioning back to the UK, along with opportunities and encouragement to build on the gap year, may be needed for some returned volunteers when at university. Such initiatives will help us more fully capitalise on these experiences.

Conclusion

By delaying the academy – their higher education – this study suggests that these students made significant gains in personal, civic, moral, and intellectual

development. A gap year out of formal education does seem to offer students benefits beyond those available in the classroom; as a result, it could also help them to take full advantage of their university experience. In the end, these international volunteering gap years may help universities to form not just good future employees, but citizens of character.

In the emerging field of the gap year, this study helps to build a foundation for future research. As the gap year industry expands, there will be more demand for an understanding of what the experiences entail for those who undertake it and the communities they serve. In future studies, researchers should examine and challenge the findings of this study, and they could include comparative dimensions, greater longitudinal studies, and a more focused analyses of particular programmatic variables and volunteer learning. Regardless, much future research is needed to explore the implications of these often overlooked educational experiences.

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