

Development of Youth's Sustainable Social Volunteerism through Buddhist Integration

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Abstract

This study aimed to 1) study opinions regarding the promotion of volunteer behavior among students in schools under the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration; 2) analyze the sustainability of Bangkok Metropolitan Administration students regarding volunteering towards society according to the principles of Buddhist integration; and 3) propose strategies for the sustainable development of Bangkok Metropolitan Administration students regarding volunteering towards society based on this integrated approach. This mixed-methods research design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 364 Bangkok Metropolitan Administration students using a structured questionnaire. Qualitative insights were gathered through in-depth interviews with parents, teachers affiliated with Bangkok Metropolitan Administration schools, and experts in volunteer development and Buddhist principles. For quantitative data, descriptive statistics (percentage, mean, standard deviation) were used, and for qualitative data, content analysis was used. The research results were found as follows: 1) Overall perceptions of promoting volunteer behavior were high, with the highest-rated aspect being recognition of community benefits, followed by motivation for volunteering, social sacrifice, helping others, commitment to development, and community responsibility; 2) The integration of Buddhist principles, specifically the Four Divine States of Mind (Brahmavira) and the Four Bases of Social Solidarity (Sangahavatthu), was identified as a viable foundation for sustainable volunteerism. However, significant obstacles persist, including a lack of intrinsic motivation, a superficial understanding of volunteerism, and insufficient support systems, which collectively undermine sustainability; and 3) for long-term success, the promotion of student volunteerism should systematically embed Buddhist principles into both formal and extracurricular learning processes to foster an internalized

and enduring volunteer consciousness. The study concluded that embedding culturally resonant Buddhist ethics into educational practices is crucial for transforming volunteerism from a sporadic activity into a sustainable, intrinsic value among Thai youth, thereby contributing to a more socially responsible and resilient society.

Keywords: Youth's Sustainable Social Volunteerism; Sustainable Development; Buddhist Integration

Introduction

The 21st century has been defined by rapid technological advancement, which has fundamentally transformed global economic structures, social dynamics, and environmental realities. This paradigm shift has fostered unprecedented global awareness of environmental conservation and the moral imperatives required for sustainable coexistence (La-orsri et al., 2022). Within the Thai context, these global transformations intersect with persistent domestic political, economic, and social challenges. In response, Thai youth are increasingly asserting their role as catalysts for change, engaging in democratic processes and advocating for social reform through formal participatory mechanisms. This burgeoning civic engagement highlights the significant potential of young people to contribute to a more equitable and transparent society.

Despite this promising trajectory, Thailand faces substantial challenges in the moral development of its younger generation. Alarming statistics indicate that 13.66% of children and youth exhibit behavioral problems, while over 1.02 million have disengaged from the formal education system. These figures reveal critical vulnerabilities in the current approaches to moral education (Khaliji & Ghalehtemouri, 2025). Although participation in volunteer activities among Generation Z is rising, this engagement often remains episodic and lacks long-term sustainability, pointing to a pronounced disconnect between policy objectives and tangible behavioral outcomes.

A critical lacuna in these initiatives is the limited systematic integration of Buddhist moral principles, particularly the Sangahavattthu 4 (Phra Brahmagunabhorn P. A. Payutto, 2008). These ethical frameworks, deeply embedded in Thailand's cultural heritage, provide a robust foundation for cultivating prosocial conduct and collective responsibility (Khaliji & Ghalehtemouri, 2025). Notably, these principles resonate strongly with established psychological theories, including Piaget's cognitive development stages, Kohlberg's model of moral reasoning, and Bandura's social cognitive theory, all of which conceptualize behavior as arising from the dynamic interaction of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors (Reciprocal Determinism) (Shaw & Dolan, 2022).

The synergy between Buddhist ethics and these psychological frameworks offers a comprehensive foundation for experiential and model-based learning aimed at strengthening moral volunteerism.

Consequently, this study aims to develop an experiential learning approach grounded in Buddhist ethics, specifically the Sangahavatthu 4, to foster sustainable moral volunteer behaviors among Generation Z youth in Thailand. By embedding these culturally resonant ethical principles into practical learning experiences, this research seeks to contribute to the formation of socially responsible citizens, advance environmental stewardship, and support the development of a more resilient democratic society.

