'You have to let them do it themselves' : analyzing professional support in a befriending project

‘You have to let them do it themselves’: Analysing professional support in a befriending project

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Introduction

In many Western welfare states, public and non-profit service organisations are increasingly looking for ways to combine the efforts and expertise of professionals and volunteers to provide support and services to vulnerable target groups (Wilson, 2012). The efforts and expertise of volunteers – defined as people who provide services to others in their spare time without receiving payment, in a formal or informal organisation (Hustinx et al., 2010) – are often seen as complementing the efforts and expertise of professionals (Dahlberg, 2006).

In everyday practice, the complementary role of volunteers working in collaboration with professionals is often challenged and put under pressure. Studies show that there is no clear division of tasks between volunteers and professionals. The boundaries between professionals and volunteers are often the result of a negotiation process in which the professionals use their status to demarcate their professional domain (Van Bochove et al., 2018; Verhoeven & Van Bochove, 2018). Additionally, studies emphasise the need for professionals to provide tailor-made support to volunteers, since the latter often experience many challenges in providing support to and addressing the needs of vulnerable target groups (Singh et al., 2019). Other studies report cases where volunteers take the place of professionals (Trappenburg & Van Beek, 2019; Skinner et al., 2019), resulting in a lack of professional support, which may lead to high volunteer turnover rates (e.g. Nelson et al., 2004). These studies provide evidence on the value and challenges of collaboration between volunteers and professionals. However, to our knowledge the literature fails to specifically focus on how professionals might provide added value to the efforts of volunteers.

The aim of this qualitative study is thus to analyse how professionals provide tailor-made support to volunteers who are confronted with challenges and difficulties when connecting with and supporting people in a vulnerable position. In particular, we focus on social assistance for people who have recently left prison. As the relationship between volunteers and professionals is an important mechanism through which social services are delivered, the importance of analysing this relationship in daily practice should not be underestimated (Dahlberg, 2006; Tomczak & Buck, 2019). The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, as stated earlier, previous studies on volunteer-professional collaboration only focus on challenges and tensions that volunteers and professionals experience while jointly providing support to vulnerable target groups (Trappenburg & Van Beek, 2019; Skinner et al., 2019). In this paper, we provide evidence on how professionals can overcome these tensions and how they tailor their role according to the specific needs of volunteers and clients. Additionally, our findings contribute to studies raising concerns about the extent to which the inclusion of volunteers in social work practice results in 'de-professionalisation' of professionals, when volunteers fulfil tasks that

belong to the professional domain of the social worker (Trappenburg & Van Beek, 2019; Skinner et al., 2019). In contrast, our findings seem to support the claim of Bochove et al. (2018), that professionals change their role and also professionalise the way they support both clients and volunteers. We more specifically identify 5 roles which professionals can adopt while supporting volunteers providing services and support to groups in vulnerable positions.

Voluntary and professional work

Collaboration between volunteers and professionals is often seen as complementary. (Skinner et al., 2019; Dahlberg, 2005; 2006), which implies that volunteers and professionals are responsible for different tasks and services. It has been found that volunteers are employed because of their specific expertise, proximity, capacity to build trust, or precisely because they are able to fulfil tasks or offer different kinds of services than professional workers (Dahlberg, 2005). By combining the strengths and resources of voluntary and professional efforts, services are more responsive to the needs of vulnerable target groups and this will enhance their well-being (Van Bochove et al., 2018; Dahlberg, 2005).

However, many studies provide a more critical account of the collaboration between volunteers and professionals (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Trappenburg & Van Beek, 2019). Some report conflicts and difficulties in such collaborations. These conflicts may arise due to concerns about being replaced (Trappenburg & Van Beek, 2019), with professionals feeling threatened when volunteers enter their professional domain. The division of the tasks and roles between professionals and volunteers is continuously negotiated in their everyday interaction and is highly dependent on the particular context, which may concern factors such as the difficulty of the tasks of volunteers, the complexity of the problems experienced by the target group, and/or working conditions (Van Bochove et al., 2018). Van Bochove et al. (2018), for example, showed that due to work pressure and stress, professionals welcomed volunteers into their professional domain to fulfil certain tasks and functions. This welcoming is based on them being perceived by the professionals as having important knowledge, skills and certain types of expertise.

