

## Research Space

Journal article

**Girls who learn to serve: An ethnography exploring the gendered experience of school-based volunteering**

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# Girls who learn to serve: an ethnography exploring the gendered experience of school-based volunteering

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This is a study of a school-based volunteering programme; an ethnography of six girls enrolled onto the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme (DofE) at their secondary school in a deprived coastal community in the United Kingdom. Building on voluntary sector research into young people's volunteering and feminist research into the systematic gender inequalities created by school structures, this article explores how often young people were coerced into school-based volunteering and how, in this case, the coercion was gendered. The researcher observed how the school's prefect group, based on relations with school leaders and teachers, were recruited onto the DofE and then divided by gendered norms that ensured the girls and boys volunteered with different motivations and were incentivised and rewarded differently. Classed and gendered constructed identities, reinforced by school structures and practices, were evident in gendered school duties and caring responsibilities given to the girls. This article raises important considerations for voluntary sector–school partnerships that aim to empower and improve student opportunities. In this study, rather than challenge and empower young people, school-based volunteering served to reproduce societal classed and gendered inequalities.

**Key words** young people • volunteering • gender • feminism • social structures

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## Introduction

Recent reports have revealed how the voluntary sector, in the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally, suffers from a lack of understanding and recognition of the structural and systemic inequalities that continue to exist within charities (Lingayah et al, 2020; Beaton et al, 2021). Additionally, many voluntary sector youth volunteering projects are carried out in partnership with schools and are therefore subject to the schools' own structures and hierarchies, which, research has shown, reproduce inequalities of class, race and gender (Reay, 2017). Rather than enabling young people to challenge the status quo, these structures and systems can ensure the same groups of young people remain marginalised. Examples from fieldwork in

a UK school, the St Francis Academy, located in an area considered disadvantaged, show how the voluntary sector partner, in this case the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme (hereafter the DofE), was co-opted into the practices and structures of the school system. This ensured it became another mechanism reproducing gendered inequalities. Implicit systems of control that existed within the school's relations and hierarchies acted to coerce the girls from the prefect group into volunteering, while social constructs of femininity and identities of girlhood dictated the responsibilities and roles the girls took as part of their school and DofE duties.

The ethnography mainly observed six girl members of the St Francis prefect group as they were recruited onto, and participated in, the DofE alongside their St Francis school prefect duties. An ethnographic field diary observed how the girls became involved in the DofE and recorded their experiences as they volunteered at a nearby care home. The DofE is a long-established international youth programme running in schools, youth groups and community organisations. Students participate in different components, including a volunteering component, to achieve a series of awards: bronze, silver and gold. In this study the girls were aiming for bronze and required to give a three-month commitment to volunteering. In 2019, the DofE received £3 million funding from the UK government and the National Lottery to support more young people to access the award, with a target of reaching an additional 20,000 disadvantaged people by 2021. The students in this research were part of this target, as the senior leader at St Francis, in partnership with the regional DofE coordinator, committed to encourage more students in the year group to get involved.

The purpose of this article is to show, through field diary data, how the young people in this study were mandated to participate in the DofE, and additionally to focus on how their participation was gendered. The first four sections draw on current and international literature from voluntary sector studies that looks at the notion of mandatory and service approaches to volunteering, and how these are framed as critical for young people and their educational success. Research also shows how systems continue to be controlled by hierarchies that reproduce identities of femininity and masculinity, with feminist literature that explores concepts of 'girlhood' and 'caring'. The next section outlines the methodology, showing how building a relationship with the girls allowed for the collection of detailed data. The findings and discussion sections highlight key examples from the field diary and sets out the implications, concluding with how the voluntary sector, by taking a critical approach, could challenge and tackle the ways their programmes contribute to the reproduction of gendered norms.

## **Mandatory approaches and service volunteering**

Current research suggests how young people in schools are mandated to participate in volunteering rather than choosing to do so voluntarily (Helms-McCarty, 2013), or be signed up for volunteering as an 'act of service' (Rochester, 2006). In this study the students were signed up to the volunteering as a prefect duty, and given very little option to opt out, which is why their experience is aligned with the concept of 'mandatory service volunteering'. By service volunteering, the study refers to the rise in the way charities and education policy makers have increasingly talked about developing 'service-orientated citizens' through volunteering (Dekker and Halman, 2003). Indeed, this is an international trend, with an increasing number of research studies investigating mandatory volunteering across Europe, the United States, Australia

and Asia, suggesting that the concept of 'service volunteering' has led to an increase in the number of young people who are involved in compulsory programmes (Kuti, 2004; Yang, 2013; Kim and Morgül, 2017; Sikora and Green, 2020).

