

# Attitudes towards Volunteerism and Individuals with Disabilities in High School Students as a Function of Educational System in South Korea

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Volunteerism has positive effects for both society and the individuals who engage in volunteering. Numerous studies have focused on the positive relationship between adolescents' volunteering experiences and their psychological and social development, while other studies have assessed the positive attitudinal changes of adolescent volunteers in frequent contact with individuals with disabilities. However, few studies have focused on the role of education on students' perceptions of individuals with disabilities. The present study investigated the volunteering experiences of students enrolled in American and Korean educational system schools in South Korea. Results revealed that the American-system students volunteered more often and had more positive attitudes about volunteerism compared to Korean-system students. In addition, American-system students with more positive attitudes about volunteerism had more positive perceptions of individuals with disabilities. There was no relationship in Korean-system students between these two variables. Cross-cultural findings and implications for education and social policy are discussed.

*Keywords:* disability, education, extracurricular activity, perception of disability, volunteerism

Le bénévolat a un impact positif autant pour la société que pour les individus qui aident les autres. Plusieurs études se sont concentrées sur les liens positifs entre les expériences de bénévolat à l'adolescence et le développement psychologique et social, alors que d'autres ont évalué le changement positif d'attitude envers les personnes handicapées au moyen de contacts fréquents. Cependant, peu d'études se sont concentrées sur le rôle de l'éducation sur la perception des étudiants envers les personnes handicapées. Cette étude a investigué les expériences de bénévolat des étudiants fréquentant un système d'éducation américain et coréen en Corée du Sud. Les résultats ont démontré que les étudiants du système américain font davantage de bénévolat, ont une attitude plus positive envers leur expérience et une perception plus positive des personnes handicapées que les étudiants du système coréen. Les résultats interculturels et les implications concernant des politiques sociales et d'éducation sont discutés.

*Mots-clés :* handicap, éducation, activités parascolaires, perception du handicap, bénévolat

Volunteerism has positive effects for both society and the individuals who serve their society without compensation. Individuals who engage in volunteer work are empowered by taking part in pro-social tasks, building relationships with communities, and obtaining new knowledge and skills that bring various psychological and social gains (Wilson, 2000).

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Additionally, high school students who volunteer develop pro-social attitudes and empathy for others (Atkins, Hart, & Donnelly, 2005). In the United States, about 38% of the American youth population engages in community service as a part of the school activity or as a requirement (Grimm, Dietz, Foster-Bey, Reingold, & Nesbit, 2006). This is in part due to there being more secondary schools adopting service-learning programs each year as an educational reform strategy to assist students to achieve important educational goals (Fox, Machmes, Tassin, & Hebert, 2010).

An important strength of volunteerism is the effect that volunteering with different populations can have on the perceptions of marginalized groups (Fichter,

## IMPACT OF EDUCATION ON PERCEPTIONS OF DISABILITIES

Schipper, & Cutler, 2005). For example, research has demonstrated that the more exposure and contact non-disabled students have with disabled students, the better the communication between these two groups (McDuffie, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2009). As students gain confidence through interactions with individuals with disabilities, they gain knowledge about disabilities and become more conscious about societal issues and disadvantages that people with disabilities may experience (Rillotta & Nettelbeck, 2007). Their recognition of similarities between individuals with and without disabilities ultimately leads to more socially accepting attitudes and more positive perceptions of individuals with disabilities (Cook & Semmel, 1999; Maras & Brown, 2000).

Although American students are often involved with volunteer opportunities and interactions with individuals with disabilities, which can positively affect their perceptions of disadvantaged groups, students in other countries are exposed to fewer volunteer opportunities (Larson, 2001) and thus, differ in the number of interactions with individuals with disabilities. For example, high school students in East Asian countries, such as South Korea, are given less opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities in general, which may be because Korean students have much less free time for outside activities than American students (Larson & Verma, 1999). Although South Korea has one of the highest education participation rates in the world, its strong focus on coursework and test preparation often leads other school activities and extracurricular activities to be ignored (Yoon, 2009). In fact, Korean students spend a weekly average of 15 hours 52 minutes studying after school, compared to American students' average of 3 hours 40 minutes (Hwang, 2001). Additionally, over 70% of Korean parents spend 7% (4.1% in public and 3% in private institutions) of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education for their children (OECD, 2001). Due to an emphasis on the traditional fact-learning and rote-learning atmosphere created by this examination culture, Korean students' time for extracurricular activities such as volunteering is limited (Ihm, 2007).

