Technology Use and Impact of "Voluntary Social Year" on High School Graduates in Germany

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Introduction

A voluntary social year, or what is more known in the United States as a “gap year,” typically takes place after the students have finished their high school education and before they enroll in higher education, such as a university or a training program. In Germany, Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr (FSJ), voluntary social year, is “a period of time, generally from six to 18 months, spent doing voluntary work … [d]esigned to offer young adults the chance to find their vocational or academic orientation while contributing to the greater social good…."
(Volunteering in Germany, 2018, para. 3) During the social year, students may stay living at home, work at a different city in Germany, or even work and live in a different countries, such as Brazil. In their placements, students typically work with a community that is in need of help, such as a childcare facility, a school, or a hospital.

Although the voluntary social year is quite popular in Germany and even throughout the rest of Europe, the United States seems to view the extended time taken between the end of high school and secondary education as something that is uncommon and not often used. While students in Europe use this time to volunteer, learn new skills, and/or help others, many American students use this time to join the work force and figure out what they feel is best for them while they are out of high school. Americans view this as more of a period of personal growth and reflection, rather than an avenue in which one may further their education through exposure to other cultures and volunteerism in a social area.

This paper focuses on “Voluntary Social Year” (Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr) in Germany. Investigating the issue from the perspectives of German high school graduates and their parents is of interest to the authors. From this paper, the readers will gain a deeper understanding of daily life of the German high school graduates who have participated in a voluntary social year and be informed of how technology has been used by the students during this special period of time of their lives.

Literature Review

The literature review primarily focused on three aspects: the perception that both students and parents have about the idea of a voluntary social year, the use of technology to engage in informal learning while participating in the social year, and how the social year affected students when they returned home.
Perceptions of the Voluntary Social Year

One of the main purposes of this study is to investigate the students’ and parents’ perceptions of the voluntary social year. This can pertain to not only the perception that one may have before the social year begins but also the perception of how the social year may have affected the students after they returned home.

Although not discussing a typical social year, Clerkin (2019) researched the perceptions of a “Transition Year” (TY) that surfaced throughout 20 schools in Ireland in which students participated in a similar program during grade 10, which acts as a quasi-gap year, since instead of the gap year occurring after secondary school, it is offered midway through secondary school, for example, between grades 10 and 11. Although this is done in a different time frame than the voluntary social year that is being discussed, the activities and assignments are similar to those that are being discussed. Discussions and conclusions within Clerkin’s research determined that most students who participated in TY felt more mature in their last 2 years of schooling, whereas students who did not participate in TY felt less mature in those last years. In addition, there were noticeable differences in the responses from males and females, with females claiming they were more independent and self-reliant, whereas the male counterparts were reporting to be less self-reliant and more immature when they did not participate in TY.

Martin (2010) sought to examine the predictors of Australian students’ intentions to take a gap year and the academic profile of students who have completed a gap year. Martin specifically looked at motivation, demographics, and “postschool uncertainty” to try and determine the motivating factors behind the allure of a gap year. His hypothesis stated that students with lower academic motivation and those with more uncertainty over postschool plans would lead to the intent to take a gap year. The conclusion was made that the gap year can mend the lower motivation and in fact encourage a study to achieve more success in university after completing a gap year. However, further research is needed to help corroborate or disprove these hypotheses due to the assumption that lower academic motivation was the sole contributor to students’ interest in participating in a voluntary social year.

There are few studies that address the students’ perceptions of the social year. What was not addressed in these studies was the perceptions that parents may have of the voluntary social year, and whether they felt it was beneficial or detrimental to their children. This is a major plothole in the previous research of the social year because ultimately, students are more likely to seek the approval of their parents before embarking on one of these trips. It is also possible that if parents view this as a negative pursuit, students may be more reluctant to take on a social year experience.

Technology and Informal Learning During the Social Year

Due to students’ lack of formal education during a social year, it is important to take a look at what students may be doing to informally further their education and gain knowledge during that time.