It has been argued that these approaches are linked to neoliberal conceptualisations of individualism, which present volunteering as a mechanism to increase employability and have compromised more human, altruistic motivations (Dean, 2015; 2016). Programmes such as the UK's National Citizens Service, it is argued, have reframed youth volunteering to fit with neoconservative ideologies of the compliant, 'good' citizen (Mills and Waite, 2017; Murphy, 2017). Youth volunteering within education is often attached to policies on youth citizenship and education policy initiatives designed to develop young people's 'character'. It has also been influenced by policies to tackle youth political apathy and re-engage with 'troublesome' young people (Gaskin, 2004; Strickland, 2010). The relationship between young people and volunteering has been shaped by this policy framing and incentivising (Moore and Allen, 1996; Kelemen et al, 2017). Taylor-Collins (2019), in her research at inner-city schools in the UK, concluded that the main motivation behind the girls' participation in the National Citizens Service was what she termed 'hope labour' – participating in volunteering to gain their ticket to a place at a competitive university or as the means to achieve their dream job. Taylor-Collins (2019) also found that other caring responsibilities the girls were engaged in at school or at home did not feature on their CV or applications, as this was seen as everyday 'helping' and devalued alongside formal activities they had done as part of school-based volunteering.

Eliasoph (2011) highlights how volunteering projects for young people considered disadvantaged are often supported through mixed funding sources and how youth charities are seen as 'morally magnetic' missions (Eliasoph, 2011: 2). She suggests that donors are drawn to organisations that can claim to be supporting disadvantaged youth and therefore organisations align themselves in this way, allowing the young people on their programmes to be collectively identified as disadvantaged. For Eliasoph (2011: 1), this an example of a 'criss-crossed mission', leading to an inaccuracy in the labels that become attached to young people and projects. Young people, who may be motivated volunteers, become labelled as 'needy youth', which paints a misleading picture about the contributions of young people.

In the context of this study, based on the requirements of the funding of the DoFE in south-east England, the DoFE programme became all about expanding and reaching 'disadvantaged' groups of young people. This led to a focus on targeting schools in areas with low socioeconomic communities and finding ways of signing up those considered 'hard to reach'. Identified as a school with a high intake of disadvantaged students, St Francis was approached by the new DoFE regional lead. The new head at St Francis, who had created a three-year plan, had set ambitious targets for the school's extra-curricular programme, including volunteering opportunities and the DoFE, aiming for the participation of more of the school community. He, and the new regional lead, soon began discussing expanding the DoFE to a whole year group. Shortly after that, the DoFE lead became a St Francis school governor as part of his role as south-east coordinator for the organisation. As part of the funding aims, the regional lead had been tasked with engaging as many schools and students as possible. It was obvious once he was governor that he would not expect St Francis to opt out of the DoFE. The school was committed to increasing numbers, despite a warning from longer-serving members of staff that the programme had only ever attracted small groups in the past.

## The DofE and the policy context

Increasingly, school–voluntary sector partnerships are impacted by the marketisation of the voluntary sector amid the huge funding changes that charities and organisations have faced over periods of austerity and changes in government (Sullivan et al, 2013; Milbourne and Cushman, 2015). Many organisations have had to pivot their projects and change their income models to reflect a lack of available funding and a need to diversify their income streams (Sepulveda et al, 2011). Youth organisations have tried to streamline their offer both to reduce costs and to appeal to donors and supporters, and the DofE, itself, has different delivery models. At St Francis, traditionally, the school had hosted the DofE but with the local authority as the DofE licence holder and facilitator. As a result of cuts to local authorities, many local authorities no longer hold the DofE licence. In this way, St Francis was asked to take on the licence, trialling a new model based on different school staff members taking on the responsibility for different components. While the licence fee was covered by donor funding, the running of the new model relied heavily on the school staff's voluntary contributions.

In the south-east of England, ensuring a high number of student sign-ups, as well as obtaining buy-in from teachers, school staff volunteers and parents, was problematic. The DofE lead visited all the schools with high numbers of students identified as disadvantaged from the start of the academic year, but struggled to get projects off the ground. In the early days of my fieldwork, I visited many schools where the DofE was being trialled, but I waited a long time for a cohort to begin. An interview with the first school lead who tried to get it off the ground revealed low student numbers, despite regular assemblies and the incentive of a funded place. In another school in the south-east of England, the DofE was implemented as 'an alternative curriculum' for students who were sitting the career-related programme of the International Baccalaureate, an alternative qualification to A-Levels or BTECs. Whereas traditionally the model of the DofE had always stipulated that all components should be off-timetable and extra-curricular, students at this school were targeted and offered the chance to complete the DofE as part of their weekly lessons. St Francis, where I completed my research, did not provide the DofE as an alternative curriculum, but it did mandate that the school's prefect students were to participate. The way the DofE ran in each school was down to the school cultures and practices and this links to the next section on the way schools each have their own social systems, which can be gendered.