Furthermore, despite the unique and added value of volunteers, professional support and interventions are seen as necessary, especially when volunteers are responsible for complex tasks and challenges (Verhoeven & Van Bochove, 2018; Metz et al., 2017). In practices where volunteers provide support to vulnerable target groups alongside the efforts of professionals, the latter must redefine and adapt their role according to the specific needs of both client and volunteer to provide the appropriate responsive services and support (Van Bochove et al., 2018). Professionals are responsible for new tasks, such as recruiting, selecting, training and coaching volunteers (McGonigle, 2002; Verhoeven &

Van Bochove, 2018). Providing ongoing training, support and follow-up is essential to retain volunteers and to maintain the connection between the organisation, the client and the volunteer (Behnia, 2007). This literature illustrates the complex and dynamic relationship between volunteers and professionals and emphasises the coordinating role of the professional. However, it does not examine how professionals might support volunteers in their challenging encounters with vulnerable target groups.

Case study: voluntary work in buddy projects in the criminal justice context

In befriending programmes, people without adequate support systems are matched with volunteers who offer support and companionship for a predefined period (Behnia, 2007). Befriending means that buddy and client have a relationship that resembles a friendship, with face-to-face or telephone contact (McGowan et al., 2009). In addition, befriending takes place through an organised intervention, with the selection, training, matching, support and follow-up of the buddy volunteer taking place within the organisation. Moreover, the buddy relationship involves the negotiation of power between the professional, the buddy and the client. This negotiation of power and agency is related to the moments and frequency of contact between the buddy and the client, the duration of the intervention and the nature of the relationship. Such decisions are necessary to build a relationship of trust (McGowan et al., 2009). Both in the literature and in practice, the concepts of befriending and mentoring are often used interchangeably. Befriending is focused on social relationships, emotional and social support and companionship, while mentoring is more goal-oriented and focused on achieving predetermined goals (Balaam, 2014; McGowan et al., 2009).

Volunteers and voluntary organisations have a longstanding tradition of supporting people and their families dealing with the criminal justice system (Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2016; Abrams et al., 2016). In Belgium, as in other Western countries, the work of volunteers in charitable and philanthropic organisations preceded the professionalisation of social work (Meyvis et al., 2012). During the expansion of the welfare state and the professionalisation of practices for this target group, the position of volunteers changed, from pioneers to more of an additional role with regard to criminal justice services. However, recent literature indicates an increase in volunteers and voluntary organisations working with people dealing with the criminal justice system (Tewksbury & Dabney, 2004; Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2016; Helminen, 2016). At present, voluntary work in and on the periphery of criminal justice is diverse in scale, organisation, method, goals and tasks (Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2016; Tomczak & Buck, 2019).

This paper sheds light on how professionals collaborate with volunteers in this context to provide help to people leaving prison. Hucklesby and Wincup (2014) state that volunteers can support the reintegration process if they are adequately recruited, trained and supported. Nevertheless, despite

the capacity and skills of volunteers, Schinkel and Whyte (2012) found that voluntary support should always be combined with professional support, especially when volunteers have little work experience. More specifically, Singh et al. (2019) found that professionals play an important role when mentors of adults in the criminal justice system are unable to provide the assistance or support needed. Mentors rely on programme staff members for guidance and expertise, as they are not sufficiently knowledgeable or well placed to resolve some of the practical issues of clients (Singh et al., 2019). Furthermore, Hucklesby and Wincup (2014) demonstrated that paid workers can also intervene by providing unplanned and pragmatic solutions to specific problems.

These studies indicate the need for professional support in combination with voluntary efforts. Furthermore, volunteers were found to experience difficulties and challenges specific to working in the criminal justice system, often being confronted with traumatising stories and situations (Tomczak & Quinn, 2020). Therefore, it has frequently been argued that supervision provided by professionals is essential to protect volunteer well-being and ensure they have the appropriate training (Tomczak & Quinn, 2020).

