

Creating competent and confident volunteers for inclusive water sports

A. Warraitch¹, M. Killalea¹, J. Murphy², E. Barrett^{1,3}

1. UCD School of Medicine, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland
2. Irish Watersports Inclusion Games Officer, Irish Sailing, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, Ireland.
3. Child and Adolescent Liaison Psychiatry, Children's University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland.

Abstract

Background

Volunteering plays a pivotal role in community events, especially in sports. Understanding the motivations behind volunteering and the benefits derived from it is crucial for the success and sustainability of such events.

Aims

This study aimed to explore the motivations and perceived benefits for volunteers at the Water Sports Inclusion Games 2023, an event designed for children with disabilities in Wexford, Ireland.

Methods

A cross-sectional design was employed, using an online survey questionnaire administered to 71 volunteers. The survey encompassed both closed and open-ended questions, focusing on demographics, roles, experiences, and perceived benefits. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to analyse the data.

Results

70 (99%) of volunteers felt valued, 70 (99%) gained new skills, while 69 (97%) experienced increased confidence, and 68 (96%) gained knowledge about inclusion. The primary motivations for volunteering included affiliation with the hosting club, previous volunteering experience, personal enjoyment from volunteering, and a desire to promote inclusivity in sports. The event's social interaction, participants' enjoyment, and overall volunteering experience were highlighted as the most fulfilling aspects.

Volunteering at inclusive sports events offers a myriad of benefits for volunteers, ranging from personal growth to societal impact. The findings underscore the importance of recognising and nurturing these motivations to ensure the continued success and growth of inclusive sports events.

Introduction

The International Labour Organisation defines volunteering as “unpaid non-compulsory work; that is time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organisation or directly for those outside their own household”¹. Considering the pivotal role of volunteers in events, it's crucial to focus on the key aspects of sports event volunteering, including factors that motivate volunteers and the benefits of volunteering that can be used as intrinsic or extrinsic motivation for their continued volunteer work.

Volunteering has many positive impacts on individuals, organisations and communities². Volunteering not only results in positive outcomes for work, but it also has many social and health benefits². These benefits include integration and engagement within the community, enhanced social skills, self-confidence, belonging, accomplishment, and coping²⁻⁹. An umbrella review conducted to explore the effects of volunteering on the health and wellbeing of volunteers found that volunteering has a positive impact on life satisfaction and quality of life, especially when they experience being valued¹⁰.

Volunteers are primarily motivated by their own personal values, the opportunity to learn more about children and young people with disabilities, and the chance to develop personally. The volunteers in programs for kids usually find their involvement as a “rewarding” experience and associate other positive emotions with helping the children¹¹.

There is limited research on the benefits and motivating factors of volunteering in water sports events for children with disabilities^{12, 13}. There is an annual Irish water sports inclusion games event for young people with disabilities or impairments and their families to experience various water sports in a fun and inclusive environment. The event allows participants to partake in a broad range of activities, such as sailing, kayaking, canoeing, rowing, powerboating, snorkelling and more. The event is free of charge and families are encouraged to participate alongside their sibling/child. We conducted a study in 2019 to explore the benefits of the event for the volunteers and the current study builds on this previous work¹²⁻¹⁴.

This current study aims to further our understanding of what motivates people to volunteer at this event and other inclusion-oriented sports events and how they benefit from volunteering in such events. This will help inform the subsequent events and maximise the benefits for the volunteers.

Methods

A cross-sectional design was used to explore the benefits of volunteering at the water sports inclusion event for young people. Water sports Inclusion Games 2023 were held in Wexford, Ireland to promote inclusive activities in water sports, allowing children with disabilities and their families to participate and enjoy water-based activities.

An online survey questionnaire was developed and administered to volunteers. The questionnaire was developed based on the questionnaires used in previous studies on evaluation of the water sports inclusion event¹²⁻¹⁴ and a literature review. It included close-ended questions on demographic information, the role volunteers played at the event, how they heard about the event, their previous experience in volunteering, their perceived benefits of participating in the event, their likelihood of volunteering again, perceived benefits of participation in water sports games events for the young people and their families, the likelihood of them recommending this event to others and their views on the training provided to volunteers. A few open-ended questions were included to explore volunteers' motivation for volunteering, the highlights of the event for them, things they found surprising at the event, and suggestions or recommendations to improve the event.