Although differences in the focus of Korean and American education systems suggest that differences may exist in the time spent volunteering between students in the two systems, there is no research, to our knowledge, examining the difference of volunteerism's prevalence between these two educational systems. Thus, the first goal of the current study was to examine whether volunteerism is in fact more prevalent

among students from high schools using the American system rather than the Korean system. In order to control for general differences that exist between the U.S. and South Korea, students from American-system and Korean-system schools in South Korea were selected for this study. Our first hypothesis was that students in the Korean education system spend less time volunteering than students in the American system. This hypothesis is based on the difference in the cultures of education between the American-system and Korean-system. That is, the American education system places a greater value on volunteerism than the Korean education system. Additionally, American-system students have more time to spend on extracurricular activities compared to Korean-system students (Larson & Verma, 1999).

The second goal of the study was to examine whether, due to differences between the two education systems, there would be differences in how important volunteerism was viewed. Because of the greater focus in the American-system schools on volunteerism, our second hypothesis was that American-system students in South Korea would value volunteerism more than Korean-system students in South Korea.

A third goal of the current study was to determine if differences in volunteering experiences would lead to differences in perceptions of individuals with disabilities. It was expected that, because volunteering helps high school students develop pro-social attitudes and empathy (Atkins et al., 2005), students who had a volunteering experience would have more positive perceptions of individuals with disabilities than those without volunteering experience. Thus, it was hypothesized that students who indicated having at least one volunteering experience would have more positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities than those who had never volunteered. Furthermore, if the first two hypotheses were supported, we expected to find that American-system students would have more positive perceptions of individuals with disabilities than Korean-system students.

Finally, we sought to explore whether perceptions of individuals with disabilities would be moderated by the interaction between the importance of volunteerism and the school system. Specifically, due to a greater emphasis on community service in the American system than in the Korean system, it was expected that the relationship between importance of volunteerism and perceptions of individuals would be stronger in the American-system students than the

Korean-system students. The current study was designed to test these hypotheses and therefore focuses on how education systems may shape experiences with and attitudes towards volunteerism as well as perceptions of individuals with disabilities.

## Method

### Participants

The participants in this study were 90 high school students (52 males) from three different schools located in South Korea. The schools represented two different education systems: Korean and American. The Korean system was represented with 50 (26 males) participants from one Korean public school, Apgujung High School, in which students with Korean citizenships are enrolled. The American system had a total of 40 (26 males) participants from Handong International School (HIS) and Seoul Foreign School (SFS). At the American system schools, students had U.S. or other country citizenships or permanent residency or had lived abroad for 5 or more years. The age of student participants ranged from 15 to 20 ( $M = 17.92$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ). All participants were given either a bakery or Starbucks coupon as compensation for their participation. All procedures were approved by the necessary Protection of Human Subjects Committees and informed consent was obtained from each participant. The students over 18 confirmed and signed for their voluntary participation. For students under 18, each received a confirmation from an academic advisor for one's participation, which is in line with ethics guidelines in South Korea.

### Materials and Procedure

All research material was presented in both English and Korean and administered by a college student bilingual in both languages. A questionnaire was constructed to analyze participants' extra-curricular participation and perceptions of individuals with disabilities. There were several scales given to the participants. First, participants were asked about their experiences with volunteerism, in which they indicated if they had volunteered during the past or present year in a community engagement setting and, if they had, how frequently they volunteered (1 = *never* to 6 = *daily*). Second, participants ranked how important they considered volunteerism to be (1 = *not at all important* to 5 = *extremely important*), which served as a measure of the perception of the importance of volunteerism.

Third, 20 questions from the Attitudes Towards Individuals with Disabilities Scale developed by Gorecczny, Bender, Caruso and Feinstein (2011;  $\alpha = .88$ ) were used to measure perceptions of individuals with disabilities. Specifically, questions regarding participants' beliefs and attitudes about the capability and competence of individuals with disabilities to perform activities associated with daily living were selected. Participants indicated their agreement with 20 statements about individuals with disabilities such as "persons with disabilities are capable of living a normal life" on a scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). Higher scores on this scale indicated more negative perceptions of individuals with disabilities. Finally, participants were asked to report their gender, age, school information, as well as the number of family members or friends with disabilities and the type(s) of disability, if applicable. After the questionnaires were completed, participants were debriefed, given their compensation, and dismissed.

## Results

Analyses were conducted with 50 Korean-system students and 40 American-system students ( $N = 90$ ). To examine whether there was a difference in volunteering experiences between the participants in the American system compared with the Korean system, Chi-square analyses were conducted. Results revealed that, in support of the first hypothesis, the frequency of students who reported volunteering compared to those who did not volunteer was statistically significantly different between the two groups, such that 92.50% of American-system participants volunteered, while only 50.00% of Korean-system participants volunteered,  $\chi^2(1, 90) = 18.73$ ,  $p < .001$ . Among the students who volunteered, results revealed that students in the American system ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) reported a higher number of volunteering activities than the Korean-system participants ( $M = 1.60$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ),  $t(88) = 8.25$ ,  $p < .001$ .

