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*Analysis of Benefits and Challenges Through a Mixed-Methods Study of Three Experiences*

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### Abstract

Service-learning (S-L) is an educational methodology that links academic training with community service, promoting ethical responsibility, civic engagement, and students' professional development. This study analyzes the impact of S-L in initial teacher training, focusing on its contribution to curricular, ethical-civic, and professional learning, as well as the development of social competencies. Through the participation of students in three S-L projects at the Complutense University of Madrid, a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative analysis is employed. The results show that S-L fosters meaningful and comprehensive learning, highlighting critical reflection as a key element that connects learning, service, and professional development. They also demonstrate improvements in communication, interpersonal, and ethical-civic skills, as well as a high level of student satisfaction and motivation, with students considering S-L a transformative experience both personally and professionally. In conclusion, its potential to foster methodological innovation and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable education is reaffirmed, forming educators committed to social transformation.

**Keywords:** *civic engagement, critical reflection, educational innovation, initial teacher training, service-learning*

## El Aprendizaje-Servicio en la formación inicial del profesorado

*Análisis de beneficios y desafíos a través de un estudio mixto de tres experiencias*

Prado Martín-Ondarza, Paloma Redondo-Corcobado, Beatriz Gálvez Martín y Juan Luis Fuentes

### Resumen

El Aprendizaje-Servicio (ApS) es una metodología educativa que vincula la formación académica con el servicio a la comunidad, promoviendo la responsabilidad ética, el compromiso cívico y el desarrollo profesional del estudiantado. Este estudio analiza el impacto del ApS en la formación inicial del profesorado, centrándose en su contribución al aprendizaje curricular, ético-cívico y profesional, así como al desarrollo de competencias sociales. Tras la participación de 139 estudiantes de tres Grados distintos de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid en tres proyectos de ApS, se empleó una metodología mixta que combina datos y análisis cualitativos y cuantitativos. Los resultados muestran que el ApS favorece un aprendizaje significativo e integral, destacando la reflexión crítica como un elemento clave que conecta el aprendizaje, el servicio y el desarrollo profesional. Asimismo, se evidencian mejoras en las habilidades comunicativas, interpersonales y ético-cívicas, así como un alto nivel de satisfacción y motivación del alumnado, que considera el ApS una experiencia transformadora tanto a nivel personal como profesional. En conclusión, se reafirma el potencial del ApS para fomentar la innovación docente universitaria y contribuir a una educación más inclusiva y equitativa, formando educadores comprometidos con la transformación social.

**Palabras clave:** *compromiso cívico, reflexión crítica, innovación educativa, formación inicial del profesorado, aprendizaje-servicio*

## Introduction

Civic engagement and social-ethical training are essential to the quality and sustainability of democratic systems. In addition to its academic function, higher education acts as a driving force of social transformation and promotes citizen values (Campus Compact, 2024; Levinson et al., 2024; Park et al., 2023). Initiatives such as “civic universities” and European projects such as TEFCE further underscore the importance of linking educational institutions to their communities, encouraging students to take part in social change.

From Dewey’s perspective (1995), education must connect to life, promoting experience-based learning and the relationship between schools and society. Within this framework, service-learning (S-L) offers a methodology that integrates academic training and community service. Arising first in the United States in the twentieth century (Naval, 2008; Tapia, 2010), S-L has taken root in Europe and Latin America as a key tool in teacher training (Redondo-Corcobado & Fuentes, 2020). Its value lies in how it brings together theory and practice, allowing learners to reflect on their experiences and develop professional and ethical-civic competencies (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Resch & Schrittmesser, 2021). Moreover, S-L joins academic training to real-world social problems, thereby promoting social justice, equity, and inclusion, as well as a critical reflection on the structures that perpetuate inequalities (Martín-Ondarza et al., 2022; Martínez, 2008).

Based on experience-based (Kolb, 2014) and transformative (Mezirow, 2000) models, S-L places the student at the center of the educational process and heightens civic and intercultural competencies essential to living in diverse societies (Chan et al., 2021). Thus, the impact achieved through S-L is extensive and holistically encompasses various dimensions of the students who participate in S-L projects, related to personal, social, professional, academic, civic, and ethical (Morillo et al., 2023). However, despite its growing implementation, S-L impact continues to be challenging to assess (Ruiz-Corbella & García-Gutiérrez, 2018), not the least because its inherent flexibility and heterogeneity make it exceedingly difficult to compare results. Nevertheless, recent studies underscore the usefulness of mixed methods to better understand its impact on teacher training (Fuentes et al., 2022; Redondo-Corcobado, 2024). The students’ own perspective becomes key to identifying benefits and areas for improvement in academic learning, critical reflection, and civic engagement (Blouin & Perry, 2009).

This study analyzes the contributions of S-L to initial teacher training, studying its global impact on students, both in terms of learning and service, with particular attention to the dimensions that most strongly emerged in the research findings: its impact on ethical, civic, and academic development. Through the experience of three groups of students on different projects, it explores how these initiatives strengthen professional identity in conjunction with social justice and community change. In addition, it aims to generate evidence that optimizes the design, implementation, and evaluation of future S-L projects, thereby ensuring their sustainability and effectiveness in teacher training.

### Service-Learning in Initial Teacher Training: The State of the Matter

In the field of initial teacher training, S-L has emerged as a key pedagogic methodology because it integrates theory and practice and promotes the development of professional, social, and civic-ethical competencies in future teachers. In addition, it gives the students direct contact with experience-based learning so that they can later employ S-L in school contexts with their future students. The following are some of the most prominent aspects highlighted by recent research, such as the connection between theory and practice, critical reflection and civic-ethical training, commitment to community and university collaboration, methodological innovation and sustainability, and the contribution of a critical approach in teacher training (Fuentes & García-Bermejo, 2025).