Research Objectives

1. To study the opinions regarding the promotion of volunteer behavior among students in schools under the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA).
2. To analyze the sustainability of youth volunteering towards society according to the principles of Buddhist integration.
3. To propose strategies for the sustainable development of youth volunteers based on the principles of Buddhist integration.

Literature Review

The Volunteer Spirit: A Conceptual Definition

The volunteer spirit is a prosocial disposition characterized by selfless action and a profound sense of interconnectedness. It manifests as the voluntary sacrifice of one's time, resources, physical energy, and intellect for the collective good. This state of mind is intrinsically motivated, finding deep satisfaction and a sense of purpose in altruistic acts that benefit others and society. Rooted in loving-kindness (*Metta*) and compassion (*Karuna*) (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University; 1996; Phra Brahmagunabhorn P.A. Payutto, 2008). it is performed with a heart of contentment and appreciation, which in turn fosters personal spiritual growth and a reduction of self-centeredness. Ultimately, it is a tranquil yet powerful force dedicated to cultivating a more just and peaceful society.

The core principles underpinning the volunteer spirit are as follows

1. Collective Consciousness: A commitment to the common good and public welfare.
2. Selfless Motivation: Action undertaken voluntarily without expectation of reciprocation or reward.

3. Personal Sacrifice: The willing contribution of one's time, effort, and abilities.
4. Civic Responsibility: A mindful and accountable attitude towards the community and public matters.
5. Ethical Foundation: Conduct guided by morality and empathetic compassion.

The Psychological Underpinnings of Volunteerism

Volunteerism emerges as a complex behavior shaped by an individual's personal development and a multitude of environmental influences, spanning familial, communal, and societal contexts. Its formation can be understood through several foundational psychological theories that illuminate the cognitive and moral development necessary for selfless action (Feng, 2025)

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory provides a fundamental framework through the concept of reciprocal determinism, positing that behavior is the product of a dynamic interplay between personal factors and the environment. This theory suggests that volunteerism is not merely a response to external stimuli but is also driven by internal cognitive processes. Key personal factors include an individual's capacity for analytical thought, value judgment, and moral reasoning. Through mechanisms of learning, observation, and self-reflection, individuals cultivate mental practices that shape their motivations, sense of self-worth, and ultimately, their decision to engage in volunteer activities.

Complementing this perspective, Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development outlines the structural prerequisites for a volunteer spirit. While not directly addressing volunteerism, Piaget's stages describe the evolving cognitive capacity for understanding and empathizing with others. Specifically, during the Concrete Operational Stage and culminating in the Formal Operational Stage, individuals develop the ability for abstract thought and logical reasoning. This cognitive maturation allows them to comprehend complex social needs and conceptualize ways to provide help, thereby laying the essential mental groundwork for altruistic behavior.

Further deepening the understanding of its motivational origins, Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development explains the progression of moral reasoning that underpins volunteer behaviors. According to this theory, individuals at higher stages of moral development are guided by an internalized sense of justice and a commitment to universal ethical principles. They can fairly consider the common good and adhere to social contracts—dispositions that are central to volunteerism. This advanced moral reasoning enables the self-sacrifice, empathy, and community-oriented action that define the volunteer spirit.

In synthesis, these theories collectively suggest that sustainable volunteerism arises at the intersection of developed cognitive abilities, advanced moral reasoning, and a supportive environment, all interacting to foster a commitment to the welfare of others.

Buddhist Ethical Frameworks for Sustainable Volunteerism

Buddhist ethics offer a culturally resonant and spiritually grounded approach to deepening the motivation for volunteerism. The Four Sublime States (Metta loving kindness, Karuna compassion, Mudita sympathetic joy, and Upekkha equanimity) transform volunteering from an externally driven activity into an internalized practice of compassion and equanimity. These states guide individuals to act selflessly, respond empathetically to suffering, and maintain emotional balance even in challenging circumstances. (Phra Brahmagunabhorn P.A. Payutto, 2008)

Complementing these virtues, the Threefold Training (Ti-sikkha) Sila (morality), Samadhi (concentration), and Panna (wisdom) provides a practical pathway for sustaining volunteer engagement. Sila establishes the ethical foundation necessary for responsible action, Samadhi fosters focus and emotional stability to prevent burnout, and Panna enables volunteers to discern the root causes of social problems and respond with insight rather than impulsivity (Buaphian et al., 2020). Additionally, the Sangahavattu 4 underscores the importance of harmonious relationships and mutual respect in community service