To test the second hypothesis that individual differences in the perception of the importance of volunteerism would differ between the two groups, an independent *t*-test was conducted. In support of this hypothesis, American-system participants ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ) placed more importance on volunteerism than the Korean-system group ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ),  $t(88) = 3.42$ ,  $p = .001$ .

Next, we examined whether differences would exist in perceptions of individuals with disabilities

## IMPACT OF EDUCATION ON PERCEPTIONS OF DISABILITIES

between those who volunteered and those who did not volunteer by performing an independent *t*-test with the Attitudes Towards Individuals with Disabilities Scale as the dependent variable. Although American-system and Korean-system students who volunteered ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ) had a more positive perception of individuals with disabilities than those who did not volunteer ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ), this difference was small and failed to reach statistical significance,  $t(88) = 0.96$ ,  $p = .338$ . Similarly, there was no statistically significant difference in perceptions of individuals with disabilities between American-system and Korean-system participants,  $t(88) = -0.05$ ,  $p = .591$ . Thus, the third hypothesis was not supported.

However, results did reveal that the perceptions of individuals with disabilities was related to importance of volunteerism,  $r = -.39$ ,  $p < .001$  (Table 1), such that the higher the importance of volunteerism, the more positive the students' perceptions of individuals with disabilities (note that higher scores in voluntarism mean more negative view towards voluntarism). To test whether the relationship between importance of volunteerism and perceptions of individuals with disabilities would be moderated by the school system, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. A regression was conducted predicting perceptions of individuals with disabilities from importance of volunteerism and school system in the first step. On the second step, the interaction between these two variables, with dummy-coded school system and mean-centered importance of volunteerism were entered. Results indicated that the regression model with the interaction was statistically significant,  $F(3, 85) = 6.15$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $R^2 = .16$  (see Table 2). As demonstrated in Figure 1, the breakdown of the interaction revealed that, for the American-system students, importance of volunteerism was a statistically significant predictor of attitudes towards individuals with disabilities (simple slope =  $-0.31$ ,  $t(85) = -4.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ); (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). For Korean-system students, however, the relationship between these variables was not statistically significant (simple slope =  $-0.14$ ,  $t(85) =$

$-1.21$ ,  $p = .231$ ). The results of this analysis suggest that the attitudes of the American-system students towards volunteerism are predictive of their attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. On the other hand, this relationship does not exist for Korean-system students, who volunteer less than those in the American-system.

## Discussion

The current study explored the important issue of perceptions of people with disabilities, which is an area of research that has received limited empirical attention and has the propensity to inform future policy decisions. More specifically, this work was designed to examine how experiences with and attitudes towards volunteering relate to perceptions of individuals with disabilities in students from Korean and American education systems in South Korea. Our findings offer interesting insight into how important educational-level variables can shape students' perceptions of individuals with disabilities. First, we hypothesized that there would be differences in volunteering experiences between Korean-system and American-system students. This hypothesis was supported in that more American-system students reported having a volunteering experience than Korean-system students; Additionally, American-system students reported more volunteering experiences than Korean-system students. Second, we hypothesized that volunteerism would be viewed as less important by students in the Korean-system compared with American-system students. Indeed, results demonstrated that American-system students valued volunteerism more than Korean-system students. These two findings are likely due to the greater focus on volunteerism in the American school system and the greater time American-system students spend on extracurricular activities, compared to Korean-system students (Larson & Verma, 1999). Furthermore, due to the larger amount of coursework and greater focus on test preparation in the Korean system compared to the American system (Kwak, 2004), as well as the reliance on private

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between Variables*

Variables	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Correlations		
		1	2	3
1. Volunteerism importance	3.54 (0.74)	-		
2. Frequency of volunteerism	2.29 (1.17)	.41**	-	
3. Perceptions of individuals with disabilities	3.28 (0.44)	-.39**	-.10	-

Note. \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 2

*Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Attitudes Towards Individuals With Disabilities From Importance of Volunteerism (N = 90)*

	B	SE	$\beta$
Step 1			
Importance of Volunteerism	-.25	.06	-.43
School	-.08	.09	-.09
Step 2			
Importance of Volunteerism	.04	.24	.06
School	-.06	.10	-.07
Importance x School	-.17	.14	-.50*

Note. For Step 1,  $R^2 = .16$  ( $p < .001$ );  $\Delta R^2 = .02$  ( $p = .001$ ) for Step 2.

lessons and tutoring for several hours per week (Hwang, 2001; Kwak, 2004), it is also likely that Korean-system students simply have less time for volunteerism in the local community than American-system students.