## Schools and gender

Feminist literature has long been examining the ways school reproduce gender, including various school studies such as Arnot and Weiner (1987), Arnot (2004) and Reay (2018). Schools can reproduce gendered norms in different ways through constructs of gender and through socialised concepts of masculine and feminine identities. Constructs of gender are reinforced in the everyday rituals, habits and practices of society. Butler (1999) argues that as individuals we are entrenched in the societal learnt performance of gendered behaviour. Schools are an important example of an institutional context where gender identities are fixed and maintained through the everyday practices of school life. Illustrations of this include the structures of school leadership and the way teacher responsibility is delegated. Other studies show how

school structures are upheld through the selection of prefects and the way student duties can be structured by gender (Kessler et al, 1985; Dunne, 2007).

Taking a feminist approach in this study allowed me a way of exposing structural inequalities within a voluntary sector project that would not usually be seen. Feminist theoretical perspectives begin with a view of society that is dominated by patriarchal power and control, with an understanding that knowledge and analysis are a product of this unequal system (Maynard and Purvis, 1994). The research began with a belief in, and an understanding of, how women's experiences are marginalised and hidden by the current social system. Taking a gender perspective allowed me to explore the girls' experiences, giving me an important purpose through my analysis and discussion. New knowledge generated in this study can be used to challenge inequality.

Taking a feminist perspective, the conceptual work of Taylor (2004) challenges the exclusion of the concept of 'volunteering' from understandings of work and labour. Taylor (2004) states how volunteering is devalued by a failure to include its contributions in understandings of paid and unpaid labour. Taylor's case study examples show how women interviewed did not rate or value their voluntary contributions when they entered discussions about work and labour. Taylor (2004) argues that it is women who are the ones making these unseen contributions, and this is supported by the findings of Martinez et al (2011) and Warburton and McLaughlin (2006), who explore what they call examples of informal volunteering. Applying this understanding of volunteering and exploring women and girls' contributions, gave me insight into the ways that the school structure rested on gendered expectations of the informal help girls give and their unseen roles. In addition, it provided an understanding of the way the girls themselves accepted and identified themselves by the roles they carried out as part of their daily duties and school practices.

Identities of girlhood inform the way girls perceive themselves and control their relationships and behaviours within the school. Contemporary discourses of girlhood place female identity into different categories, including what researchers have defined as 'the good girl', 'the bad girl', 'the academic girl', 'the rebel', among others. Adolescent girls grow up constricted by these constructed identities (Harris, 2004; Aapola et al, 2005). McRobbie (2004: 3) has called modern discourses of girlhood 'the double entanglement; the co-existence of neo-conservative values ... and processes of liberalization'. Simultaneously, girls are told to be strong and independent, and this comes alongside conservative ideas that remind them of their vulnerability as girls and the ways they should be protected and rescued (Aapola et al, 2005). Gilligan and Mickel Brown (1992) report a 'crisis' in adolescent girls' development, a stage when they begin to edit out their true feelings and opinions and feel they must censor and control their feelings in order to fit in.

## Gender and moral thinking

The psychological perspective of Gilligan (2002) also provides a theory that enables us to understand the way girls and boys often respond to moral problems in different ways, with distinct types of power attached to their decisions, and consequences for how their decisions lead them to be positioned in the social order. Gilligan (2002) builds her theory around the idea that women have a different moral voice from men. Other research studies have found that, in a crisis-type scenario, girls display more empathy and care for the individuals affected by the crisis than boys, who, the

research suggests, often respond by focusing more on ways of solving the dilemma (Karniol et al, 2003; Skoe, 2010).

While these studies do not claim that boys are incapable of empathy and care, their findings strongly suggest that girls focus more on taking on a caring responsibility for the emotional and relational impacts of a crisis. Feminist theory helps us understand how this caring-focused approach has led to less power and agency for the girls who take it (Tronto and Fisher, 1990). Taking a feminist perspective on moral development, Gilligan (2004) suggests that notions of caring have become a feminine virtue and demonstrates how this is problematic in a modern patriarchal society. She describes how, over time, a capacity for empathy in women has been romantically idealised, often with descriptions of women as almost angelic, yet simultaneously devalued.

Gilligan (2002; 2004) argues that current gender binaries ensure that those who speak with a more caring voice are considered weaker and not given equal power and agency. This has led to a lack of caring voices within modern society's decision making, and a gendered split between ideas of justice-orientated decision making on the masculine side and caring approaches associated with femininity. It has prevented the ideas being used alongside each other (Gilligan, 2004). Karniol et al (2003), using Gilligan's theories, looking specifically at girls in adolescence, indicate that adolescent girls may feel their opinions do not count as much as those taking a 'whole picture' view.