The Conceptual Foundation of Buddhist Integration

The term “Buddhist Integration” is a compound concept derived from “Buddhism” and “Integration.” Etymologically, “Buddha” signifies awakening or profound inner realization, which forms the core of Buddhism. While historically diversified into several schools—such as Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, all tracing their origins to the enlightenment of the Buddha—the predominant tradition in contemporary Thailand is Theravada Buddhism. The soteriological aim of Theravada is the ultimate liberation from suffering, or Nirvana, also conceptualized as Santi (peace) and Vimutti (freedom). This pinnacle of human development is pursued through a deliberate process of cultivation, known in Pali as Bhavana, meaning “to bring into being.” Thus, development in the Buddhist sense is the cultivation of personal qualities and external conditions conducive to attaining Nirvana.

In synthesis, Buddhist Integration can be understood as the conscious and systematic process of harmonizing Buddhist principles—such as its soteriological goals, ethical frameworks, and developmental practices (Bhavana)—with other domains of knowledge or activity, resulting in a coherent, functional, and transformative whole.

Conceptual Framework

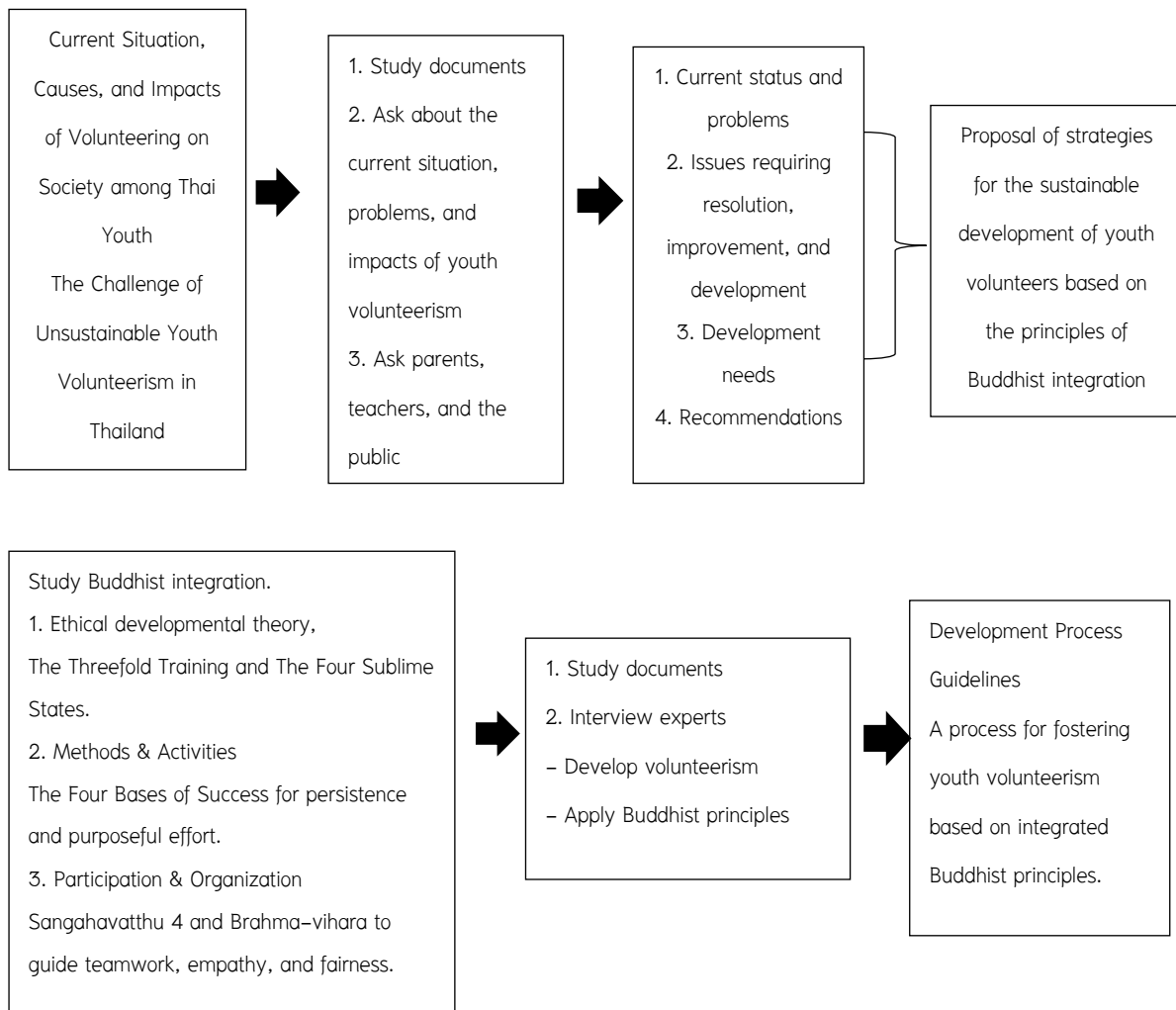


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to provide a comprehensive examination of the research problem. The quantitative approach was utilized to ascertain the breadth and general trends of perceptions regarding youth volunteerism, while the qualitative approach was employed to explore the underlying motivations, contextual factors, and nuanced insights in greater depth. The triangulation of data from these two sources enhances the validity and reliability of the findings, ensuring a robust understanding of Buddhist integration in youth volunteerism.

Population and Sample

The target population for the quantitative phase consisted of 4,013 high school students from three schools under the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration: Wat Suthiwararam School, Satri Srisuriyothai School, and Triam Udom Suksa Pattanakarn School (Yan Nawa). The sample size was determined using Taro Yamane's formula (1967) at a 5% margin of error, yielding a representative sample of 364 individuals.

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was used to select 10 key informants, comprising 3 school administrators, 2 students with extensive volunteer experience, 3 experts in Buddhist studies, and 2 parents. Additionally, a focus group discussion was conducted with 20 participants, including parents, teachers, and relevant faculty members, to gather diverse perspectives.

Research Instruments

1. Quantitative Instrument: A structured questionnaire was developed based on relevant concepts, theories, and literature. The instrument consisted of two parts: (1) demographic information, and (2) a 5-point Likert scale assessing opinions on the promotion of volunteer behavior. The questionnaire was validated by a panel of experts, achieving an Index of Item–Objective Congruence (IOC) of 1.00. Reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.7, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