Given the above-mentioned importance of professional support and collaboration, in this paper, we investigate: (1) How professionals and volunteers collaborate in a specific befriending programme; and (2) The situations in which professionals intervene in the volunteer's relationship with the client or other professionals.

Study site and context: the case of *Brug Binnen Buiten*

In recent years, welfare policy in Flanders has embraced the notion of '*vermaatschappelijking van de zorg*', which means that care and support are considered a responsibility not only of professionals and paid staff, but also of informal networks and unpaid volunteers. As a result of this shift in welfare policy, volunteers are becoming more prominent in the provision of care to people in vulnerable positions. Buddy programmes have been developed by (local) policy makers, public and non-profit service organisations to provide support and services to a variety of target groups, such as people in poverty, children with a migrant background, people in an asylum procedure etc. (Van Robaeys & Lyssens-Denneboom, 2018). This paper analyses a buddy befriending programme which uses volunteers to support people who have recently left prison. The project is located in Antwerp and Turnhout, two cities in Flanders, which is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium.

The current project, called *Brug Binnen Buiten* (Bridge Inside Outside), is an initiative of the Judicial Welfare Work (*Justitieel Welzijnswerk*). The Judicial Welfare Work is financed by the Flemish government and provides generalist social support to people in prison. This generalist approach to

social work entails social workers addressing all of the problems and needs of their target group (Blom, 2004).

Within the *Brug Binnen Buiten* project, social workers match volunteer-buddies with people who have recently left prison. This project started in 2016 and is (partly) financed by a philanthropic organisation. The overall aim of the project is to find qualitative solutions to the needs of people who have recently left prison as well as to facilitate and support the reintegration process into society. Volunteers are selected on the basis of their willingness to support people leaving prison. They receive training for two days, in which they are introduced to the prison, the needs of people leaving prison, and the barriers to reintegration, as well as learning some basic conversation skills. The training does not involve information about social benefits, organisations, regulations etc. This is an explicit choice as the *Brug Binnen Buiten* project does not want to train experts but aims to prepare buddies to emotionally support the target group instead. Buddies do not provide expert information, but are expected to build an equal relationship with the client. The volunteer acts as a buddy, a kind of friend, a helpline or a motivator (Van Dam & Raeymaeckers, 2017). The tasks of the volunteers include offering a 'listening ear', supporting people, taking care of practical issues, accompanying clients to services and attempting to reinforce their autonomy. Each volunteer supports only one person at a time. The social worker matches the volunteer and the client. The matching process is based on the needs of the client and the capabilities of the volunteer. For example, some people need a buddy as somebody to talk to. In these cases, the social worker makes a match with a volunteer who likes to support and listen to others. When people ask for someone to support them with administrative issues, the social worker matches them with a volunteer who indicated that he or she likes to provide this kind of support. After the first contact between the client and the volunteer, the social worker remains available in the 'back office', supporting the volunteers in their tasks. Volunteers are supported in group supervision meetings that are organised on a monthly basis. The group supervision enables volunteers and professionals to discuss issues they are confronted with. It is a moment of reflection and learning at the same time. Next, the professional provides intense individual support to each volunteer. Through the group supervision combined with individual supervision, the social workers are closely involved and support the volunteers in guiding the client.

The 'Brug Binnen Buiten' case is characterised by intense collaboration between the professional social workers and the volunteers. Since little is known about professional-volunteer collaborations (Tomczak & Buck, 2019), this case thus allows us to provide an in-depth account of how professionals provide tailor-made support to volunteers.