S-L facilitates a meaningful interrelationship between theoretical knowledge and practical experience, an essential aspect in initial teacher training. Recent research, such as Duarte et al. (2024), highlights that this methodology helps develop skills for attention to diversity and pedagogic adaptation in multicultural environments. Through projects that take on real problems in their communities, the

future teachers acquire practical tools for designing and implementing effective teaching strategies. In addition, a systematic review by García-González and Vázquez-González (2020) notes that the participants in S-L projects significantly improve their ability to integrate principles of inclusion and equality in their teaching.

One fundamental component of S-L is critical reflection, since it connects practical experiences with the ethical-civic principles that guide the teaching profession. Research such as DeMarais et al. (2022) shows that this process not only transforms the students' personal perspectives but also strengthens their ability to identify and question the structural inequalities in educational systems. Furthermore, Candela-Soto et al. (2020) emphasize that S-L foments fundamental values such as empathy, solidarity, and respect for diversity, which are all essential for effective teaching in diverse learning environments.

S-L also promotes interaction between universities and local communities, thereby generating two-way learning. As Duarte et al. (2024) note, these interactions benefit the communities through innovative educational solutions while also benefiting the students by strengthening their sense of belonging and social responsibility. According to Martín-Ondarza et al. (2022), S-L contributes to overcoming structural barriers that hinder social participation, thereby favoring the inclusion of vulnerable groups.

Another significant benefit of S-L is its ability to foster pedagogic innovation. Snijder et al. (2022) underscore the importance of institutionalizing this methodology to ensure its sustainability and increase its influence/benefits on higher education. Similarly, Narayanan et al. (2022) propose preservice activities that develop competencies, such as problem-solving and leadership, ensuring that the future teachers are better prepared to face educational challenges in complex contexts. To maximize these benefits, it is crucial to ensure that these projects are carried out in optimal conditions with cooperation, reciprocal knowledge, and institutional support (Martín-Ondarza et al., 2022; Volchok, 2017).

S-L also provides a critical approach to teacher training, letting the future teachers question the traditional power dynamics and adopt pedagogical practices based on social justice. Hawes et al. (2021) argue that this approach encourages equitable relationships between the participants in the projects by fostering collaboration and mutual respect. Moreover, Martín-Ondarza et al. (2022) highlight that the incorporation of seminars on guided reflection and the systematic evaluation of the S-L projects is key to ensuring their effectiveness in transforming attitudes and building ethical-civic competencies.

S-L provides an integral tool in initial teacher training that combines critical reflection, community collaboration, and pedagogic innovation. Not only does it foster the development of professional, ethical, and social competencies, but it also promotes teaching that is committed to equality and social justice. Its implementation, adapted to diverse teaching contexts, can significantly contribute to training teachers prepared to face the challenges of a world characterized by plurality, diversity, and complexity.

## Context

This study presents an analysis of three S-L projects undertaken at the Complutense University of Madrid, Faculty of Education. The projects were implemented during the 2021–2022 academic year in the subjects *Theory of Education* and *Social Pedagogy*, involving three groups of undergraduate students majoring in Primary Education, Pedagogy, or a double major in both. Embedded as a central component of these two core courses, the S-L projects accounted for approximately 50% of the sessions, all of which were dedicated to practical classes. These sessions focused on project planning, collaborative teamwork, and guided critical reflection, enabling students to design, carry out, and analyze their service experiences in close connection with course content and pedagogical goals, and to promote professional and civic development.

Each group carried out their service at one of three collaborating institutions, two of them characterized by situations of vulnerability and the third featuring needs for support in fostering its students' emotional development and ethical-civic values. The groups of students and institutions receiving the service were as follows:

- The undergraduate students majoring in Primary Education provided their service at the *IES Guadarrama*, a high school in Guadarrama, Madrid (Spain).

- The students double majoring in Primary Education and Pedagogy performed their service at the *Asociación Achalay* within the framework of Proyecto Liceo, working with people with functional diversity.
- The students majoring in Pedagogy undertook their service at the Madrid Red Cross, within the framework of the Government of Spain's Humanitarian Aid Program (Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migrations).

The learning and service objectives of the projects combine theoretical and practical training in ethics and civics education, with direct action in contexts of social vulnerability. Some of the main learning objectives were the following: understanding the ethical foundations of teaching and its social responsibility, designing workshops tailored to specific contexts, fostering emotional management in learning and teaching contexts, and developing competencies in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for collaborative work. Similarly, the main service objectives were promoting civic engagement at schools, raising their awareness of their social responsibility at times of hardship, facilitating tools for self-care, caring for others, and providing audiovisual materials that support values education. This integrative approach is designed to train future teachers in professional, ethical, and social skills, as well as contributing to the emotional well-being and civic development of the learners, especially in the post-pandemic context.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This research took a mixed approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the experience, learning, and perceptions of the students participating in three different S-L projects. This approach offers a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon studied on the complementarity of methods to address the complexity of educational phenomena (Creswell & Clark, 2017), as is the case in this research study, of evaluating ethical learning, the diversity of groups in education, and the diversity of entities.

Data were collected using the techniques of qualitative content analysis and questionnaires. The qualitative study used reflective essays written by the university students upon completion of their participation in the S-L project. These essays included a final section of guided reflection, structured around questions that invited students to reflect on their participation in the S-L project and, more specifically, on aspects related to curricular learning, ethical-civic development, and professional identity as future educators, as well as their overall satisfaction with the project. This final section was treated as a primary source of data and systematically analyzed to assess the educational value of the S-L experience. The essays provided the input data used to delve deeper into their individual learning experiences.

In turn, in the quantitative phase, each participant was given a Likert-type questionnaire validated by León-Carrascosa et al. (2020). The questionnaire assesses the dimensions of Training, Learning, and Service in order to measure the students' perception of the impact of S-L on their training. The combination of these techniques helps give a more thorough understanding of the participants' perceptions and meanings (Gibbs, 2018).