2. Qualitative Instruments: Semi-structured interview protocols and focus group discussion guides were developed. These instruments were designed to explore key themes, including desirable volunteer characteristics, existing obstacles, and potential development approaches. Specific emphasis was placed on investigating how Buddhist principles—such as the Four Sublime States (Brahma–vihara), the Threefold Training (Ti–sikkha), and the Four Bases of Success (Iddhipada)—could be integrated into educational practices to foster sustainable volunteerism.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in two parallel streams. The primary data was gathered through the distribution of surveys and the facilitation of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with purposively selected participants. Secondary data was collected through a systematic review of key policy documents—including the Scout Act (2008), the National Education Act (1999), the National Master Plan for Morality Promotion, and the 20-Year National Strategy—as well as 25 relevant domestic and international studies published between 2019 and

2023. This document analysis provided essential context and informed the development of recommendations.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and standard deviations) with statistical software to summarize the survey responses. Qualitative data were subjected to a rigorous analytical process. To ensure credibility, triangulation was employed across data sources, researchers, and methods. The data were then analyzed using content analysis, following which the findings were interpreted and synthesized to draw conclusions and formulate development guidelines.

Research Process

The data analysis process adhered to the systematic framework proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three concurrent flows of activity:

1. Data Reduction: The process of selecting, focusing, and transforming raw data into a manageable form.
2. Data Display: The organized assembly of information into structured formats such as narratives, tables, and diagrams to clarify relationships.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: The interpretation of displayed data to identify patterns, formulate meanings, and verify conclusions that address the research objectives.

Research Results

Results from the study on opinions regarding promoting volunteer behavior in Bangkok Metropolitan Administration Schools

Table 1 Perceptions Regarding the Promotion of Volunteer Behavior

Volunteer Behavior Aspect	Mean	S.D.	Interpretation
1. Motivation for volunteer work	4.21	0.41	High
2. Helping others	4.19	0.39	High
3. Social sacrifice	4.21	0.40	High
4. Commitment to development	4.19	0.39	High
5. Recognition of public benefits	4.23	0.42	High
6. Public responsibility	4.19	0.39	High
Total	4.20	0.40	High

