


Transforming realities: students' learning through University Service-Learning in initial teacher training

*Transformando realidades: aprendizajes
del alumnado a través del Aprendizaje-
Servicio Universitario en formación inicial
docente*

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ABSTRACT

University Service-Learning (S-L), based on the theories of active methodologies, is conceived as a transformative tool that creates a culture to promote integral human development from civic awareness, the design of sustainable scenarios and the perspective of social justice, thus contributing to the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) collected in the 2030 Agenda. This case study aims to identify the learning that university students develop when they become involved in university S-L projects and experiences. The narratives of the conclusions of sixty-five Final Degree Projects and Master Thesis in the field of education carried out at the University of de Basque Country (UPV/EHU) have been analysed. The narratives have been coded in order to carry out a categorization process based on a deductive-inductive categorical system and with the help of Nvivo software. The triangulation of the analysis was multimodal. The students define S-L as a suitable means of developing university competences and completing their academic training. Through experiences and evaluation of them, they acquire conceptual and procedural learning: disciplinary knowledge, curricular content and professional competences; and they experience a change of identity by developing their critical reflection and values based on social justice and sustainability. By responding to real needs together with the community, the active role and leadership of the students is evident and they are involved throughout the process. However, the planning of S-L proposals also raises certain challenges such as the relationship with the collaborating entities and/or the management of time. Therefore, institutional management is proposed for these aspects and, thus, facilitating dynamic learning-teaching actions aimed at community contribution.

Keywords: activity learning, social justice, universities, teacher qualifications, identity

RESUMEN

El Aprendizaje-Servicio (ApS) universitario, basado en las teorías de las metodologías activas, se concibe como herramienta transformadora que crea una cultura para promover el desarrollo humano integral desde la conciencia cívica, el diseño de escenarios sostenibles y la perspectiva de la justicia social, contribuyendo así al cumplimiento de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) recogidos en la Agenda 2030. Este estudio de caso pretende identificar los aprendizajes que desarrolla el alumnado universitario al implicarse en proyectos y experiencias de ApS universitario. Se han analizado las narrativas de las conclusiones de sesenta y cinco Trabajos Fin de Grado (TFG) y Trabajos Fin de Master (TFM) del ámbito de la educación realizados en la Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea (UPV/EHU). Las narrativas han sido codificadas para, posteriormente llevar a cabo un proceso de categorización basado en un sistema categorial deductivo-inductivo y con ayuda del software Nvivo. La triangulación del análisis ha sido multimodal. El alumnado define el ApS como medio adecuado para desarrollar competencias universitarias y completar su formación académica. A través de las vivencias y evaluación de las mismas, adquieren aprendizajes conceptuales y procedimentales: conocimientos disciplinarios, contenidos curriculares y

competencias profesionales; y experimentan un cambio identitario al desarrollar su reflexión crítica y valores basados en la justicia social y la sostenibilidad. Al responder a necesidades reales junto a la comunidad, el rol activo y de liderazgo del alumnado es evidente y se involucran a lo largo de todo el proceso. No obstante, la planificación de propuestas de ApS también plantea ciertos desafíos como la relación con las entidades colaboradoras y/o la gestión de los tiempos. Por ello, se propone la gestión institucional para dichos aspectos y, así, facilitar las acciones de aprendizaje-enseñanza dinámicas dirigidas a la contribución comunitaria.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje activo, justicia social, universidad, competencias del docente, identidad

INTRODUCTION

The signing of the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998 was the first step in initiating a political process to change higher education in Europe and to build the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). A year later, in 1999, the process was formalized with the Bologna Declaration, signed by 30 states from the European Union (EU) and others.

This Declaration marked a milestone in defining the parameters that govern the current European university system. Its purpose was to create a unified university system, in accordance with the principles of quality, mobility, diversity, international training, competitiveness, and employment.

The universities' immersion in the EHEA has brought about changes that pose challenges. New methodologies are needed, aligned with today's society, more active, where students take a leading role in their education and are aware of what happens in their environment in order to respond creatively and ethically to problems (Calderón, 2022). There is a call for more autonomous, experiential, constructive, meaningful, cooperative, and committed learning (Fernández, 2006).

This is reflected in the current laws and regulations on higher education. The Organic Law 6/2001, of December 21, on Universities (LOMLOU) proclaims innovation in the ways knowledge is generated and transmitted. Royal Decree 8222/2021, of September 28, which establishes the organization of university teaching and the procedure for ensuring its quality, considers the institutionalization of innovative teaching methodologies in the university context. The new Organic Law 2/2023, of March 22, on the University System (LOSU), emphasizes the importance of responding to the needs of society. In the context of Education Degrees, there is direct reference to collaboration with the social environment, active citizenship, and sustainable futures as basic competencies for professional practice (Orden ECI/3857/2007). It is also important to focus on the major challenges facing

the planet, currently contained in the 2030 Agenda in the form of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Naciones Unidas, 2015).