### Participants

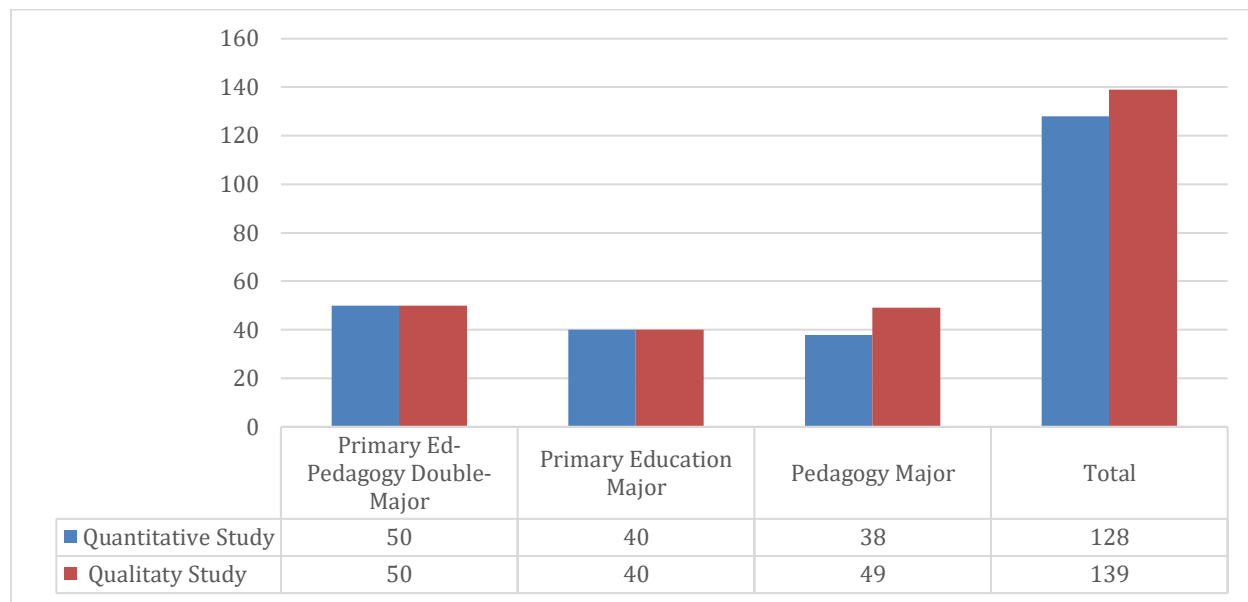
For the quantitative study, the sample consisted of 139 reflective essays from students selected by means of an intentional sample (students of the Complutense University of Madrid, Faculty of Education participating in S-L project). For the quantitative study, the sample, equally intentional, consisted of 128 of those same students who answered the questionnaire (Figure 1).

The research adhered to ethical guidelines. Before participating, students were fully informed about the study's objectives, assured of the anonymity of their data, and notified of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To guarantee confidentiality, all data were managed exclusively by the research team

within a secure, encrypted database and were not disclosed to any third parties. Finally, the research team committed to sharing a summary of the findings with the participants upon the study’s conclusion.

**Figure 1.**

*Sample and Participants*



**Data Analysis**

*Qualitative Analysis*

The qualitative analysis followed an exploratory, comparative approach. With the help of the Atlas.ti 22 software, a mixed codification process was carried out that combined deductive and inductive categories. The resultant dimensions of analysis were as follows:

- A. Learning
  - 1. Curricular: integration of theory and practice, adaptability, flexibility, teamwork, critical reflection (specific competencies, coursework contents, and cross-curricular competencies).
  - 2. Ethical-civic: social and civic engagement, social and ethical responsibility, fostering values in ethics, transformative education, development of interpersonal skills, and the teacher as an agent of social change.
  - 3. Professional: consolidation of the professional role, trust, and reflection on the education practice (teacher identity).
- B. Service: two-way impact and belonging of the community work.
- C. Overall satisfaction: general assessment of the experience of participating in the S-L project and perception of its personal development.

Finally, because the different dimensions are connected, the results of each were processed in relation to all the others.

*Triangulation of Data*

To ensure the reliability of the analysis of documents, the qualitative results were put through a process of triangulation among the three main researchers, thereby reducing interpretive bias. In addition, the students’ final reflections were used to validate emergent themes in the qualitative analysis and to interpret

dimensions such as social transformation and civic learning from the students' own narratives. Furthermore, quantitative data were integrated by methodological triangulation, which strengthens the validity and reliability of the findings by contrasting and complementing the information obtained from different methods (Denzin, 2017).

### *Quantitative Analysis*

The questionnaire was administered face-to-face and digitally, and its confidentiality was always ensured. The data were analyzed with the help of IBM's SPSS Statistics 27 software.

To analyze the data, descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were calculated. After that, correlational analyses were carried out by means of the Pearson coefficient, for the purpose of exploring the relationships between the dimensions and subdimensions of the questionnaire. Correlations between 0.4 and 0.7 were considered moderate, while any above 0.7 were considered strong, in accordance with the criteria in Dancey and Reidy (2004). In addition, significance tests were used to assess differences between groups: one-way ANOVA to analyze variations by gender and degree, the student's *t*-test to compare two specific groups, and Welch's test in cases in which the equal variance assumption was not met. The level of significance used in all the analyses was  $p < 0.05$ , a standard criterion for determining statistical relevance. Finally, the statistical assumptions such as normality and homogeneity of variances were verified, and the data were reviewed to identify any atypical values or potential omissions.

## **Results**

### **Qualitative Study**

The results obtained were used to identify significant impacts along three key dimensions in the future teachers' learning and development: learning (curricular, ethics-civics, and professional), service, and overall satisfaction. The three are all intertwined in a comprehensive learning process covering academic, ethical, social, and professional aspects.