As presented in Table 1, the overall perception regarding the promotion of volunteer behavior among students in Bangkok Metropolitan Administration schools is at a high level (mean = 4.20). The aspect receiving the highest rating is "recognition of public benefits" (mean = 4.23), followed by "motivation for volunteer work" and "social sacrifice" (mean = 4.21), with "helping others," "commitment to development," and "public responsibility" equally rated (mean = 4.19). Notable findings for each aspect include:

1. Motivation: Highest-rated statements emphasized excitement about new experiences and opportunities for social connection and self-discovery.
2. Helping Behavior: Most participants reported donating to charitable organizations and providing assistance to tourists and peers.
3. Social Sacrifice: Students expressed willingness to work tirelessly for society and cooperate voluntarily in school activities.
4. Development Commitment: Participants valued their contribution to community development and maintained discipline in volunteer activities.
5. Public Benefit Orientation: Students prioritized communal welfare and actively discouraged damage to public property.
6. Public Responsibility: Participants demonstrated conscientiousness in following public rules and environmental conservation.

Analysis of Sustainable Youth Volunteerism for Society through Buddhist Integration Principles

The investigation reveals significant challenges in current youth volunteer initiatives. Many participants acknowledged that their engagement was primarily driven by external incentives such as certificates or academic credits, rather than genuine moral commitment. As one 19-year-old student candidly shared, "We join for the certificate, but after the event, nothing in our attitude really changes." This superficial involvement, coupled with insufficient moral and spiritual foundation, has considerably limited the long-term effectiveness of volunteer programs. Furthermore, stakeholders highlighted the absence of crucial structural support, including mentorship systems, clear evaluation metrics, and sustainable community partnerships.

In response to these identified gaps, this study proposes a conceptual framework for sustainable youth volunteerism through Buddhist integration. This framework is grounded in empirical findings rather than theoretical abstraction. Seasoned volunteers and Buddhist teachers consistently emphasized the transformative potential of the Four Divine Abodes (Brahma-vihāra)

in fostering genuine compassion and intrinsic motivation. Their insights indicate that cultivating loving-kindness (Metta) and empathetic joy (Mudita) enables sustained engagement beyond external rewards. Similarly, educators and parents identified the Four Bases of Social Solidarity (Sangahavatthu) as a practical framework for developing community responsibility and harmonious group dynamics.

The framework incorporates contemporary pedagogical approaches to actualize these Buddhist principles. Both experiential learning and service-learning methodologies proved particularly effective in interview responses. Youth participants reported enhanced engagement and personal development when volunteer activities incorporated authentic problem-solving opportunities and structured reflection. Community leaders stressed the importance of aligning volunteer tasks with genuine local needs, noting that meaningful participation strengthens youth-community bonds.

Essential support mechanisms form another critical component of the model. Educational practitioners and NGO coordinators advocated for robust monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure accountability and measure impact. They also emphasized the value of establishing dissemination networks through youth organizations, educational institutions, and community partners to maintain program continuity. Significantly, inclusivity emerged as a moral imperative, with stakeholders stressing the need to provide accessible opportunities for underprivileged youth.

Collectively, these elements constitute an integrated approach designed for youth aged 15–25, a crucial period for moral and spiritual development. The proposed model emphasizes meaningful service opportunities complemented by guided reflection and mentorship, while systematically embedding Dhamma principles within service-learning curricula. Successful implementation requires collaborative efforts among educational institutions, government agencies, private organizations, and local communities to resource, policy alignment, and sustained momentum.

By synthesizing Buddhist ethics with contemporary educational theory and social science research, this framework offers a culturally-grounded, evidence-based approach to cultivating enduring volunteerism. It directly addresses the core limitations identified in the study—superficial motivation, weak ethical foundations, and inadequate structural support—while nurturing morally grounded, socially responsible youth equipped to contribute to sustainable community development.

Whereas the quantitative findings initially suggested strong engagement, with high scores in "Commitment to Development," "Social Sacrifice," and "Public Responsibility" indicating positive behavioral intentions. However, qualitative data revealed a more nuanced reality. Multiple students confessed that their primary motivation stemmed from external validation rather than genuine concern for social causes. One student's admission—"Honestly, I joined because I needed the certificate for my university application, not because I really cared about the project"—exemplifies this concerning discrepancy between outward participation and internal motivation.