## Methodology

The fieldwork was a collection of ethnographic observations, interviews and focus groups with the girls, boys and staff within St Francis, collected over a year-long period totalling about 300 hours of fieldwork time. I met with the prefect group once a week for an afternoon, usually over a three-hour period. The prefect group at St Francis was a large group made up of about 18 girls and six boys. The numbers involved in my research fluctuated as prefects took on different roles within the school, and after a month, my core research group became six girls. Each week I took detailed field notes, I recorded sessions and transcribed short group discussions, and I spent time analysing the field notes, initially spending around five hours a week doing this. This rose significantly as I began working with the six girls and sharing transcriptions, and it rose again as we started volunteering together at the care home on Wednesdays. Field notes included notes on observations and discussions as we walked to the care home, as well as field notes taken inside the care home while observing the girls as they were interacting with the residents.

As the relationship between myself and the participants and the number of participants changed over the course of the research, the sessions changed. At the beginning, I mainly recorded observations in my field diary. These changed to informal interviews where I created a series of loose questions to explore with the girls, but the discussions were led and directed by them. Towards the end I carried out more formal group interviews to explore a particular perception or experience with the girls. As I reflected on the data I had collected from the girls, I set up four formal interviews with the boys in order to compare the girls' and boys' perceptions of volunteering and duty. In the beginning I also spent time informally interviewing the school lead for the DoF and prefects, Mr D, who also agreed to be recorded, and I spent time transcribing his responses. In time, this moved to observations as



I recorded how Mr D interacted with the prefects when he facilitated the prefect group meeting, or when he talked to other staff within the school, senior and other members of his team, as well as the way he presented himself to the DofE lead and the way he interacted with me, as a researcher.

Mr D was both my gatekeeper and the most important contact for the prefects. He consistently had an important impact on the relations within the school, the power structures and the identities of the girls and it is important his values and position are understood. Mr D is the head of his subject, as well as having responsibility for multiple leadership roles. He is wedded to the school and its progress; he has been there for more than 20 years since he started his teaching career. In the local area, he is well known as a teacher and leader within the school. He has an informal relationship with both the girls and the boys; his relationship with the students is based on self-deprecation and sharing stories about his family, and humorous banter, ensuring he is a popular teacher. The six girls who are dominant in my study identify as female and are White. Verity, Bea and Kate align themselves with a Catholic faith, while Etta, Annie and Freya say they have no religion. They were aged 13 or 14 when I started the ethnography; Etta and Annie were aged 15 by time the ethnography finished.

All the names of places and people have been anonymised in this article. Ethical clearance for the study was applied for and obtained, and letters of consent were obtained from participants and their guardians. I observed with an awareness of the hierarchical power between researcher and those researched. My ethnography was a way of looking beyond the labels that are given and stick within the education sector – such as ‘disadvantaged’, ‘under-achieving’ and ‘hard to reach’. The stigma associated with being labelled disadvantaged is to be viewed in deficit and less human ways (Shelton et al, 2010), it dictates that young people labelled in this way will be seen and communicated with through a particular lens by teachers and practitioners (Hargreaves et al, 1975).

While developing a relationship with the girls, I adopted different questioning styles to create a non-hierarchical rapport. Volunteering alongside the girls, rather than only observing them, played a role in gaining access to their perceptions and understanding. Adopting what Blackman (2007) has termed ‘crossing borders’ as part of the hidden ethnography, I built a friendship with the girls, and deliberately chose to reveal parts of my own life. This is, as Blackman states, accepting the role of emotion and attachment in the research process; the girls were an important part of my life. The intimacy that we developed led them to reveal open and honest thoughts about their experiences at St Francis, their home life and their relationships with peers, staff members at the school, volunteering staff and people in their community. I gave them access to my field diary at several points in the ethnography to ensure they felt the transcriptions represented their thoughts accurately. And I allowed them to edit extracts and add comments, which I kept a detailed record of.

## Findings

### *Students were coerced into volunteering through the school structure and practices*

From the beginning there was a difference in the expectations of the headteacher and DofE lead, who expected sign-ups to come more easily, and Mr D’s knowledge of the



students and likely behaviours. This extract is from my first observation of Mr D as I was introduced to the school team by the DofE lead and is taken from the field diary:

There is a long silence however when the Head asks Mr D for the numbers, and he is very disappointed to hear only nine students in year 9 have signed up. He clearly feels a bit embarrassed at these numbers after his commitment to involve the whole year group. He puts Mr D on the spot asking whether he thinks 9 is aspirational enough number after a week of recruiting, Mr D looks uncomfortable but says it is not far from what he expected and much better than previous years. Despite Mr D's reservations a decision is made to open it up to Year 10 and Mr D is to ask House Leads to relaunch it. The DofE lead cheerfully offers to come back and give another DofE assembly.