### *Learning*

Outlined below are the results from the three above-mentioned fundamental areas in the students' learning.

### ***Curricular Learning***

Many of the students stated that their participation in the S-L project was an essential tool for integrating theoretical knowledge of the subject matter with the practice learned by doing the service. Through their experience in real-world teaching and learning contexts, they were able to consolidate their understanding of academic concepts and apply them to specific situations, which strengthened their learning and gave the course content a sense of relevance and usefulness.

“Regarding theoretical concepts, this experience has helped me to assimilate much better the different concepts but one aspect that I must highlight the most is that thanks to this project I have deeply understood the importance of one sentence that we studied in class: ‘Theory without practice is useless but practice without theory is blind.’”

Nevertheless, the results also show that instructor mediation is essential to integrating the curricular contents with the acts of the service and fostering continuous reflection on the learning process. The instructors' guidance helped the students draw meaningful connections between theory and practice.

Similarly, participation in the project strengthened cross-curricular competencies such as cooperation and teamwork. The students' need to coordinate actions to solve problems improved their communication strategies, conflict-solving, and mutual support, which fostered a positive emotional climate. The project activities created a space of trust where participants could express experiences and emotions safely, feeling

listened to and supported. This collective support promoted their well-being, facilitated new interpersonal relationships, and honed their social skills. Moreover, the resultant atmosphere encouraged integration, motivation, and greater engagement on the project.

Finally, immersing the students in real-world educational contexts heightened their interest in becoming trained and acquiring skills for managing groups and communicating effectively in the classroom.

### ***Ethical-Civic Learning***

This category gains relevance given that, for many of the participants, S-L has been an experience that transcends the academic by broadening their perspectives on commitment and social change. They recognize the value of education not only as a transmission of knowledge but also as a transformative process that can contribute to social justice and improve living conditions in a community.

“My participation in this project has led me to understand the importance of social commitment for university students, since we must be able to empathize and help others and thus contribute to more humane decisions.”

The analyses carried out show a significant impact on civic engagement in all three groups of students. The students highlighted that the experience strengthened their sense of social and ethical responsibility and made them more aware of their role as future teachers. They stated that by participating in the projects, they were able to contribute to the well-being of the community and reflect on the impact their work has in real contexts, consolidating values such as empathy, respect, solidarity, and generosity. Likewise, they expressed that the experience reaffirmed their professional goals and helped them develop a vision of education as a tool for equality, inclusion, and social and civic transformation on the basis of those values.

“When transferring knowledge, it is also essential for us to include moral and ethical values, teaching generosity, empathy, and respect from early childhood on.”

The S-L projects were appraised to develop essential interpersonal skills such as communication and collaboration, both of which are fundamental in the ethical-civic competence needed to face the complexities and challenges of teaching. Thus, their impact was reflected in the student’s own personal development and in their integration as agents of change in their communities. By applying knowledge and values in real-world contexts, they underwent a mutual learning process with the beneficiaries of the service, thereby reinforcing their commitment to social justice.

These experiences underscore how relevant it is to integrate S-L in university training as a strategy that unites academic development, social commitment, and ethical values.

“That’s why I think this project was much more than a class activity; it was a chance to encourage young people to take a step forward and make them aware of the fact that we all have the power to improve the lives of others. It was also a chance to develop our maturity, empathy, and social skills.”

### ***Professional Learning***

S-L also had a noticeable impact on acquiring professional skills fundamental to carrying out their future job as teachers. The students noted the ability to adapt to unforeseen situations as one of the most valuable lessons for their future teaching. This skill is relevant given the fact that the dynamic nature of teaching and learning contexts makes it necessary to keep an open, flexible plan that adjusts to changes in the surrounding context. This approach fosters an open, receptive attitude that will be useful in their future career.

The importance of acquiring skills of adaptability in implementing their plans appeared closely linked to the diversity of the characteristics of the people they worked with and the demands of each context of intervention. The experience led them to recognize the diversity of profiles they will be working with in the future, as well as the importance of identifying the individual characteristics and needs in the classroom.

This awareness-raising is associated with the adoption of an inclusive perspective of education that will guide their professional practice.

“Our main aim was that all students participate in the workshops, so we worked on social inclusion considering that there were some students with learning or developmental difficulties. In fact, we didn’t know who the students with difficulties were, but we just tried that all of them can collaborate on a comfortable way, so that they didn’t feel excluded; but at a time, they can talk when they want and express their feelings. It is true that the very first day, there were some students that didn’t want to talk a lot, or express their opinion, so we decided to plan different activities for them to feel freer and calmer.”

On the other hand, these facts and reflections made the students aware of the need to pursue more professional training throughout their career for them to be able to attend suitably to the ever-changing variety of needs in the educational context.

In addition, their S-L experience significantly contributed to developing and strengthening their own identity as teachers, who began to define their view and philosophy of education.

“I have reaffirmed that being a teacher involves not only teaching but also being an agent of social change.”

This has helped them reaffirm their vocation and their decision of having chosen this profession. In addition, in relation to becoming aware of the transformative power of education, it has also led them to reflect deeply on the type of teachers they want to be and the values they want to transmit through their teaching. As they state, this is because direct contact with the reality of teaching made them see that they can have a significant impact on how future generations develop and how communities improve.

“As teachers, we have a very great power in our hands, which is that of teaching and supporting those who most need it, not only in knowledge, but also in values.”

### ***Challenges Faced by the Students***

The students also reflected on aspects they found challenging during the project that are directly related to the learning processes carried out.

Regarding the didactic planning and scheduling of the sessions or workshops at the high schools, the participants expressed how difficult it was for them.

“Because of this project, I have had a chance to experience in my own flesh how hard it is to plan a course . . . it is a job that takes a lot of dedication and prior training.”