While many participants reported experiencing happiness and pride through volunteer work—with one sharing, "Helping at the elderly home made me feel peaceful and proud of myself"—educators observed that insufficient practical skills and low self-confidence often hindered meaningful contribution, leading to declining participation over time. These findings collectively suggest that without adequate skill development, deep understanding, and genuine inspiration, volunteerism risks degenerating into a superficial activity pursued for personal gain rather than a sustained commitment to social welfare.

Qualitative analysis particularly highlighted the pivotal role of Buddhist principles in strengthening intrinsic motivation. Students who consciously applied Buddhist values or connected their volunteer work to Dhamma teachings demonstrated notably deeper and more enduring commitment. Prevalent themes included "connecting with suffering through compassion (Karuna)" and "experiencing peace through selfless giving (Dāna)." Educators and parents who incorporated pre-activity Dhamma reflection and post-activity sharing sessions observed students drawing more meaningful connections between their volunteer experiences and broader life values.

As one Buddhist mentor explained, "When students meditate on Metta before volunteering, they begin to see it not as a requirement, but as a way of living kindly." This observation suggests that systematic integration of the Four Divine Abodes and Four Sangahavatthu can fundamentally transform volunteerism from temporary acts of kindness into enduring values and habits.

The analysis concludes that fostering sustainable youth volunteerism necessitates bridging the gap between external incentives and internal motivation. Integrating Buddhist principles such as loving-kindness (Metta) and persistent effort (Viriya) into formal curricula and structured reflection sessions can cultivate genuine service motivation. Simultaneously, schools should provide comprehensive skill-building opportunities and mentoring programs to enhance student confidence and capability. Most crucially, families, communities, and educational institutions must collaborate

to model positive behaviors and nurture an ecosystem where volunteerism is valued as moral responsibility rather than obligation.

Through these integrated strategies, youth volunteerism in Bangkok schools can transcend its current limitations, evolving from surface-level participation into a sustained practice that develops socially responsible citizens prepared to contribute meaningfully to long-term community development.

Discussions

The findings of this study illuminate both the potential and the complexities of fostering sustainable volunteerism among youth in Bangkok.

At a broader level, the community-building function of volunteerism emerged clearly. The sense of shared responsibility and resilience developed by students in this study mirrors the outcomes observed by Mahasippo et al. (2022) in community-based disaster response teams. Through participatory, service-learning activities, students cultivated a stronger connection to their neighborhoods, fostering a sense of belonging that is fundamental to long-term civic commitment.

A central contribution of this research is its empirical support for Buddhist integration as a transformative mechanism for volunteer development. Participants who consciously linked their service to Buddhist principles reported a more profound and fulfilling experience, independent of external validation. This finding resonates with a growing body of literature. It extends the Buddhist psychological model by applying it in an educational context and reinforces observations by Hongladarom and Novotný (2022) and Swenson (2021) on the motivational power of Buddhist ethics in civic action. As one mentor insightfully noted, “Meditating on Metta before service helps students see volunteering not as a requirement, but as a way of living kindly.” This suggests that systematic practice of the Brahma-vihara (Four Divine Abodes) and Sangahavatthu (Bases of Social Solidarity) can effectively reorient volunteerism from a discrete task to an intrinsic, lifelong habit.

Nevertheless, persistent challenges must be acknowledged. The perception of volunteering as a transactional activity for grades or praise among some students echoes Singhol and Nilnama (2023) caution that extrinsic incentives can undermine authentic commitment. To counter this, a more profound integration of Buddhist-based practices—such as mindfulness, wisdom (Panna), and gratitude—into the core of service-learning curricula is essential. Furthermore, a synergistic

effort among schools, families, and communities is required to model and nurture an environment where volunteerism is esteemed as a moral imperative rather than a mere obligation.

In synthesis, this study positions Buddhist integration not merely as a cultural accessory but as a robust, practical framework for cultivating the intrinsic motivation, moral discipline, and social responsibility that underpin sustainable volunteerism. By embedding these principles within experiential learning, our findings extend the work of Wanchai et al. (2021) beyond professional training into general urban education. Ultimately, this research affirms Tiya'o's (2018) vision of volunteerism as social refinement, positing Buddhist-integrated volunteerism as a vital pedagogy for developing the enlightened citizens necessary for Thailand's sustainable future.