Mills, Knezek, and Khaddage (2014) conducted a study in which US undergraduate students were given a survey to reveal the attitudes of students and their use of mobile devices to obtain information. This research study suggested that a better understanding of technological advancements be critical to the shift from formal to informal learning. The authors stated, “Cross-validation with an established Mobile Learning Scale … indicates that Information
Sharing aligns significantly … with Mobile Learning. Information Seeking, Information Sharing, and mobile access are presented as important … in the shift along the formal to informal learning continuum.” (p. 324) The authors further stressed the importance of not only knowing what students may be informally learning but also how they may be acquiring this information.

Galanis, Mayol, Alier, and García-Penalvo (2016) suggested a higher emphasis on peer interactions and social settings to encourage informal learning. The researchers asked, “Can the knowledge obtained through non-formal and informal means be quantified and evaluated in order to be formalized and recognized within the competences of a curriculum?” (p. 597). Although the authors did not directly answer the question, students within the social year program are exposed to different cultures and languages when they travel abroad which coincides with the authors’ suggestion to emphasize a more social atmosphere when it comes to learning. In theory, the idea of moving to another country and/or city in itself can breed informal learning in ways students may have not thought possible.

Studies may provide information about informal learning and how informal learning can be done; but there is very little information about how informal learning is done during a social year. These studies also do not address how students may be informally learning new languages and cultures by simply living and working in their respective programs. Many students involved in a type of social year program go on to attend other training programs or potentially university, but previous research lacks in attempting to seek out the truth of how students stay current in their education.

The Impact of the Social Year

The sign of whether a voluntary social year was beneficial to both the organization being served and the individual in the program is to see how they are affected by the experience after the fact. When researching this topic, it was noteworthy to pay attention to how the students and communities reacted to the ending of the program.

O’Shea (2011) conducted interviews with students in the UK who returned home from their voluntary social year in which he asked these students about their experiences during their time abroad and how these experiences have shaped them into the persons they are today. From these interviews, he was able to gauge students’ motivation, culture shock, psychosocial improvements, and other aspects. He noted that although some students participated in the volunteer gap year for completely altruistic reasons, there were many that simply did it so they could avoid going to university or use the time to figure out what they truly wanted to pursue in life. This is contradictory to what many organizations strive for within their programs with students, but is similar to the American idea of a “gap year” in which they use their time to delay higher education. However, it was determined that overall students came back from their voluntary social year with a heightened sense of self and gained experience and maturity through their time abroad.

Wilde (2016) discusses the dichotomy between wanting to help others while also being forced to reflect on how a person’s actions affect others, and concerns herself with the idea that volunteerism in foreign countries merely help people experience the culture for a short period of time, but does not help them gain accurate knowledge and insight on the problems that these countries face. Wilde stated, “What emerged from my fieldwork was an emphasis on individually orientated [sic] activities, in contrast to the ethos of the charity that focus on interconnections and awareness of an individual’s impact upon others around them” (p. 79). She
found that these social year programs focus more heavily on the interconnected web of relaying global development information, rather than focusing on individualizing their experiences to foster better learning. This could directly affect the idea of “informal learning” that students should be experiencing and questions whether the students are getting enough information about that environment to consider it educational.

Although the impact may be questionable to those students it has served, most research indicates that social year positively impacts the student by increasing maturity and/or independence when speaking about their time during their gap year. King (2010) reported that, after interviews with 23 students from Southern England who participated in a social year, the interviews illustrated that the gap year “enabled these young people to indicate, in this context, that their current self differed from a past self” (p. 353). This conclusion is important for our research because it helps support the fact that students benefit from this time in a gap year also by growing and changing as people.

In this field, there is a void of information of not only the participating students to be interviewed, but also the families and/or communities who are supposed to benefit from the help that the student provides. However, one can hope that the impact of the social year would be beneficial for those who are volunteering and working during that time. Ultimately, what is at stake is the impact that the experience has on the students when they return home, including the families and communities in which they serve.

Methodology

The goal of the research was to gain more knowledge about the process of the social year and how the process has affected both parents and students alike. In addition, the authors investigated how technology was used by the students during the social year.