Furthermore, the need to reflect on their work from a self-critical perspective, although perceived as essential for learning, became somewhat of a challenge in analyzing mistakes and looking for strategies to correct them was a complex aspect for some of the participants.

“This project taught us to reflect on our mistakes and strengths, and to adapt our approach to the needs of the community.”

As regards the difficulties with developing ethical-civic learning, one of the main challenges noted was how to face social realities different from one’s own, which required a process of emotional and professional adaptation. Another was the difficulty associated with the above-mentioned need to adapt the activities to that diverse environment. In this sense, some participants mentioned that working in vulnerable contexts led them to reflect deeply on their role as agents of social change and on the limitations of their initial perspective.

Another common challenge was how difficult it was to integrate ethical values into the professional practice effectively. Although the students understood the importance of transmitting values such as empathy and social justice, some noted that this process was not always simple due to the complexity of the contexts in which they performed their service. Thus, despite grasping the magnitude of the social

impact of their pedagogical actions, in some cases, they felt their prior training had not prepared them adequately to handle these contexts effectively.

“It’s hard to see how something so simple and mean so much to the community, but it’s also a reminder that we need more tools to generate a real impact.”

These difficulties, noted by the students, not only reflect areas for improvement in implementing S-L but also highlight the learning opportunities it offers from dealing with the complexities of different social and cultural realities. Taking on these challenges contributed to the development of civic engagement and strengthened the participants’ sense of professional purpose.

### *Comparative Study of Integrated Learning*

The comparative analysis of the results obtained from the three groups of participants shows that each group adapts and enriches its learning through S-L, showing both the similarities and the differences in key aspects of the three categories of analysis corresponding to the Learning dimension, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

#### *Comparative Analysis Between Groups of Participants*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Aspects Analyzed</b>	<b>Primary Ed-pedagogy Double Major</b>	<b>Primary Education Major</b>	<b>Pedagogy Major</b>
<b>Curricular learning</b>	<b>Integration of theory practice</b>	<b>High:</b> Consolidation of theory practice. Students apply theory to real situations, thereby reinforcing their learning.	<b>Moderate:</b> Practical application with challenges. Difficulties in practical application of theoretical concepts.	<b>High:</b> Critical use of theory and practice. Reflection and critical analysis from applying knowledge in social contexts.
	<b>Collaborative work</b>	<b>High:</b> Importance of teamwork. Collaboration on design and execution of activities.	<b>High:</b> Strengthening the collaborative work. Improvement in problem-solving and decision-making as a group.	<b>High:</b> Collaboration on social intervention. Group work focused on community impact.
<b>Professional learning</b>	<b>Development of teaching competencies</b>	<b>High:</b> Classroom management and planning. Emphasis on structuring activities and managing group dynamics.	<b>Moderate:</b> Focus on practical competencies. Development of operational skills and skills for basic interaction.	<b>Moderate:</b> Focus on transformative education. Design of strategies for social inclusion and equality.
	<b>Adaptability and flexibility in the classroom</b>	<b>Moderate:</b> Adaptation in the teaching context. Adjustment of methodologies for standard school needs.	<b>High:</b> Adjustment in bilingual environment. Emphasis on cultural and linguistic adaptations.	<b>Moderate:</b> Adaptation to social contexts. Adjustment to vulnerable scenarios, but with less focus on school environments.
<b>Ethical-civic learning</b>	<b>Social and civic engagement</b>	<b>High:</b> Impact on communities. Focus on immediate needs of the education communities.	<b>High:</b> Inclusion in post-pandemic period. Adaptive response to recent social emergencies.	<b>High:</b> Orientation toward social justice. Sensitizing on structural inequalities and social transformation.

<b>Interpersonal skills</b>	<b>High:</b> Empathy and collaboration. Reinforcement of the ability for teamwork and connecting with others.	<b>High:</b> Multicultural collaboration. Adaptation to the cultural and linguistic diversity in educational contexts.	<b>High:</b> Intervention skills. Development of specific skills for vulnerable contexts.
<b>Social change</b>	<b>Moderate:</b> Focus on teaching. Less emphasis on structural transformation, oriented to educational improvement.	<b>Moderate:</b> Cultural inclusion. Fostering respect and acceptance in multicultural environments.	<b>High:</b> Social transformation. Use of education as a tool to generate sweeping social changes.

### Curricular Learning

The students double majoring in Primary Education and Pedagogy valued the integration of theory and practice in S-L, highlighting its impact on meaningful learning and on collaborative work as a key tool to designing and executing teaching activities.

The Primary Education majors acknowledged that they learned to apply theoretical concepts, but they faced challenges when adapting them to diverse contexts. Like the group mentioned above, they also underscored the strength of collaborative work and its impact on solving problems in the classroom.

For their part, the students in Pedagogy adopted a critical approach, applying knowledge in social contexts and giving priority to reflection and community impact.

### Professional Learning

While the double-major undergraduate students highlighted teaching competencies, especially planning and classroom management, the students majoring in Primary Education took a more practical approach, highlighting the development of interpersonal skills and adaptation in bilingual environments.

In a more theoretical sense of education, the students majoring in Pedagogy emphasized the potential of transformative education and the design of inclusive strategies to help adapt to vulnerable contexts beyond traditional school environments.

### Ethical-Civic Learning

The undergraduate double-major students underscored their social commitment and the positive impact on educational communities, highlighting empathy and collaboration as keys to ethical and civic training. The undergraduate students in Primary Education emphasized the teaching of inclusive values in multicultural classrooms and their supporting role in the post-pandemic emergency.

For their part, the students in Pedagogy adopted an activist vision, highlighting the power of S-L as a tool for social transformation in environments with pressing social problems.