Field diary observations record Mr D navigating a difficult space between the expectations of the senior leader and DofE lead, while managing complaints about the extra workload from his own team of house leads. The house leads believed there was a lack of understanding about how many sign-ups they could achieve; despite numerous assemblies, uptake among the Year 9 and Year 10 students remained low. As time went on and after the start date had been pushed back several times, Mr D made the decision to call upon a group of about 18 Year 10 students, who had applied to be prefects. This was based on his knowledge that he would be able to ask the prefects to do it with less opportunity to opt out.

I soon realised that as part of their application to be a school prefect, they had been required to participate in several things, these included Youth Alpha (a course for young Christians), St Francis prayer and door duty, and other volunteering tasks in the community. Most of the prefects reluctantly signed up to the DofE, but at various points tried to drop it across the year, until all the boys except two had dropped it. This was not the same with the girls. Each time they tried, Mr D persuaded them to continue. This led to negative feelings from the girls, including this reflection from Annie, who felt she had no choice but to continue because she was a prefect. From the field diary:

Annie: I mean I do like being a prefect, I mean I like it, I just don't like ... I mean we get our own room, and we do get to have certain freedoms, but even with those freedoms there are like pros and cons, pros are like we get our own rooms and other benefits and stuff, but cons are like we literally are like the school slaves, and it's like oh you need to do something, oh just get the prefects to do it, or do you need this to happen, just get the prefects to do it, and it's like I know, we do have to do some of it but sometimes they ask everyone and other people do it, but then just ditch it and no one says anything to them ... Like on Friday we get to go in late if you've done something, but then people haven't done it, but they still go in late. They ask everyone to do stuff, but then other people can say no or drop out, but if we try to drop out, we can't because we're prefects.

Compulsory approaches to participating in volunteering produced negative feelings about volunteering and the DofE. On one occasion when the girls had asked to drop the DofE, they told me that they did not want to stop visiting the elderly residents,

they just wanted to stop volunteering with the DofE. This was mainly because they did not feel that they had any choice or agency about whether to participate. They did want to volunteer but for different, and arguably more altruistic, reasons. They were not motivated by the rewards of the DofE. This point challenges dominant deficit narratives about young people and their inclinations to volunteer as well as raises questions about the discourse that suggests young people need rewards or mandatory approaches to be involved. The girls' involvement was based on their sense of making a difference.

### *Girls and boys were coerced in different, gendered ways*

The field diary observations from the prefect group show important differences in the relationship between Mr D and the girls and Mr D and the boys, all of which impacted their volunteering choices and experiences. While both boys and girls had a close relationship with Mr D, there were gendered differences in the way he talked to the girls and boys about their prefect responsibilities and duties. The way Mr D called on the girls in my study to participate rested on gendered ideas of girls as more compliant, which has been explored in the classroom studies of [Jones and Myhill \(2004\)](#). Mr D often used the girls' sense of empathy as a motivation to help him out.

Field notes record a similarity in how Mr D referred to his own hopelessness when requesting help from both the prefect girls and his female house leaders. He tried to flatter the girls and his other female staff by telling them how reliable they were, how he depended on them and how he could not do the task without them. In this way, Mr D was using the girls' moral sense of responsibility and care. When the girls talked about duties and volunteering, they talked about supporting Mr D, who was their favourite teacher as he was dedicated to all students. They often felt conflicted between their own inclinations and a reluctance to let Mr D down, which supports [Gilligan's \(2004\)](#) study and her description of how care and responsibility become part of girls' identities. From the field diary:

Etta: So, the school set something up and they try and sign people up and when it looks like it might not work, they say, 'Oh well you are prefects so you can do it too...' and we can't say no and even if we do they say 'No, come on'.

Annie: I said I didn't want to do it and everyone said just keep on for now ... I don't know about you guys but for me it is about feeling bad.

Verity: Yes, if I say I don't want to do it anymore then Sir has to go all through that work.

Etta: I'm the type of person who cannot say NO.

Annie: Mr D is so kind, he's the kindest teacher in school. All agree ...

Bea: He's my most favourite teacher in school.

Annie: So, I feel bad if I know I am disappointing him.

Yet this loyalty to Mr D ensured that often the girls engaged in duties and volunteering that they did not want to do and gave their time reluctantly. It led to a lack of power and agency within the decisions and duties they participated in.