Research Inquiry/Questions

While investigating this topic, five questions were developed in order to guide the research and to use as the focus for this project. They are listed as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of German high school students about a “Voluntary Social Year”?
2. What do German high school graduates who have participated in a “Voluntary Social Year” think of their experiences?
3. What do parents of German high school graduates who have participated in a “Voluntary Social Year” think of their children’s experiences?
4. What technology was used for communication and learning during the social year?
5. How was technology used for communication and learning during the social year?

Data Collection

Data was collected through surveys and interviews from participants who were a convenience sample. This was done in order to collect qualitative data to examine and determine how students and parents both perceive the idea of the volunteer social year.

The surveys were given via Google Forms to high school graduates who completed secondary school in the years 2012-2018. These were given in order to not only obtain contact
information from the students but also gain a basic understanding of the students’ experiences. Additionally, the survey’s purpose was to gauge which students would be open to participating in interviews in which they would go into more detail about their participation in the social year. Included in the survey were four questions with sub-questions attached to questions two and three. Previous information about the program, placement in the program, and technology use during the program were among the questions in the survey. The last question inquired as to whether the student would like to participate in face-to-face interviews. Below were some questions in the survey:

“2. Were you aware of the ‘Voluntary Social Year’ program while you were deciding on your future, e.g., what to study?
2.1. If yes, how did you learn about it? Did you consider participating in the ‘Voluntary Social Year’ program? Why or why not?
3. Have you participated in the ‘Voluntary Social Year’ program?
3.1. If yes, where did you go? How long were you there? What did you do? What do you think of the experiences? How did/do the experiences help or change you? Knowing what you know now, would you still make the same decision? Why?
3.2. If yes, what technology did you use for communication/learning during the social year? How did you use it, e.g., for staying in contact with your family members?
3.3. If no, did or do you wish that you had participated in the ‘Voluntary Social Year’ program? Why or why not? Knowing what you know now, would you still make the same decision? Why?”

A total of 23 students responded to the survey. It was planned that students completed the survey in early June 2019, prior to the interviews. However, many students completed the survey late, after the interviews were conducted.

Interviews were conducted with both parents and students: four parents and fourteen students were interviewed. Interviews were conducted in late June of 2019, with additional interviews being conducted during Fall of 2019. In June, interviews were done with two focus groups and one individual. The focus groups consisted of students who were in medicine, teacher education, and computers and engineering. Ten open-ended questions were given to students about their experiences and how they felt this process had influenced them. One set of parents was interviewed about their experience of having their children complete the program. These questions were similar in content to the interviews done with the students but was more focused on how they were affected, what they saw in their children when they returned, etc. During Fall of 2019, another set of parents and a student were interviewed using the same interview questions. All interviews were recorded using a recording device.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data obtained from the survey and the interviews were analyzed using both coding and content analysis to determine any similarities or trends between the responses of the individuals. Analysis was conducted separately by two people in which they listened to the recordings of the interviews and made notes and conclusions in order to cross-check the analysis results.

Results

Twenty three students completed the survey. Among them, 14 students participated in a social year while nine students did not participate. Students who did not participate in a social
year were asked, “*did or do you wish that you had participated in the 'Voluntary Social Year' program? Why or why not? Knowing what you know now, would you still make the same decision? Why?*” Six of the nine students expressed that they did not regret of not doing it because they knew what they wanted to do during that time, for example, studying at the university, working or/and traveling. One respondent stated that the wages of the social year were too low. Two of the nine students wished that they had participated in a social year, and one of them noted that the social year experience might have made him or her more mature. One of the nine students was not sure if in hindsight, he or she would have wanted to participate in a social year.

After interviewing students from Germany about their time during their voluntary social year, their answers showed that, although the students participated in a variety of placements, whether abroad or more local, many of the answers provided similarities.

When asked how students learned about the opportunity to participate in a voluntary social year, their answers varied from school teachers to siblings, to their parents, and even their peers. In some cases, their older siblings had already participated in the voluntary social year, which inspired the younger sibling to participate as well. Even though a few students explained that they learned about this opportunity from their schools, the students noted that their instructors mentioned the voluntary social year, but rarely went into detail about what it fully entails. Each student’s answer varied slightly, but overall, when asked why they had chosen to complete a social year, the word “independence” was overwhelmingly used in order to describe what they wanted to gain out of this experience. Similarly, many students spoke about their desire to experience something new, such as a new environment or a new culture, since most had lived in the same town for many years.