### Service

The projects generated a two-way impact that benefited both the university students and the recipients of the service. The participants recognized the reciprocity of mutual learning in their interaction with the communities, identifying different learning items they achieved thanks to their direct interaction with the students who provided the service. This continuous feedback not only enriched the students' academic experience but also facilitated personal growth, since it let them reflect on their achievements and mistakes in order to improve on them in the future.

The students considered this aspect to be fundamental in their training since it encourages practical learning by which they internalize knowledge through real-world experience.

### *Overall Satisfaction*

The participants show a high degree of satisfaction, produced by the enrichment on a personal and social level, as well as professionally, that their participation in the project gave them. Their increase in motivation to continue their initial training and their professional career in teaching along with the above-mentioned sense of reaffirmation of their own vocation and identity as teachers, figure prominently as the aspects that gave the student participants the greatest satisfaction. In addition, they also placed a very high value on the chance to put their theoretical knowledge into practice, as well as their understanding of the social dimension that inevitably accompanies their work. Moreover, crossing the lines from the participants' professional dimension to the personal, most associate their high assessment of the project with the growth that came about from being able to have a positive impact on their communities and their having developed a commitment to them. For all the above, the participants were grateful and considered that this type of project should be included in every school, not only for the students' benefit but for the benefit of society overall.

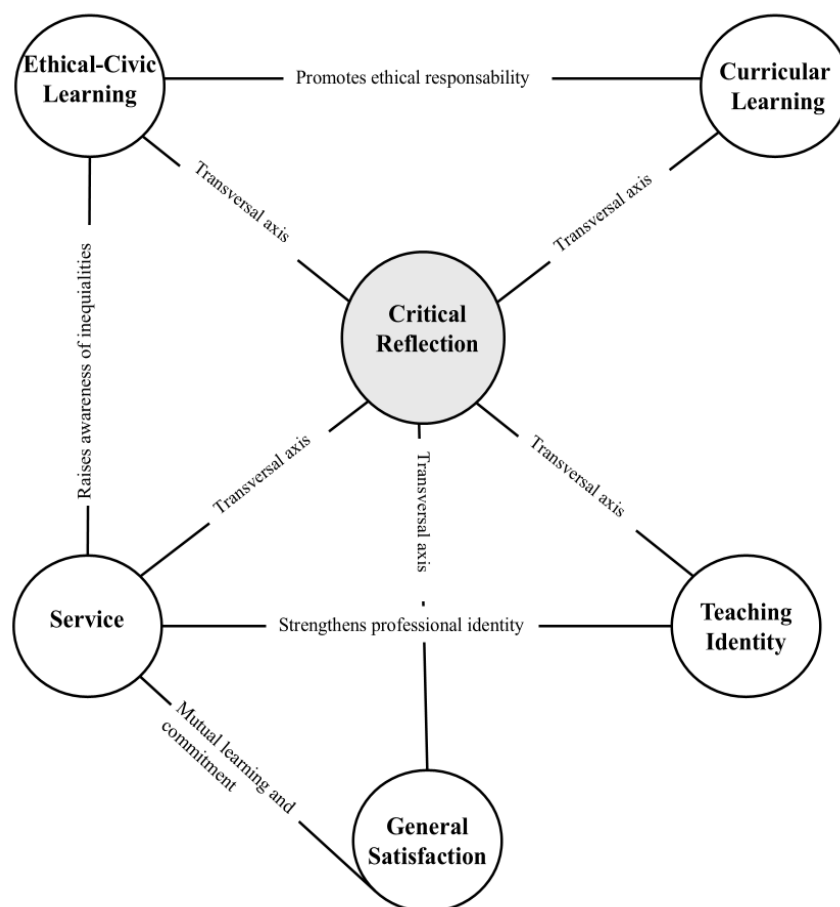
“For many reasons, I will always be thankful for having had the chance to take part in such a marvelous project as this one. Moreover, I believe more projects like this should be carried out, since they are vital to promoting civic engagement to the needs of the community, not only as a university student, but as a future teacher as well.”

### *Interrelation Between the Dimensions Analyzed*

There is a dynamic relation among the dimensions (Figure 2), which points to the comprehensive learning process developed by the students by means of their participation in an S-L project. In the middle is critical reflection as a cross-cutting axis that connects the different dimensions and enhances their integration. The connection between curricular learning and ethical-civic learning underscores the fact that the application of academic knowledge in socio-educational contexts fosters a greater sense of ethical responsibility. The relation between service and ethical-civic learning is seen in the fact that the students' interaction with other communities makes them more sensitive to inequalities and social problems. The interactions between service and satisfaction reflect the reciprocity of mutual learning and strengthen their commitment to teaching. Finally, teacher identity is strengthened by critical reflection, as well as by the learning achieved through the practical experiences of the service.

### **Figure 2.**

### *Interrelation Among Qualitative Dimensions*



## Quantitative Study

### *Descriptive Analysis*

The results analyzed from the dimensions and subdimensions of the questionnaire show that the main dimensions (Training, Learning, and Service) attain high values according to the established intervals as shown in Table 2. This reinforces the participants' positive perception of the experience provided by the project.

**Table 2.**

### *Score and Average of the Dimensions*

	Min-Max	Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very high		Average
Training	1–25	5–9	9–13	13–17	17–21	21–23	23–25	22.984
Learning	1–55	11–19.8	19.8–28.6	28.6–37.4	37.4–46.2	46.2–50.6	50.6–55	47.984
Service	1–60	12–21.6	21.6–31.2	31.2–40.8	40.8–50.4	50.4–55.2	55.2–60	53.385

The descriptive analysis of the subdimensions reveals high scores on all of them, with implicit training being particularly prominent. This result suggests that the participants significantly valued their nonexplicit learning during the experience. Beyond the curricular contents or technical aspects of training, the students seem to acknowledge and value the development of cross-curricular competencies, among which are autonomy, flexibility, and meta-cognition.