***Rewards and incentives were offered to boys based on their relationships with teachers***

In comparison, observations of the conversations between Mr D and the boys showed he did not use empathy and duty as a motivation to engage them in volunteering. Mr D incentivised and rewarded the boys for their voluntary contributions by giving them opportunities to lead; for example he made them responsible for the delegation of door duty to the other prefects and asked them to monitor the prefect room. These additional responsibilities included more public recognition, such as presenting at assembly and attending meetings with senior leaders. One day, as the girls and I entered the prefect room, it had been reorganised – the head boy and a couple of other prefect boys had rearranged it and done it after school with Mr D. The girls started to notice a difference in the way Mr D divided up prefect duties among the group. From the field diary:

Annie: The boys are basically head boys already ...

Freya: The boys have so many connections with the teachers, and they are always here after school ...

Bea: They come every day after school, like they are the head boys, but they were doing it before, for example they moved all the computers in here, they're redoing the room, they just do it on their own, but in conversation with Mr D.

Annie: They know stuff that we don't know, and they won't always tell us. They tell us, the day after or the day they're doing it.

Freya: All the teachers go to them because they always feel that they are already the top of the leader of prefects and so they get told everything first.

EL: Do you mean the teachers treat the boys like leaders?

Bea: Don't know but the thing about the boys is that they have kind of like (Fi: – connections) but kind of position and I don't blame them because they do work extremely hard, they stay behind after school, they help with homework club, and so I don't blame them, if they want to be that responsible that's fine, less pressure on me.

Fi: It's not because they're boys ... at least I hope it's not.

EL: Do you think the boys work harder than you?

Fi: I'll be honest, me and Verity don't do anything for prefects we just turn up and do the duty – the boys do everything for us, they sort out the door duties, then if I have a problem I will go to boys.

EL: Why do you think the boys do extra work?

Verity: Because they like being in charge maybe.

Fi: They like to be helpful ...

Bea: They like to be the loudest voice that's heard ...

Fi: They are just very much leadership personality and they like being in control of everything ...

EL: Do you like being leaders?

ALL: Noooo!

Fi: I'd rather be told what to do and I'll do it ...

While this extract records the girls' perceptions of how the boys were treated, other examples from the field diary also suggest an inequity in agency and power. Several times the boys, Mr D and other teachers made decisions without involving the prefect girls, for example the date and arrangement of the prefect assembly. Decisions made without consultation across the whole group, removes the agency of the girls, leaving them invisible. Interviews with the boys also revealed different motivations for volunteering, one boy stated: "I want to make the school a better place. I wanted to make sure that I was going to change all the bad things in the school." This motivation fits with [Gilligan's \(2002\)](#) idea of gendered moral reasoning and justice-based positions; it also contrasts with the girls and the way their motivation was aligned to Mr D.

Within voluntary sector studies there are theories of gendered notions of volunteering duties within communities, as identified by [Einolf \(2011\)](#). Their paper discusses how the social norms around gender roles and duties are reflected by women and men's choices in volunteering: 'Some types of volunteering have strong gender norms, with men dominating the staffs of volunteer fire and rescue squads and women making up the majority of hospice volunteers' ([Einolf, 2011: 1094](#)). These gendered differences are reinforced by the way the St Francis girls were offered and chose caring roles, such as working with the primary children and older people. In contrast, an opportunity to marshal at a nearby heritage site was participated in by the boys. These choices reflect the gendered societal choices within volunteering.

### *The girls formed their identities around constructs of femininity and girlhood*

Early in the ethnography I observed how the girls formed their identity around both their class and their gender ([Skeggs, 2005](#)). The girls' selective grammar school sits opposite St Francis, which is the non-selective school. The girls identify themselves as non-academic because unlike the girls at the school opposite, they did not pass the entry test. In this research the girls also talked about how they formed their identity by challenging rather than conforming to constructs of girlhood. From the field diary:

Kate (talking to Bea about her head girl application): When you are HEAD girl you will be the best girl in the whole entire school and you will have the best hair, just like that ... [As she is talking, Kate finishes a picture she has been drawing on the white board of a girl with straight hair, very long legs and eyes with long eyelashes and they all start laughing.] I check, and Bea is laughing too, she talks a lot about her hair and the way it does not behave and never does what other people's hair does, and sometimes she says that bothers her but other times it makes her feel different, and that is a good thing.

Field notes show the girls understood how girlhood formed their identity by referring to their belief that they were not the 'expected' girls who usually became prefects:

Bea: There are plenty of other students in our year that are like really well behaved but they're not prefects. And that's even though they're even more well-behaved than me. People are usually surprised I am a prefect. (Field notes, November 2019)

When Bea recorded her video application for head girl, she also chose to focus on this difference too:

Bea: Most head girls are not usually like me, they are usually intelligent, goody two shoes, but I'm not really like that, I'm not the brightest person you'll ever meet but I am friendly, and I care about other people's opinions, and I like working with them. That's about it really. And it would be good on my CV. So, I might not get any GCSEs, but it'll have head girl on it.