Method

Selection of respondents

We included a variety of respondents, based on education, gender, professional background and experience. The first author contacted keypersons (the project manager and the coordinator of the Judicial Welfare Work). The first meeting with those keypersons was used to gather information on the project, how it works, the number of clients and volunteers etc. This meeting provided descriptive insights into the project. The researcher received a list of volunteers from the project manager and selected volunteers who had at least two months of experience volunteering in the project. At the time of data collection, 25 volunteers were involved in the project in Antwerp, and 15 potential respondents were selected based on the above-mentioned criteria. We did not select a volunteer in Turnhout as the project had just started there. Ultimately, 13 volunteers were willing to participate in our research. In a second phase, all four professional social workers involved in the project were interviewed.

Respondents

Table 1 presents more details about the volunteer respondents. Their average age was 41.3 (from a range of 21 to 71) and their average experience in the project was 18.8 months. In total, the volunteers interviewed supported 31 people within this project.

Table 1. Details on research participants (volunteers)

Table 2 presents more details about the professional social work respondents (respondents 14-17). Their average age was 42.5 (from a range of 31 to 54). Three of them had between 5 and 11 years of experience in working with this target group.

Table 2. Details on research participants (social workers)

Data collection

Before the data collection period, COVID-19 started to spread across the world. The COVID-19 pandemic made face-to-face interviews impossible. We therefore used video calls through Skype or Teams. During the first contact by telephone, the researcher stressed the independence and the confidentiality of the research project. Respondents were asked whether they were able to conduct an interview by video call. If they felt uncomfortable with this, a telephone interview was proposed as an alternative. None of the respondents felt the need to do the interview by phone. The researcher and the respondent then made an appointment for the interview. In this way, both researcher and interviewee could choose an appropriate moment to avoid one possible disadvantage of a video call –

the potential for disturbances during the interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). The researcher also asked permission to record the interview and informed consent was sent by email.

The interviews were conducted by the first author, in Dutch, between April and November 2020. Those with the volunteers had an average duration of 68.6 minutes (45 min–1 hr 52 min). The interviews with the professional social workers had an average duration of 96 minutes (85 min–2 hr). A semi-structured interview schedule was used, which enabled the researcher to explore additional issues mentioned by the respondent. In general, three topics were discussed: (a) information about the respondents (age and profession); (b) the task of the volunteer and the professional in the project (the division of tasks and changes during the trajectory with a client); (c) the collaboration between the professional and the volunteer (types of support and complex situations).

Analysis of the interviews

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were anonymised and the interviews were analysed using NVivo. All audio-files were deleted after the analysis. The transcripts were first read to explore the data. In a second step we started with an open-coding method. During this coding phase we analysed the transcripts line by line according to themes derived from the research questions, while also leaving the possibility for additional themes to emerge. The initial data analysis was inductive. A thematic analysis was performed to identify the main themes, and the data were reduced by labelling the transcripts with codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Subsequent analyses were directed by themes from the literature about collaboration and previous research about collaboration between volunteers and professionals. Rather than using preconceived categories or concepts, we used a sensitising-concept approach (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006). 'A sensitizing concept gives a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look' (Blumer, 1954, p. 148). Three major themes were identified in the data: (i) emotional support, (ii) support through information, coaching and advice, (iii) interventions of the professional in contacting the client or other professionals. A member check meeting with the project steering group (consisting of key professionals and researchers) enabled us to review and refine our interpretations.

Research Ethics

This study was conducted as a research project at the University of Antwerp and meets the standards of this institution's ethical guidelines. Approval for this research project was obtained from the independent Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities, installed by the Executive Board of the UAntwerp (SHW_21_111).

Results

In the following section, the findings are presented according to the main themes that emerged from the data.

'You have to let them do it themselves'

The volunteer was not expected to act as an expert or practitioner. The volunteer acted as a true companion who searched for solutions to problems and needs in close collaboration with the client. Furthermore, the volunteers worked quite independently and had freedom to support the client in the way they thought suitable. The professional social workers remained available in the 'back office' and played a supporting role for the volunteers. However, social workers sometimes found it challenging not to become overly involved in guiding the volunteer or intervening too often.