New Knowledge from Research

This study yields a conceptual framework for sustainable youth volunteerism through Buddhist integration, as illustrated in Figure. 2. The framework comprises five interconnected components: 1) the manifestation of volunteer behavior, 2) the foundational Buddhist principles of *Sangahavatthu 4* (Bases of Social Solidarity) and the *Four Divine Abodes* (*Brahmavihara*), 3) the process of sustainable development achieved through reflective activities; (4) identified obstacles including low intrinsic motivation and insufficient support systems; and (5) development guidelines focusing on cultivating intrinsic motivation, systematic integration, and network building. Collectively, these elements provide a comprehensive mechanism explaining how youth volunteerism can be effectively strengthened and sustained within society.

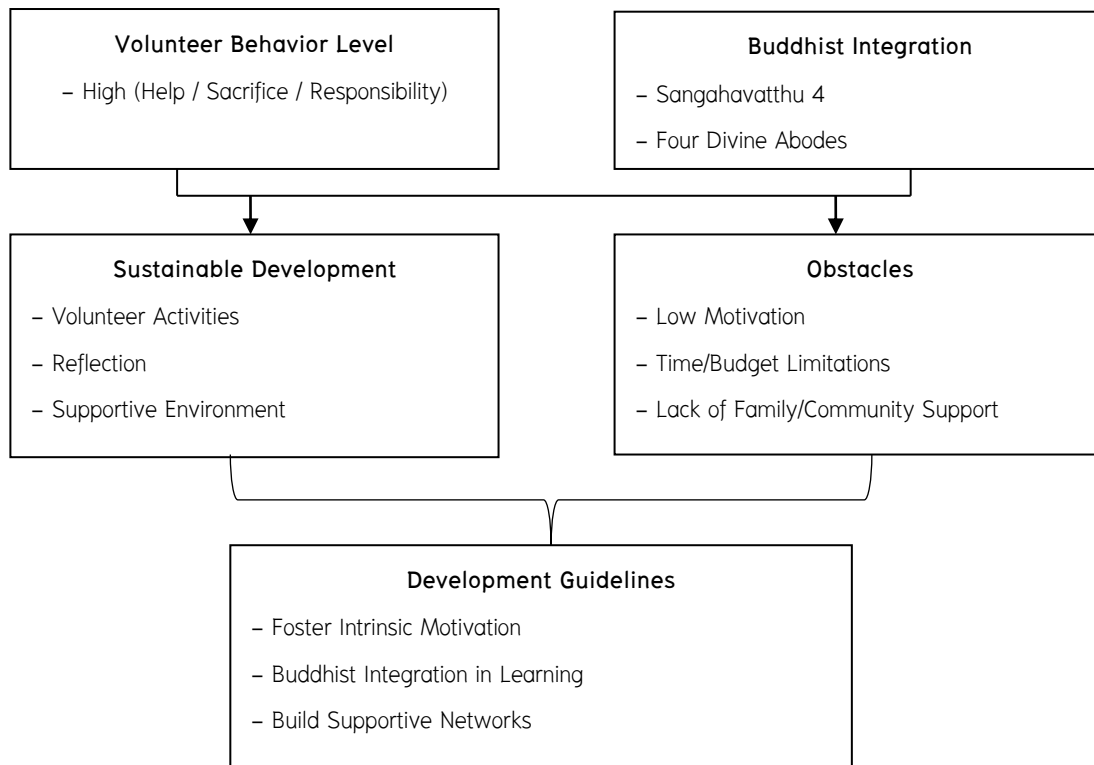


Figure 2 Knowledge from Research

Conclusion

This study found that while Bangkok students show high volunteer rates, their motivation remains largely extrinsic. Significant barriers include skill deficits and insufficient support systems. Integrating Buddhist principles like Karuna and Metta effectively transforms motivation into intrinsic commitment. These principles create an ethical foundation for personal growth and social responsibility. Sustainable volunteerism requires embedding these ethics into curricula and activities. A collaborative ecosystem of schools, families, and communities is crucial for support. This approach develops compassionate citizens and strengthens social cohesion.

Suggestions

This research's key finding is that Buddhist principles are a transformative mechanism for shifting volunteer motivation from extrinsic to intrinsic. This can be applied to designing educational curricula and volunteer activity frameworks by prioritizing the systematic integration of principles like the Brahmavihara and Sangahavatthu to foster genuine motivation, alongside developing practical skills and strengthening multi-sectoral support networks. For future research, investigations should focus on developing a sustainable student volunteerism model based on Buddhist principles.

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