**Table 3.***Score and Average of the Subdimensions*

	No. of Elements	Min-Max	Average	General Score
Curricular content	128	2–10	8.89	High
Implicit training	127	3–15	14.0787	Very high
Professional development	128	4–20	17.4063	Very high
Communicative aspects	128	4–20	16.9922	Very high
Social aspects	128	3–15	13.5859	High
Personal development	128	3–15	13.4687	High
Project planning	128	5–25	21.9766	Very high
Participation in service	128	4–20	17.9449	Very high

*Correlative Study*

The three dimensions analyzed show significant correlations among themselves:

- Training and Learning:  $r = 0.716$  (strong).
- Training and Service:  $r = 0.805$  (strong).
- Learning and Service:  $r = 0.770$  (strong).

**Table 4.***Matrix of Correlations Among Main Dimensions*

		Training	Learning	Service
Training	Pearson correlation	1	0.716**	0.805**
	Sig. (bilateral)		0.000	0.000
	<i>N</i>	127	127	126
Learning	Pearson correlation	0.716**	1	0.770**
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.000		0.000
	<i>N</i>	127	128	127
Service	Pearson correlation	0.805**	0.770**	1
	Sig. (bilateral)	0.000	0.00	
	<i>N</i>	126	127	127

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral).

These results reflect that the S-L methodology does not treat the dimensions as independent elements, but as components integrated into one single system. This means that theoretical training (Training) enhances practical skills (Learning) and both contribute to a more significant impact on the service activities (Service), giving rise to interdimensional transference. An example of this interconnection can be seen in the relationship between Training and Service, where an improvement in communication skills may spread to a better ability to collaborate and participate within the service dimension.

In contrast, the differential analysis did not find any significant differences in any of the three dimensions in terms of the participants' academic degrees or gender ( $p > 0.05$ ). On both the ANOVA tests and the Welch statistics, a clear homogeneity was found among the scores, indicating that the experience produced a similar benefit in all the students.

*Correlative Study*

The correlative study shows the existence of key subdimensions within S-L that feature significant relations between them.

Communicative Aspects and Professional Development

The Pearson correlation coefficient among these subdimensions is  $r = 0.721$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), which indicates a strong relationship. This suggests that the improvement in communication skills is closely linked to a better perception of professional development. The students who strengthened communication skills also perceived greater growth in their preparation for work and professional contexts.

Because of its interactive and collaborative nature, S-L strengthens cross-curricular competencies that are essential to effective professional performance in dynamic, socially committed contexts.

#### Communicative Aspects and Personal Development ( $r = 0.725$ )

The correlation between these two subdimensions shows that communication skills are intrinsically related to the student's individual development. The communicative aspects subdimension assesses that student's ability to express ideas and generate reflective dialogues, whereas personal development is associated with initiative, decision-making, and professional self-awareness. The high correlation between the two dimensions confirms that communication skills not only facilitate social interaction, but they also strengthen professional identity and awareness of the teacher's role in social transformation.

#### Project Planning and Personal Development ( $r = 0.743$ , $p < 0.0001$ )

With a correlation of  $r = 0.743$ , this connection is the highest found in the present study, suggesting a significant and direct link between the ability to plan and schedule projects successfully and the impact on the participant's own personal growth.

The planning activities, which include organizing tasks and making decisions, are related to the development of personal competencies, initiative, self-confidence, and commitment. Therefore, the students who are actively engaged with the project also develop in terms of aspects that transcend academics alone, thereby strengthening their own personal development.

#### Implicit Training and Project Planning ( $r = 0.718$ )

The Pearson correlation coefficient between Implicit Training and Project Planning ( $r = 0.718$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) suggests a significant connection between the ability to structure and develop S-L projects and the acquisition of learning that goes beyond formal instruction. The result highlights the transfer of knowledge and skills beyond the strict academic content, fostering an integrative training that can be adapted to many different educational contexts. Thus, project planning is associated with implicit learning in terms of self-training, adaptability, and the development of practical skills.

#### *Differential Analysis*

Differential analysis identified significant differences according to the educational stage on two subdimensions: curricular content and personal development. On the curricular content subdimension, the ANOVA variance analysis indicates significant differences between groups ( $p = 0.001$ ), with a high effect size ( $\eta^2 = 0.340$ ). The post hoc analysis confirmed that the double-major students and the bilingual undergraduates scored significantly higher than the students majoring in Pedagogy. On personal development, the results also indicated significant differences ( $p = 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.168$ ) following the same pattern. On all the other subdimensions (implicit training, professional development, communicative aspects, social aspects, project planning, and participation in the service), no significant differences were found between the groups. These results may explain why the S-L experience for the double majors and bilingual majors aligned more with their teacher training and the application of pedagogical knowledge. Nevertheless, the lack of significant differences on all the other dimensions suggests that the common framework of S-L and critical reflection fostered transversal competencies similarly among the groups.

## Discussion

The results show a high degree of cohesion among the different aspects analyzed in the S-L projects. This can be seen in the significance of the correlations obtained between the main dimensions analyzed on the quantitative instrument (Training-Learning:  $r = 0.716$ , Training-Service  $r = 0.805$ , Learning-Service:  $r = 0.770$ ). These figures indicate the interdependence among the competencies developed through the S-L, showing that they do not function in isolation but rather, they mutually enhance each other within the collaborative experiential environment characterized by this methodology. Likewise, the qualitative results show that critical reflection is a central theme connecting all the key dimensions of the study-curricular learning, professional learning, and ethical-civic learning, service and satisfaction. Critical reflection facilitates the connection between them, thereby providing an integrated, comprehensive learning that links theory to practice in real-world contexts while also honing interpersonal skills and bettering the needs of the context. This aligns with authors who define S-L in terms of practical training hand in hand with holistic learning for the student by means of improving the environment (Bingle et al., 2006; Martín et al., 2019).