> *I am also always concerned about the client, concerned that they are not getting what they need. Of course that's because of my background as a social worker. I know that X (colleague social worker) sometimes struggles with that too. That you sometimes think: 'Come on just do it like this or like that', but you have to let them (the volunteers) do it themselves as long as possible. Letting them run into their own walls and the things they bump into. I don't find that easy...* (Professional – Resp. 16).

We found that the social workers experienced tension between, on the one hand, taking a more active role as a professional in a direct relationship with the client and prioritising the latter's needs and, on the other hand, supporting the volunteer in their personal growth and helping them to cope with the many challenges they experienced. More specifically, our results showed that professionals may deal with this tension by adopting several roles, to provide tailor-made support to the volunteers. We distinguished between emotional support, providing information, coaching, contact with the client in complex and difficult situations and contact with other professionals.

1. Professionals provide emotional support to volunteers

A recurring theme across all volunteers was the lack of experience in working with people who had recently left prison. Many of the volunteers interviewed stated that they were confronted with distressing and unjust situations for the first time in their life. They had no experience in working with this target group and had doubts about their approach, their actions and the relationship with the client or with other professionals. These experiences evoked many feelings, often mixed. The volunteers emphasised the importance of having a professional social worker who could provide emotional support. Specifically, they mentioned that the professionals provided a listening ear, were approachable and were interested in the client's situation.

I didn't really ask anything, but I talked a lot with X (professional social worker). For me, that first man I supported, well it was very emotional to see what it means to fight against a system and how powerless you can be. (Volunteer – Resp. 6)

The volunteers are often faced with emotionally stressful situations due to the life situations of many clients, the clients' lack of apparent prospects, and a variety of other problems. Having someone to share their feelings with makes volunteers feel they are not alone in dealing with these situations.

2. Professionals provide information to volunteers

The social workers share their professional knowledge and expertise and provide additional tailor-made information to help volunteers tackle the many questions and problems faced by the client. This enables the client and the volunteer to develop a trusting relationship, makes volunteers feel more confident and increases the chances of making progress in some life domains of the clients.

With respect to providing help and support, volunteers reflected on the fact that they were confronted with a variety of social problems and specific questions about receiving benefits, housing problems, addiction, unemployment and criminal justice interventions. The volunteers often felt that they lacked the appropriate knowledge to support the client in dealing with these issues.

When I have specific questions, because you know, a whole new world has really opened for me and still, it really is a tangle to find my way. Due to the fact that I am not working in it day in day out, many things are completely new to me, so sometimes I need help from the social worker to find my way. (Volunteer – Resp. 9)

In this respect, the professional social workers can provide specific information to the volunteers to help them find the appropriate services, or understand the legislation or procedures that must be followed, for example when they want to apply for benefits. Furthermore, the social worker provides information about complex issues, such as addiction or mental health issues.

Professional expertise and knowledge are not only important to support the volunteer but also to realise the rights of the client. Volunteers (and clients) often have limited knowledge of all the rights and entitlements of clients. For example, a volunteer may support the client in applying for one specific benefit but have no knowledge of other benefits available. In discussing these issues with the professional, the latter can broaden their awareness of the client's rights.

'Well, he needs money, so he has to apply for a living wage, is that enough?' Often we then say: 'Yes, but make sure to ask for a reference address or a rental deposit as well'. In that way, we give some extra information about possibilities for the client. (Professional – Resp. 15)

This finding indicates that by sharing their knowledge, the professional social worker helps the volunteer to go a step further than addressing the initial question of the client. In this way, the professional ensures that the volunteer and the client are better informed about the client's entitlements and how to obtain them.

3. A coaching role

The volunteers stated that they could rely on the professional to 'think things through' at times when they did not really know how to handle a situation. The professionals not only provided useful information to the volunteers but acted as coaches. In this case, coaching entailed giving advice and stimulating reflection through mirroring. First, advice was given about which actions volunteers should or should not undertake. The difference between this and providing information is that 'advice' refers to specific actions or the attitude of the volunteer. The professionals provided concrete guidelines with regard to the actions and attitude of the volunteer concerning, for example, the behaviour of the client, the variety of social problems, and collaboration with another organisation.