In regards to how students chose where they were placed, not just their town, but also their placement in terms of work, there were a multitude of answers. One student recalled that their church provided a voluntary social year that was of interest to them. Another chose their placement due to their interest in a particular field, such as the medical field, in order to gain more experience for a future career. Others chose their placement either by previously working with the organization prior to participating in the social year or using one of the two main websites that provide information and placement opportunities for students after high school. The placements, in terms of their daily work, ranged from a youth hostel, a daycare facility, an emergency response team, and a school in which students participated in a plethora of daily activities. As mentioned previously, most students that were interviewed stayed in Germany for their placements, but two of the students traveled abroad, one to Bolivia and one to Brazil.

When prompted to share details of their typical day while completing their social year, students provided many explanations. First, students discussed their hours and how long they would work each day which varied from 8-10 hours per day, 4-5 days a week, with the exception of the student that worked with the emergency response team in which she would sometimes work up to 12 hours a day, which would shorten the days per week she worked. On average, the students agreed they worked about 40 hours per week, similar hours to a full-time job. Second, the students were then asked to describe their daily routines and what their workdays consisted of. Students who worked in the daycare facility or in the schools worked with young children, mostly kindergarten, but some a little older. These students would provide the children with homework help, snacks after school, and other enrichment activities, which would be similar to an after-school program. One student provided assistance to a medical emergency response team in which she would ride in the ambulance with the other medical technicians and assist the team.
in emergency situations. One student worked in a youth hostel in which he would design and provide games and enrichment activities for the students who stayed there.

Next, the students were asked to describe how or if they were paid for their services, and if so, how much and in what form. For the students who were provided lodging (which consisted of usually an apartment or a flat), the students were paid less than if they were not provided with housing. However, given what was leftover from their payment, there was very little room for luxuries, and ultimately, after paying for food and other travels, the students were left with very little profit. The government, the church, a specific social year organization, or a combination of both were funding the students’ jobs and travel to their destinations.

In addition to learning about what the students experienced while taking part in their social year, what the students felt they ultimately gained from this experience, whether it be rewarding or challenging, was of particular interest. Overwhelmingly, each of the students noted an increased sense of maturity and independence in addition to heightened self-confidence and knowledge of other cultures and customs. Students also felt that communication with strangers was easier, and overall this experience helped them better decide what steps to take next in terms of their future careers and/or life plans. Although most of the aspects of this year were positive, students that traveled abroad found it challenging to learn some of the customs and languages when first arriving. When working with children in low-income areas, the students felt that it was sometimes difficult to see children in less fortunate situations. The student that worked at the youth hostel also expressed a sense of loss of privacy since the students could essentially call on them at any moment to ask for assistance. This forced the student to essentially remain on-call during most of the evening and night. Another challenge that one student faced was the trauma that comes with being on an emergency response team and having to prepare to be present for potentially harrowing scenes.

Fourteen students participated in the interviews, but little was known about how many students out of their graduating class participated in the volunteer social year. When asked, most students guessed around 10-15% of students in their class decided to complete a voluntary social year as opposed to going to university or enrolling in some other form of a training program. A student also noted that females were found more frequently among those working with younger children. When prompted to discuss how the participating students felt that non-participating students perceived the social year, 13 out of the 14 students said the non-participating students felt positive about it, although some may view the international travel as something to be concerned about. Only one student mentioned that perhaps a small percentage of non-participating students may not view the social year as beneficial due to the delay that it would cause in terms of starting university or a potential career.

Reflecting back on their time engaging in their social year, positivity resonated through their answers. The majority of the students do not regret their time, and if given the chance, they would choose to participate once again. However, when asked if students would have done anything differently, the common answers seemed to be that they wished they would have stayed in placement longer so that they could absorb more in addition to taking more risks, and learning the language better prior to traveling for those who went abroad.