Furthermore, *critical reflection* is found to be a transformative element. On one hand, the students themselves noted that reflection prompted by their participation in the projects on their strengths, mistakes, and values brought them to greater self-awareness and to making pedagogical adaptations in accordance with the particular context in which they carried out their teaching, as well as in consolidating their own teacher identity. The students also recognize this transformation through the high scores they gave to the dimension on implicit training (14.08 out of 15), on the impact of their ethical and reflective development, as well as their ability to self-regulate and make decisions. In fact, authors such as Scott (2012) affirm that mere participation in S-L experiences is not enough to ensure meaningful learning or transformative change. For this process to be effective, it is necessary to have an organized, sustained methodology of reflection that lets the students connect their experience to the theoretical knowledge and their personal development. In this way, Dewey holds that reflection leads to a well-grounded action, achieving the level of reflection-in-action, which fosters not only the student's own personal development but also the social change toward more democratic communities committed to the common good (Deeley, 2016). For his part, Mezirow (2000) underscores that meaningful experiences can trigger a restructuring of perspectives and beliefs, an essential component of the transformative impact of S-L.

Recent research has reaffirmed the key role of critical reflection in S-L. Narayanan et al. (2022) highlight that the combination of service experiences with guided reflective processes strengthens the connection between theoretical learning and ethical-practical development. As DeMarais et al. (2022) note, not only does critical reflection promote transformative learning, but it also translates into sustainable collective actions. Similarly, Páez Sánchez and Puig Rovira (2015) highlight the importance of offering multiple devices for reflection, encouraging students to question their experience and employ conceptual and instrumental measures to enrich the reflective process. Along these same lines, García-González and Vázquez-González (2020) state that S-L contributes significantly to the development of ethical-civic and professional competencies in initial teacher training. Some of the most developed ethics-civics are empathy, social commitment, and critical reflection. Furthermore, their study underscores the improvement in the students' ability to integrate the principles of inclusion and equality into their teaching practice, thereby reinforcing the impact of S-L as a methodology that not only transforms each student individually but also fosters changes in how they conceive of and carry out their future teaching. This all matches up with the results of the research done here, as stated amply above.

Therefore, critical reflection is not only a major underpinning of S-L but also acts as a force of change in teacher training, promoting the students' professional and ethical-civic development through learning experiences that go beyond the classroom and contribute to transformation of the real world.

In relation to that transformation, one of the most noteworthy results of the present study is the high degree of impact noted by the students in their social dimension. Indeed, many other studies have highlighted the potential of S-L for the interpersonal development of those who participate in this type of project, strengthening students in aspects such as pr-sociality, active listening, and commitment to others (Redondo-Corcobado & Fuentes, 2020). The testimonies analyzed agree with this literature, noting that

teamwork and cooperative activities honed their interpersonal and communication skills, such as empathy and conflict resolution, and provided a positive atmosphere that promoted the students' well-being during their participation in the projects. This profound development is reflected in the strong correlation obtained between communicative aspects and personal development ( $r = 0.725$ ), linking improvement in communication skills to the personal growth of the participants.

As regards the students' *teaching competence*, scores were found to be high in professional development and project planning (17.4 out of 20 and 21.9 out of 25, respectively), which confirms their perception of a significant improvement in their pedagogical skills. Moreover, in their reflections, they reported a strengthening of their vocation and teacher identity, as well as the development of increased ability in classroom management skills and a strong commitment to addressing socio-cultural diversity. This last point became especially evident in their experiences and interactions within the real-world contexts of the projects, where they designed their activities to be inclusive and equitable. Therefore, the student's active participation in the S-L projects, their interaction with a diverse student body, adaptation to different capabilities and potentials, and major social development have all combined to contribute to a solid professional training experience in educational inclusion and equality. These findings coincide with the ones set out in García-González and Vázquez-González (2020) and in Martín-Ondarza et al. (2022), who also point out the potential of S-L in preventing prejudice and discrimination in educational contexts of diversity, both in socio-cultural background and in capabilities.

Regarding the participating students' *overall satisfaction*, 95% reported a high degree of satisfaction in their responses. The data also indicate that longer participation in the projects would have increased benefits noted by the participants. Moreover, the qualitative data also reflect several challenges, such as adapting activities in the diverse contexts in which they were carried out and in didactic lesson planning, which students perceive as great challenges while also recognizing them as opportunities for learning and improvement. The quantitative data feature high scores on ethical-civic engagement and interpersonal skills, suggesting that the students perceived significant progress in these areas. Nevertheless, student responses also underscored the great challenge of integrating ethical values into their teaching, recognizing their importance and the difficulty this task holds.

It is important to note that, although this research focuses specifically on the S-L impact on students—particularly on its academic, ethical, and civic dimensions—the effects of S-L are not limited to them. As a methodology grounded in community engagement, its influence extends to all actors involved in the project: teachers, community partners, and the wider society. This interaction generates a ripple effect that transforms social dynamics, reshapes the relationships between partner organizations and educational institutions, and fosters ongoing adjustments and improvements in S-L programs, which are progressively refined through practice.

## Conclusions

This study confirms the effectiveness of S-L in teacher training, evidenced by its impact through a mixed-methods approach to give a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The findings herein highlight critical reflection as central to learning, service, and professional development, as well as strengthening the communicative, interpersonal, and ethical-civic competencies essential for teachers. In addition, the participants reported high degrees of satisfaction and considered S-L to be a transformative experience.

From an applied perspective, the study highlights the importance of integrating processes of critical reflection to strengthen the connection between theory and practice. It is also recommended to design experiences in diverse environments that favor empathy, problem-solving, and pedagogical planning in heterogeneous educational contexts.

In conclusion, S-L can improve academic and professional training and promote methodological innovation, social commitment, and educational equity by preparing teachers committed to social transformation.

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