> *He called me so often on Facebook that I thought something was really wrong. When I called him back it turned out that he just wanted to have a chat. So, then I discussed it with the social worker: How I could limit that without pushing him away? So, she gave me some tips and after that I did tell him that it was too much, at first a bit in a funny way and then we had a nice conversation about what I prepared with the social worker. And it has been much better since then*. (Volunteer – Resp. 10)

The professional social workers pointed out that they often advised their volunteers about the appropriate level of proximity in their relationship with the client. Sometimes, the professionals considered that the volunteer was getting either too emotionally involved or remaining too distant. In other cases, the professionals found that the volunteers could sometimes be too passive or take things over in a paternalistic way.

> *Sometimes they tell you something that you think, oh no, that's not really the way we work. For example, a volunteer told me that he (the volunteer) had been looking for apartments [for the client] at home. Yes, then we say, 'Why are you looking for apartments at home by yourself, why don't you do that together*?' (Professional – Resp. 15)

This shows that professional advice to the volunteer can help them to develop a more balanced relationship; in this case, instead of doing the work himself (searching for an apartment) without any

involvement of the client, the volunteer is encouraged to focus more on guidance in doing the work together.

Second, all of the professionals indicated that if the actions of the volunteer are not in line with the mission of the project, the social worker introduces mirroring. In these situations, the professional helps the volunteer to critically reflect on his or her approach (Esposito et al., 2017).

> *Sometimes someone has to understand why his interventions are not strengthening for the client. You can advise, but if you notice it systematically recurs, giving advice may not be enough. Then you have to ask why are you doing such a thing, why are you taking it out of the hands of the client?'* (Professional – Resp. 14)

Professionals will thus coach the volunteers to ensure that their approach is in accordance with the mission of the project, that it is strength-oriented, with a tailor-made approach for each client, respecting the pace of the client, persistent and goal-oriented. In daily practice, adhering to these values is challenging for many volunteers.

> *The social worker advised me to… well, you know, I would do everything at once, but I've noticed that for this group it often has to be step by step. So, first this and when that is finished think about the next. Otherwise, it is too much at once and that's too overwhelming. So, I thought that was a good tip, because in my personal life I find it difficult if things aren't immediately sorted out*. (Volunteer – Resp. 11)

4. Professionals support the client in complex and difficult situations

In order to enable the volunteer and client to build up a relationship of trust, the professional will generally have no contact with the client after the matching phase. However, our interviews showed that the social worker may have contact with the client if the relationship between client and volunteer is defined as 'difficult'. This occurs when the client does not respond to the volunteer, or if the volunteer and the client have different expectations. At these times, a meeting between the volunteer, the social worker and the client is arranged.

> *It is usually a signal from the volunteer, who says 'I can't get any further here.' And then it does help to sit down with the three of us. Then, you can ask the client, 'What do you really need?'* (Professional – Resp. 14)

Furthermore, sometimes the client might ask the volunteer for support in undertaking a task with which the volunteer is not sure how to proceed, for example in preparing and attending an important meeting with another organisation. In such cases, the volunteer might discuss their concerns with the

professional, who can then attend a preparatory conversation between the client and the volunteer to reassure them both.

5. Professionals contact other professionals

In some specific situations, the professional contacts other organisations or professionals for a variety of reasons. First, the professional may intervene in situations defined as 'complex cases' or 'difficult cases'. Those situations occur when the volunteer finds the complexity of the problems faced by their client too difficult. For example, handling a complex and time-consuming social administration task can ask too much from a volunteer. In addition to the practical burden, the situation people live in can place an emotional burden on the volunteer. When the volunteer indicates this, the social worker takes over from the volunteer.

> *The volunteer told me it was a bit too much. The situation of the client was very poignant. He was sitting there without food. I just went to buy bread for him because I felt so sorry for him. That was already very emotional for me, and it was such a multi-problem situation that I think, how could a volunteer do this? That just won't work, that's irresponsible*. (Professional – Resp. 15)

Second, there are cases where clients face a variety of problems in several life domains and have contact with several social services. Due to this complexity, both professionals and volunteers agree that professional social workers should take over.