Our third hypothesis, that those with a volunteering experience would have more positive views of individuals with disabilities, was not supported. Our results indicate, rather, that the American-system students who valued community service highly were more likely to perceive individuals with disabilities positively than the American-system students who valued volunteerism less. Korean students' perceptions of individuals with disabilities, however, were unaffected by how strongly they valued volunteerism,

most likely due to limited variability and frequency in their volunteering experiences. These results suggest that unequal educational emphasis on the importance of volunteerism between the American system and the Korean system may create a difference in students' exposure to various types of activities (Eitle & Eitle, 2002; McNeal, 1999). Thus, it appears that instilling a social norm that community service is valued as well as providing opportunities for volunteerism can lead to more positive perceptions of individuals with disabilities.

The different rates of inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the respective school systems may also have affected the relationships between volunteerism and perceptions of individuals with disabilities between the two education systems. American-system schools serve many more individuals with disabilities in secondary schools under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; United States Department of Education, 2009) while less individuals with disabilities are served under the Korean education system (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2008). Students' participation in school-based volunteerism opportunities provides them opportunities to associate with peers different from those they encounter at home and in the classroom (Darling, Cadwell, & Smith, 2005) and therefore learn social acceptance and positive peer attitudes toward individuals with disabilities (Cook & Semmel, 1999; Maras & Brown, 2000). These findings may indicate that American-system students' attitudes towards individuals with disabilities are more likely to be changed for the better as the emphasis on volunteerism increases. As the difference between the two school systems lies in the relationship between importance of volunteerism and perceptions of individuals with disabilities, it does not appear that simple exposure to individuals with disabilities leads

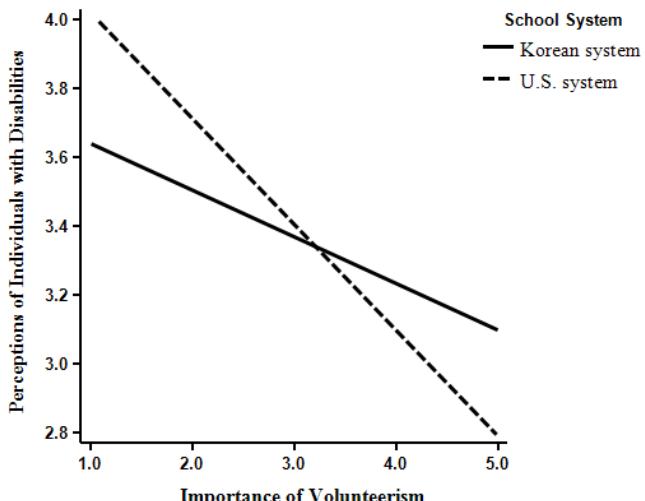


Figure 1. Perceptions of individuals with disabilities as a function of the importance of volunteerism and the school system.

Lower scores on the Perceptions of Individuals with Disabilities Scale indicate more favorable attitudes.

## IMPACT OF EDUCATION ON PERCEPTIONS OF DISABILITIES

to differences in perception. Thus, the current results suggest that although familiarity with individuals with disabilities does not correspond to attitude change towards the groups, the degree to which individuals place importance on volunteerism is associated with more positive views of individuals with disabilities, but only in the American system sample.

### **Limitations**

The results of the current study should be interpreted with caution, however, as there may be additional personality variables that are responsible for the relationship between importance of volunteerism and perceptions of individuals with disabilities in the American-system sample. Because this relationship was not found with the Korean-system sample, we believe this is unlikely, but the current study was not experimental in nature and thus future research should continue to explore this issue.

Future research should also continue to investigate individual differences in the need to engage in extracurricular activities, and how this may vary based on the education system and other cultural and social influences. The difference in volunteering experience between American and Korean system students is most likely due to the differences in the philosophies between the school systems; This conclusion should be interpreted with caution, however, as we did not use a validated scale to measure participants' volunteering experience or the importance of volunteerism.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of the current study can have important implications for policy decisions regarding the implementation of volunteerism programs. Given that previous work demonstrate the positive psychological and social impacts that volunteerism can have on individuals (Atkins et al., 2005; Wilson, 2000), and the positive perceptions that placing importance on volunteerism could potentially lead to, this work suggests that encouraging volunteerism among high school students, at least those in American school systems, can have potentially positive impacts on how individuals with disabilities are perceived. Future work should continue to examine whether importance of volunteerism is related to positive attitudes towards other disadvantaged groups, rather than just individuals with disabilities.

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