Lastly, the students were asked how technology fits into their lives when conducting their voluntary social year. They all stated that technology played a critical role prior to, during, and after their social year. Prior to the social year, they searched for information about the voluntary social year using technology. During the social year, technology was used to communicate with family and friends. They also used technology to document their time spent away from home.
through photos, videos, and digital journaling. After the social year, they used technology to keep connected with people who were part of their social year. In regards to what technology used, they expressed that they used a variety of devices, including their cell phones, ebooks, and laptops while using apps such as WhatsApp, social media, blogs, and Skype.

The parents of a student who conducted her voluntary social year service in Germany provided insight into the perception that they have of their child’s participation in her social year. They echoed the positive impacts of the social year on their child: being more mature and independent, and knowing what she wanted to do after she returned from her social year. The parents pointed out that the voluntary social year in Germany is connected to the history of Germany. Males in Germany prior to 2011 were drafted into the military, but the option existed to claim to be conscientious objectors. Instead of service in the military, those conscientious objectors then had to participate in community service, which was similar to the service in voluntary social year. This connection to the history might explain why the voluntary social year in Germany is so well organized and structured.

The parents of another student who went abroad also provided insight into the perception that the parents have of their children’s participation in a social year. The parents found that their children, once back home, showed an increased sense of maturity and independence, which the parents found to be a very positive change. The children also showed more responsibility and a better understanding of what may come next in the child’s life. Additionally, the parents felt that because their children came back with the knowledge of other cities and cultures, this also translated over to the parents as well and they felt that they were able to learn along with their child. One parent, however, made an observation that little is said about the impact that the students participating in the social year have on their host families and communities, and it seems crucial to look into how this may affect them, as well.

**Limitations**

This study shed a good light on a voluntary social year in Germany and technology use by students who participated in the social year. At the same time, the authors identified the following limitations:

The participants of the study were convenience sample, being recruited by two German high school graduates, one in the field of medicine and the other in teacher education. Thus, the majority of the participants were from these two fields of study: medicine and teacher education. Should the participants have been from other or a variety of fields of study, the results might have been different from what was found in this study.

The study focused on perceptions of students who participated in a voluntary social year and also their parents’ perceptions. The study did not look into the organization of a social year, for example, how a social year program is organized and structured, or where the funding comes from. Visiting sites of the participants, for example, a daycare center or a youth hostel, will definitely give the authors a better picture of the life of the participants during their social year.

The study indicated a positive impact of a social year on German high school graduates. It did not look into the impact of the German high school graduates on their hosting institutions, as one of the parents interviewed had pointed out. For example, what was the impact of the two German students, who went to Bolivia and Brazil, on the children in the two countries? Would the service they provided continue after they left Bolivia and Brazil?
Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the information that was gathered through the interviews and information provided by the students, it is evident that the volunteer social year is a positive experience for students. They expressed that they are in favor of the social year and that they have more maturity, more independence, and more confidence. The students also expressed an increase in knowledge of international values and customs which is beneficial. In addition, this study shows that students also claim to be better able to communicate with strangers and other adults, allowing them to be more open to difficult situations. Lastly, this information has also shown that students who come back from the volunteer social year have a better understanding, or idea, of what their future may look like once they return home.

The parents who were interviewed also responded favorably to the social year, and it can be concluded that they find this experience to be beneficial for their children. It seems that the parents’ responses echo the sentiments noted by their children that there is a definite increase in maturity and independence when the students arrive home. The parents are overall pleased with the changes that they have seen in their children.

In terms of technology, students communicated easier when able to use devices and apps, such as WhatsApp and FaceTime. Not only has the technology been beneficial in terms of communication, but it has also allowed for students to learn independently through the use of the Internet and other online resources. Technology gives students the opportunity to stay connected, share photographs, and document their journey which added to the novelty of their experience.

Looking forward into future research, it would be wise to look into Germany’s history as to what the purpose of the volunteer social year originally was and how it became as commonplace as it is today. Looking into the history and the background, this process will provide a better understanding of the volunteer social year. Additionally, it would be interesting to look into how the host families of these students perceive this process and even more so, looking into the impact that the students leave on their host communities. Lastly, interviews and information from students and parents who did not complete the volunteer social year would also provide more insight into this experience and provide more information on how this process is perceived by others.

References