Third, we found that professionals have networks with other professionals, which makes access to certain social services more straightforward.

> *At the night shelter, to get a bed for the night for him. Well, when I called, I'm someone calling on behalf of someone else. But if she [the social worker] calls, she knows the person on the other end of the line and that goes more smoothly of course.* (Volunteer – Resp. 5)

Thus, in some circumstances, the status of the professional and the fact that they often have a broader network with other professionals and organisations allows them greater ease of access to services and to realise the rights of the client.

In addition to their professional status and network, the results show that their combined knowledge of legislation and procedures, professional jargon, arguments, assertiveness and experience makes social workers more resolute in obtaining access to certain services and in realising rights.

> *Often a social worker from the Public Centre for Welfare (OCMW) doesn't want to give a reference address. Then, I sometimes have to explain how the legislation is for people who have*

> *left prison, because they don't know. Or I say, 'Yes, but that's a right and I want you to propose that to the council and this is my reason'. You can't expect that from a volunteer, can you? That they know the whole legislation around it and are assertive enough to protest against the social worker and say, 'I want that anyway'.* (Professional – Resp. 14)

Arguing against the decision of another social worker is challenging for a volunteer. In these cases, we found that the professional social workers can better advocate to realise the rights of the client. For these complex cases, professional interventions make a difference because of their specific knowledge of legislation and regulations, their use of their professional network or status, their knowledge of jargon, their experience and their knowledge of the criminal justice system, all of which inform their assertiveness.

Finally, the social workers pointed out that they intervene when it becomes apparent that several volunteers and clients are experiencing the same type of problems. In these cases, professionals engage in advocacy strategies and contact other agencies or policymakers to discuss the problems experienced by the volunteers and clients.

> *Frequently volunteers said, 'We cannot connect with the Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB)'. I had the impression that we could do more for our clients if we had a contact person there. So, now we have someone there, which is a great advantage. Normally, the procedure is that for the first 6 months there is only contact by telephone. If people, after that period, still have no work, they can get a counsellor. Now, our clients bypass those 6 months and get a supervisor from the VDAB immediately. That's very beneficial as it goes faster and is more efficient. A better service is provided for our clients. Furthermore, a permanent contact person, like X, also means that she knows our clients better. She knows the problems of people who have left prison, she knows the profiles. That makes it much easier.* (Professional – Resp. 15)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyse collaboration between volunteers and professionals in a befriending project. Despite the overwhelming number of studies emphasising the importance of professional support for volunteers who are themselves providing support and guidance to vulnerable target groups, we lack in-depth knowledge about how professionals can fulfil such a supportive and complementary role (Schinkel & Whyte, 2012; Tomczak & Buck, 2019).

The period following release from prison is challenging to rebuild life. Providing proactive and intensive support to clients in sorting out practical problems, escorting them to appointments and offering advice is important (Fox et al, 2002). As many professionals have heavy caseloads and limited time, a volunteer

buddy can be of tremendous importance for clients. Clients often value the relationship with volunteers as they are non-judgmental and accessible (Brown & Ross, 2008; Schinkel & Whyte, 2012). However, good knowledge of organizations and how to navigate ''the system'' is essential (Van Dooren, et al. 2021). Therefor we state an intensive collaboration between volunteers and professional social workers is essential". Our findings show that professionals play an important role in supporting both volunteers and clients. While the volunteers aim to engage in a supportive befriending relationship, they sometimes lacked the skills and expertise to cope with the complex challenges faced by their clients. More specifically, our study showed that professionals support volunteers in various ways. First, professionals provide emotional support to volunteers. This finding corresponds with earlier studies indicating that professional support is indispensable when volunteers find it difficult to deal with the complex life situation of many clients (Tomczak & Quinn, 2020). Second, professionals also provide volunteers with practical knowledge and information (Hucklesby & Wincup, 2014). By sharing this information, they ensure that the volunteer is aware, for example, of the rights of the client and how to obtain satisfaction of these. Third, the professional may act as a coach in giving advice or enabling the volunteer to reflect on his or her actions in supporting people. Fourth, the findings of this study show that professional social workers actively intervene in the relationship when the volunteer and client face situations defined as 'difficult' (Hucklesby & Wincup, 2014; Singh et al., 2019).