The notion of not conforming, however, put the girls in a position of less power among their peers in the prefect group and the rest of the students. During one incident at a prefect meeting, the other prefect girls (who were described by my participants as 'girlie girls') and the prefect boys teamed up to ostracise Bea and the girls in my study. Etta commented on this saying "it's because we stand up to them". Rejecting the feminine codes at school had its impact and led to the girls in my study becoming outsiders within the prefect structure. Bea also used the notion of being caring as a counter to the fact she was not clever. This notion of using care for identity forming resonates with Skeggs' (2002) work. Her study of the identity of working-class women showed how they perceived they were different from middle-class women, because they cared for their children at home.

### *Girls are expected to take on caring duties in and outside school*

The roles and duties of school staff at St Francis are gendered. The senior leadership team, school governance and teachers with leadership responsibilities are male. House leaders, teaching assistants and support staff in pastoral and domestic roles are female. This is replicated in the prefect group: most of the girls in the group are responsible for reading to the primary school children next door, and the girls in my group were caring for older people. The boys took responsibility for monitoring the door duty rota. The more I got to know the girls and their lives outside school, I learnt that they

all had other daily responsibilities and caring duties. This included babysitting and looking after elderly neighbours. Etta could never meet after school as she picked up younger siblings every day and had to drop them home. Bea and Kate looked after a neighbour's elderly father and children, while Verity also looked after her niece and nephew after school. However, this was not seen by the girls as volunteering. They saw these as acts of 'helping' rather than voluntary action, while domestic chores such as babysitting and caring for grandparents often fall to girls. Research describes how boys may be asked to sort out the bins or wash the car, which conforms to gendered stereotypes (Brannen, 1995).

## Discussion

This article has focused on how girls were coerced into volunteering as part of the DoFE and their prefect duties at their secondary school. The findings from the field diary also suggest a gendered dimension to the way they were recruited, incentivised and rewarded. The study has shown how the volunteering programme became part of the gendered structures and systems within the school. The study raises interesting questions for both schools and voluntary sector partnerships, highlighting the implicit ways in which gender inequality can be inherent in the way students experience volunteering programmes.

At St Francis, young people did not voluntarily sign up to volunteering opportunities. There was not much work done at a leadership level to understand why young people did not want to be involved. Bea, however, when asked about the low numbers, referred to masculine stereotypes as the reason for the low number of boys participating. She and Etta suggested that peer pressure was the key driver among the boys at St Francis. From the field diary:

Bea: I think boys have a pressure to think about the way something looks ...

Etta: There is a boy stereotype – there are boys in our school who are like chavvy ... idiots ... and that's being polite, and I think they might feel pressured that they might get laughed at ...

This links to research by Davies (2018) who suggests that the barriers to boys' participation is not only gendered but also classed, with volunteering portrayed as an uncool activity that shows weakness, which is significant for working-class boys and their identity. Gender relations at St Francis are set not only by the school structures, but also by the relationship Mr D has with the girls and the boys. The relationship between Mr D and the girls is similar to his relationship with his female team of house leads. This relationship rests on the construct of himself as 'the self-confessed hopeless' and disorganised man. Just as he refers to 'his team of ladies as his saviours', he often jokes that the girls look after him too. The way Mr D flatters the girls about the way they look after him is one way in which he encourages them to continue volunteering and complete school duties, by invoking their sense of empathy.

The way the girls were coerced through empathy and care also supports Gilligan's theory of how gendered differences exist in moral reasoning and the way this can impact girls' sense of power and agency. The girls' main motivation for remaining with the DoFE and completing other tasks was their duty to Mr D. Their worries and

concerns were that giving up would be letting him and the school down. As the field notes report different motivations for the boys, based on rewards and incentives, this study reveals how girls and boys in the prefect group had different levels of agency and power at school. Despite both boys and girls having a close relationship with Mr D, his relationship with the boys was different and involved giving them more access to decision making, leadership and recognition. The girls' sense of empathy and care, as Gilligan (2002) describes, ensured they were left with less power and knowledge and felt less able to use their position as prefect to lead. This lack of agency also linked to the way the girls felt like outsiders among the prefect group, and the school.