The sample included 71 volunteers, who were self-selected from a pool of 140 participants. To maximise the number of volunteer participants, the survey was advertised on a "Feedback Wall", where participants could scan a QR code to access the survey. The survey was administered using SurveyMonkey. The link to the online survey was circulated 3 times to participants by the Event Coordinator in the 3 weeks following the Water Sports Inclusion Games

The study, being an opt-in and anonymous one for adult volunteers, received ethical approval from University College Dublin's Ethics Committee. Analysis was carried out using a combination of methods in Excel and SPSS. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics and qualitative data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's methodology for thematic analyses¹⁵. This involved a single reviewer manually identifying and extracting recurring data, coding each answer, and then further analysing these codes to discern main themes and sub-themes.

Results

Demographics

Participants ranged in age from 15 years to 75 years with the majority of participants (39%) falling within the age range of 55 to 64, followed by 18% of participants being within the age range of 45 to 54 years. 33 volunteers (46.5%) were female while 38 (53.5%) were male. Majority of the participants (n=34, 48%) were from county Wexford, followed by 15.5% (n=11) being from Dublin. Most of the participants (n=50, 70%) volunteered on the rides and games such as motorboats (n=14, 20%), and sailing boats (n=8, 11%). 30% of the volunteers worked in roles such as registration (n=7, 10%), signing up for activities (n=9, 13%), coordinating volunteers (n=3, 4%), safety coordination (n=1, 1%) and providing support (n=2, 3%).

Most of the volunteers (n=36, 51%) reported hearing about the event through word of mouth, followed by volunteers knowing about the event due to their previous experience in volunteering (n=19, 27%). Some of the volunteers at the event had also volunteered at the event in 2022 (n=16, 22.5%), in 2019 (n=13, 18.3%), in 2018 (n=5, 7%) and 2017 (n=2, 3%). However, majority of the participants (n=53, 75%) were volunteering for the first time in 2023.

Benefits perceived by volunteers for themselves.

99% of the volunteers (n=70) reported gaining a skill to enable them to volunteer at a similar event in the future and feeling that their contributions were valued at the event. 97% of the volunteers (n=69) reported increased confidence in their ability to volunteer at similar events in the future while. Similarly, 96% of the volunteers (n=68) reported an increased knowledge about inclusion while 94% of the volunteers (n=67) reported that the event made them feel more engaged with the water sports community.

Benefits perceived by volunteers for participants.

Most of the volunteers reported the event to be very beneficial for enabling the whole family's participation (n=64, 90%), increasing participants' confidence (n=61, 86%), meeting peers and other parents (n= 61, 86%), for gaining new skills and experiences (n=56, 79%) and for improving motor skills (n=38, 53.5%).

Repeat volunteering and recommending to others.

70% (n=50) of the participants reported that they were highly likely to volunteer at this event again in the future and they were highly likely to recommend this event to others in the future.

Training

79% (n=56) of the volunteers reported feeling satisfied with the training provided to the volunteers.

Reasons for volunteering

Four reasons were reported by volunteers for joining the event. First, participants reported deciding to volunteer at the event due to their current affiliation with the club hosting the event or affiliation with different organisations involved in sponsoring the event. For example, one volunteer stated "As a member of the host club I wanted to do my bit to help make the games a success". Second, participants reported joining the event due to their previous experience as a volunteer which made them feel like they had the required knowledge and skills to volunteer. Third, volunteers stated they enjoy volunteering and find it fulfilling to work with people with disabilities. For example, a volunteer described the experience to be "... one of the most fulfilling experiences I have ever had". Fourth, participants reported joining

the event due to their desire to help out and to promote inclusion in sports for people with disabilities. For instance, a volunteer stated, *“I wanted to be part of it and was excited by the idea of providing access to water sports to people who couldn’t easily access it otherwise”*. Volunteers further described joining the event because they wanted to share their knowledge about water sports, inclusion in games and to learn more about these things from others as well.

Highlights of volunteering

Five themes emerged for highlights of the volunteering question. First, volunteers reported enjoying the social interaction aspect of the event including getting to interact with and know other people and having fun with participants in the sports. Second, they described participants enjoying the event to be a highlight for them as one volunteer stated that *“Seeing how happy all the participants were when they came back from activities was a highlight”*. Third, they reported that the overall experience of volunteering was a highlight for them as it enabled them to help people, support their access to water sports, learn about the challenges faced by children with disabilities, and contribute to the overall event. Fourth, volunteers reported enjoying the entertainment at the event such as the food and the games. Fifth, they described the welcoming atmosphere at the event to be a highlight for them as one volunteer stated *“The start gave me a buzz. Yes, we did it and then to see disabled people happy - being assisted only where necessary and everyone with a smile on their face”*.