These findings confirm the assumption that tailor-made support by professionals is indispensable, as it ensures the sharing of professional knowledge, experience, connections and attitudes with the volunteers, which can lead to an improvement in the life situation and wellbeing of the clients and the realisation of their rights (Singh et al., 2019). However, professionals may also experience difficulties in allowing volunteers the freedom to work independently. They often struggle with feelings of responsibility and feel the need to take over or tell the volunteer how to handle the situation better in order to provide responsive services. This corresponds with earlier findings that social workers feel responsible for the care and welfare of clients whom they hand over to volunteers (Verhoeven & Van Bochove, 2018).

In complex situations, professionals need to recognise the importance of their role. Not every task lies within the capacity, skills and expertise of volunteers, even when they obtain advice, information or emotional support from the professionals (Singh et al., 2019). For example, when volunteers become aware that rights of the clients are being violated, they often do not feel in a position to take a stand and advocate for them. Professional intervention makes a difference because of the combination of the professionals' specific knowledge of legislation and regulations, their professional network or status and their knowledge of the criminal justice system. Furthermore, we found that it was essential for volunteers to flag up existing barriers to professional social workers. By doing so, social workers in

turn obtain the necessary information to advocate for structural change and collaboration between services and thus increased accessibility of services (Naessens & Raeymaeckers, 2020).

To conclude, our results provide a comprehensive perspective on how complementarity is constructed in the daily practice of collaboration between volunteers and professionals. Although professional interventions and support are necessary to address the needs of vulnerable people, volunteers may contribute to the provision of responsive support to fellow citizens in need, offering a wider range of support than professionals alone can provide (McGonigle, 2002). Consequently, close collaboration between volunteers and professionals can result in a valuable response to the needs of people who have recently left prison. However, our findings also indicate that when a client's situation becomes complex and volunteers lack the skills, experience or status to deal with it, professionals need to take over (Van Bochove et al., 2018). Our study confirms Van Bochove et al. (2016), emphasizing the ambivalent nature of professional-volunteer collaborations. We show that professional-volunteer collaboration does not always lead to a hollowing out of the professional role. On the contrary, our findings clearly indicate the importance of professionals in order to enable the volunteers to act as a true companion of the client. Furthermore, the professionals act as decision-makers when they decide which type of support can be expected from buddies and where the professional social worker should take over. This new role however comes with great responsibility. Next to building trust relationships with clients, professionals should also take into account the capacity and specific needs of the buddies and value their skills to act as a companion or buddy of the client.

This said, this study has some limitations. First, like all qualitative research, there are limitations to the generalisability of this study, which is mainly focused on one particular befriending project in the field of criminal justice. However, we argue that the findings are of value in gaining a deeper understanding of the role of volunteers and how they can best be supported in other contexts and types of services. We therefore recommend that further studies investigate the roles of professionals in other settings where volunteers provide support and guidance to vulnerable target groups. Second, this study did not include the perspective of the clients. Although gaining insights into the collaboration between volunteers and professionals is important, a client's perspective is also indispensable to a better analysis of the quality of the services provided. We agree with Quinn and Tomczak (2021) that volunteers and professionals have a shared responsibility, not only in the individual support of people but also in the critical reflection on how society deals with social problems such as crime, poverty and addiction. Volunteers may be important in dealing with many issues and may soften the consequences of criminal justice interventions. However, a narrow focus on the individual support of criminalised people often creates the pitfall that their social problems are merely managed and individualised and the systemic causes and responsibility of society are overlooked. Therefore, quality care and support

from both volunteers and professionals must be seen within a broader context, in which the central aim is the realisation of social justice.

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