Openly alluding to the kinds of feminine codes and constructs of girlhood described by Harris et al (2004), the girls in my study constructed their identity outside the categories of girlhood, but this left them feeling different and uncompliant. They had drifted together because they felt like they did not fit into any of the other cliques within the school structure. In one particular scene in the field notes the girls and boys argued fiercely about the colour of the leavers' jumpers and the best way to decide. Reeling from the argument, the girls were upset and doubted their actions. Bea, who had been told to lead the meeting by Mr D, seemed confused by how the boys and the other girls had confronted her.

Supporting theories about the crisis of girlhood, the sense of disorientation the girls felt after speaking their minds and being involved in the argument showed the complexities of modern feminism. The narrative that girls can be strong-willed and determined is flawed when placed within a context where socialised identities of masculine and feminine are very much at play. Despite the girls in my study being told they should take decision-making roles, in reality, this was not received well by their peers, which left them in an uncomfortable place. In truth as well, while the girls in my study often stated they believed in equal rights, on other occasions they stated that "they would rather be told than lead". This fits with research within schools, which has shown that generally the student population are more comfortable with boys in leadership positions (Archard, 2013).

Just as Taylor (2004) describes how formal concepts of work, labour and volunteering have devalued informal work such as childcare and domestic chores, the girls also alluded to differences in formalised volunteering and everyday helping, with the latter positioned as less important. At the beginning of my study, the girls stated that they had never volunteered, and it was only after getting to know them that I understood how much they were involved in what they described as helping and duties. Informal volunteering or the invisible work of women and girls is devalued across the world. Many research studies have shown how informal volunteering is gendered, and women and girls are much more likely to be participating in these types of activities, without recognition (Martinez et al, 2011). As with the coercions of teachers and school structures, girls' participation in informal volunteering is done not through choice, but through obligation and duty, enforced by family and community. The girls in my research study all chose to volunteer at a care home and this is noteworthy as the boys chose more physical tasks such as community clean-ups and school renovations. Without recognising it, the girls made a choice that, again, was gendered and often seen as the responsibility and natural duty of women.

The girls were also exposed to sexism during their volunteering, although they never commented on or challenged it. Each week the residents would assess the clothes the girls wore and the length of their skirts, as well as choosing who was prettiest



and asking them when they would have children. Bates (2015) has talked about how women and girls are expected to accept everyday sexism as a part of life and certainly the girls never complained about it during my observations. It is interesting that on the one occasion Mr D went to the care home, he was very uncomfortable in the setting. He still encouraged the girls to go along after that, in fact once telling them that St Francis students keep their commitments, however he refused to go again as he said it was depressing and he did not like the way the women talked to him. This example shows sexism within volunteering, which is something not considered by the volunteering organisation when they set the volunteering task.

## Conclusion

This article contributes to knowledge about the way girls and boys experience volunteering in a school context. First, it builds on existing literature suggesting that through different policy agendas or through aims to expand the reach of volunteering, young people are increasingly mandated to volunteer and incentivised in ways that rest on individualism and gain. The article shows that coercion can come through the power and value systems of the school, where obligation can come from a duty to the school. The data from this ethnography also suggest negative impacts of involving young people in those ways and how coercion undermines more altruistic reasons for volunteering.

Next, the article has shown gendered dimensions to school-based volunteering. These are around recruitment, participation and rewards. In this study these gendered dimensions built on the existing systems and structures of the school. The implicit gendered practices and means of control in the school were reproduced within the volunteering programme. Evidence in this study builds on gendered constructs around masculine and feminine duties that are seen in volunteering. Finally, this study reinforces how important these school and volunteering experiences are for the development of the identity of girls and how experiences of volunteering can change the girls' perceptions of the world and their place in it.

It is important to remember that this is only a single school study, and the lack of comparison is a limitation. The study is taken from a particular UK context and therefore the findings cannot be transferred to all school experiences of prefect systems and volunteering. The DofE programme is a long-running one, which is often reported as transforming lives and experiences. This study is not suggesting that every DofE volunteering experience becomes embedded in school power structures and practices. The field diary presents very personalised examples of events unique only to St Francis, with its own sociocultural norms that create the school's character and shape the student experience. The participant group was predominately White and the study focused on their lived experiences in their particular context.

Nevertheless, the study is useful in the ways it shows how gendered inequalities can be hidden and embedded and can be useful for thinking about other cases of how race, ethnicity and class can play a role in the volunteering experiences of young people. Learning from this study suggests that voluntary sector practitioners and educationalists could use their work with young people to challenge gender inequalities, to recognise and understand where structural inequalities come from. Policy makers and practitioners, by pursuing a way of working with young people that debates, discusses and challenges the inequalities of society, could ensure that

education and volunteering play a role in helping the next generation fight societal class, race and gender bias. Inequalities of class and gender can only be solved by collective acts of exposing and dismantling the structures, and this involves recognising the societal gendered norms that maintain structures and relations.

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### Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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