Unexpected things at the event

Volunteers reported being surprised by the scale of the event and the overall huge number of participants who joined the event with their families. Others reported they were taken aback by how well-organised the event was and the range of activities that were available to participants. Similarly, they also highlighted the inclusiveness and accessibility of the event to be unexpected. Lastly, volunteers reported being surprised by the overall spirit of community that was evoked by the event and how open-minded, helpful, enthusiastic, and dedicated people were. For instance, a volunteer stated that they were surprised by *“how openminded everyone was- nothing was too much trouble for the volunteers”*.

Table 1. Thematic table

Themes	Subthemes
Reasons for volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current affiliation with the club hosting the event. • Previous experience as a volunteer • Enjoying volunteering • Desire to help out
Highlights of Volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoying the social interaction

Unexpected things at the event

- Participants enjoying the event
 - Overall experience of volunteering
 - Enjoying the entertainment
 - Scale of event
 - Organisation of the event
 - Accessibility and inclusiveness
 - Spirit of Community
-

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the perceived benefits of volunteering in water sports inclusion events for children with disabilities, along with the motivation of participants to volunteer in such events.

We found that volunteering at the event resulted in five main benefits for more than 90% of the volunteers. These benefits included gaining a new skill, feeling valued, increased confidence in the ability to volunteer, increased knowledge of inclusion, and feeling more engaged with the water sports community. This is in line with the previous study conducted to explore the benefits of volunteerism for volunteers engaged in the water sports inclusion event in 2019. O'Flynn also found more than 90 percent of the volunteers reported the same benefits as the ones reported by volunteers in this study¹³. This highlights that volunteering in water sports events for children with disabilities is a fulfilling experience for the volunteers. These results were further supported by the qualitative data where volunteers reported that they liked interacting with the participants and found the overall experience of volunteering to be enjoyable. One of the main reasons they cited for their enjoyment of the event was the fact that participants had a great time at the event a lot and feeling like they were contributing to other people's happiness and were making the event fun for children with disabilities. This is aligned with other studies on volunteerism highlighting the benefits of volunteering.

Volunteers experiencing a sense of community was also something highlighted in multiple other studies. For example, Walsh et al and Kerwin et al also reported that participation in events as volunteers generates a sense of community^{16, 17}, including volunteering in events for people with disabilities¹⁸. Similarly, participants reported an increased knowledge of inclusion of people with disabilities. Other studies refer to this as "disability confidence", which is defined as 'positive attitudes, empathy and appropriate communication skills' in relation to people with disabilities¹⁹. The concept of 'disability confidence' is particularly noteworthy. As society progresses, there's a growing emphasis on inclusivity and understanding. Volunteering at events like these not only boosts the confidence of the volunteers in interacting with people with disabilities but also equips them with the skills and understanding to promote inclusivity in other spheres of their lives. This ripple effect, where

volunteers carry forward the lessons of inclusivity to other areas, can have a profound impact on society at large.

The second objective of the study was to explore volunteers' motivation for volunteering. These included their affiliation with the club hosting the event, previous experience as a volunteer, finding volunteering to be an enjoyable activity, and a desire to help out. These results are similar to the results of the study conducted in 2019 to explore the benefits and motivation of volunteers¹³. Volunteers in the previous study also reported joining the event due to them enjoying volunteering, desire to give back, affiliation with the club and having relevant experience as a volunteer. Other studies have also highlighted that the motivations for volunteering can be both intrinsic and extrinsic and both altruistic and personal¹². Volunteering at events for people with disabilities has been attributed to more altruistic motivation as compared to volunteering at other types of events^{20, 21}. However, the extrinsic reasons to participate in the event as a volunteer are more commonly associated with overall volunteering in sports events. For example, other studies on volunteering in overall sports events also report similar motivation of joining due to affiliation with the hosting organisation, previous experience of volunteering and a general interest in volunteering^{16, 22}. It is noteworthy that 70% of volunteers indicated a desire to volunteer again in the future due to their positive experience in this event which indicates them experiencing some kinds of benefits also serves as a powerful motivating factor. This highlights that while intrinsic motivations are powerful, it's essential not to undermine the extrinsic motivations.

In conclusion, the act of volunteering, especially in events focused on inclusivity, offers a rich tapestry of experiences and learnings for the volunteers. Whether driven by personal motivations, societal goals, or a mix of both, the benefits of volunteering are manifold. As more studies delve into the motivations and benefits of volunteering, it becomes clear that such events offer a win-win situation for all involved – the participants, the organisers, and the volunteers. Lastly, volunteers gain valuable experience and skills from these opportunities.

Declarations of Conflicts of Interest:

None declared.

Corresponding author:

Elizabeth Barrett,
UCD School of Medicine,
University College Dublin,
Belfield,
Dublin 4,

Ireland.

E-Mail: elizabeth.barrett@ucd.ie

References:

1. Office IL. Manual on the measurement of volunteer work: International Labour Office; 2011.
2. Rider C, Hall C. Inclusive volunteering: Benefits to participants and community. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*. 2002;36(3):247-59.
3. Hall E, Wilton R. Alternative spaces of 'work' and inclusion for disabled people. *Disability & Society*. 2011;26(7):867-80.
4. Choma BL, Ochocka J. Supported volunteering: A community approach for people with complex needs. *Journal on Developmental Disabilities*. 2005;12(1):1-18.
5. Bates* P, Davis FA. Social capital, social inclusion and services for people with learning disabilities. *Disability & Society*. 2004;19(3):195-207.
6. Ouellet M-C, Morin CM, Lavoie A. Volunteer work and psychological health following traumatic brain injury. *The Journal of head trauma rehabilitation*. 2009;24(4):262-71.
7. Finn JL, Checkoway B. Young people as competent community builders: A challenge to social work. *Social work*. 1998;43(4):335-45.
8. Smith DH. Grassroots associations are important: Some theory and a review of the impact literature. *Nonprofit and voluntary sector quarterly*. 1997;26(3):269-306.
9. Thoits PA, Hewitt LN. Volunteer work and well-being. *Journal of health and social behavior*. 2001:115-31.
10. Jenkinson C.E, Dickens A.P, Jones K, Thompson-Coon J, Taylor R.S, Rogers M., et al. Is volunteering a public health intervention? A systematic review and meta-analysis of the health and survival of volunteers. *BMC Public Health* 13, 773 (2013)
11. Sanders M, Balcanoff S. Motivations for volunteering in an adapted skiing program: implications for volunteer program development. *Disability and Rehabilitation*. 2022;44(23):7087-95.
12. O'Flynn A, Barrett E, Murphy J. A brief literature review of the psychological benefits of volunteerism in watersports inclusion. *Irish Journal of Medical Science (1971-)*. 2021;190:731-4.
13. O'Flynn A, Murphy J, Barrett E. Psychological benefits for volunteers at the Watersports Inclusion Games. *Irish Journal of Medical Science (1971-)*. 2022:1-6.
14. Salgado A, Murphy J, Barrett E. The Benefits Experience by Families Participating in the Watersports Inclusion Journal Games. *Irish Medical Journal*. 2021;114(8):436-.
15. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*. 2006;3(2):77-101.

16. Woods C, Moyna N, Quinlan A. The children's sport participation and physical activity study (CSPPA study). 2010.
17. Kerwin S, Warner S, Walker M, Stevens J. Exploring sense of community among small-scale sport event volunteers. Impacts and strategic outcomes from non-mega sport events for local communities: Routledge; 2017. p. 85-100.
18. Labbé D, Miller WC, Ng R. Participating more, participating better: Health benefits of adaptive leisure for people with disabilities. *Disability and Health*. 2019;12(2):287-95.
19. Lindsay S, Cancelliere S. A model for developing disability confidence. *Disability and rehabilitation*. 2018;40(18):2122-30.
20. Khoo S, Engelhorn R. Volunteer motivations at a national Special Olympics event. *Adapted physical activity quarterly*. 2011;28(1):27-39.
21. Khoo S, Surujlal J, Engelhorn R. Motivation of volunteers at disability sports events: A comparative study of volunteers in Malaysia, South Africa and the United States. *African Journal for Physical Health Education, Recreation and Dance*. 2011;17(sup-2):356-71.
22. Delaney L, Fahey T. Social and economic value of sport in Ireland: Economic and Social Research Institute Dublin; 2005.