In the universal and shared commitment to sustainable development (Espejel, 2022), education plays a strategic and transversal role, and universities must promote a culture of social responsibility (CRUE, 2018). Higher education, and especially initial teacher training, must be holistic and integral, seeking active participation in community-based alternative change through knowledge and reflection (García-Rico et al., 2021).

In this line, Service-Learning (S-L) emerges as a transformative tool that promotes human development, designs sustainable future scenarios, and works on social justice for community coexistence (Candela-Soto et al., 2021). Its premise is to establish a link between educational growth and responding to social needs (Fernández-Prados & Lozano-Díaz, 2021).

More precisely, S-L is defined as an educational proposal that combines and integrates: (1) a learning process encompassing disciplinary knowledge, curricular content, values, and reflection on practice; and (2) a solidarity-based service, coordinated with the community, that seeks to address real social deficiencies in the local context (Lorenzo et al., 2019). It is an experiential, autonomous process that requires practical application and real involvement and/or commitment (Santos-Pastor et al., 2021).

Thus, the practical application of knowledge in real-world settings has a significant impact both on education and on society. Identifying social issues helps guide reflection to understand the identity of the context and its critical issues for the community (Escofet et al., 2016). By actively and critically addressing detected needs, the well-being of the community is promoted (Aramburuzabala et al., 2015; Ganga-Contreras et al., 2021). Services aim to change the environment, improving it and aligning with the foundations, principles, and skills of education for sustainability (Granados, 2010).

This symbiotic student-community relationship provides new meanings for the learning process (Butler et al., 2021). It offers the opportunity to develop fundamental life skills such as teamwork, empathy, effective communication, and problem-solving, as well as emotions and values (Blanco-Cano & García-Martín, 2021; Garay et al., 2021; Lázaro-Cayuso et al., 2023).

It also enhances students' ethical and social commitment, as community interaction challenges social inequalities and injustices (Butler et al., 2021; Zygmunt et al., 2020). This results in the active defense of groups in greater vulnerability, while students experience the sense that their actions can be transformative (Morales et al., 2020). All of this translates into the formation of a mindset based on social justice.

Moreover, in the case of initial teacher training, S-L serves as a motivational methodology in which students develop their pedagogical practice with the aim of ensuring inclusive learning opportunities (García & Cotrina, 2015). This allows them to build their own professional identity through critical reflection, being aware of their skills development (Giles et al., 2021).

Thus, in recent years, educational innovation and S-L have been coexisting and gaining ground in universities (Agrafojo et al., 2017; Candela-Soto et al., 2021; Sánchez-Caballé & González-Martínez, 2022). Both the World Conference on Higher Education and the Conference of Spanish University Rectors recognize the importance of institutionalizing S-L as a teaching strategy within the framework of university social responsibility (CRUE, 2018). In the same vein, recently, the G9 Group of Universities has decided to launch a network of S-L for its implementation (García-Rico et al., 2021), and many university educational centers are already working on its institutionalization (Gezuraga et al., 2023; Valderrama & Arocha, 2022).

Based on the relationship between S-L, active learning, and the social responsibility that higher education must respond to, this paper aims to identify the disciplinary knowledge, curricular content, professional competencies, critical reflection, and values of education for sustainability that university students develop through the implementation of S-L. All of this is carried out through the lens of the specific competencies in initial teacher training in the Final Degree Project.

Thus, the goal is to provide evidence on university-level S-L so that it can be extended as a permanent methodological strategy to all degree programs in response to comprehensive, high-quality education.

METHOD

Design

This study is situated within qualitative educational research, as it “involves a direct concern for experience as it is lived, felt, or experienced” (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p. 7). It examines the processes of practice in order to understand them and implement improvements from different perspectives, such as social justice (Santaella, 2006).

The chosen methodological framework intertwines narrative research and case study to provide a broad, descriptive analysis of the experience. The study analyzes the works produced by university students, using them as a vehicle to gather information about various events from the protagonist's voice (Susinos & Parrilla, 2016). The goal is to comprehensively understand the results of the learning process undertaken by students during the implementation of S-L in teacher training

(Vázquez-Recio & Angulo-Rasco, 2003). In this way, by approaching the reality of the experience, it will be possible to assess the impact that the S-L methodology has on the professional and personal development of higher education students.

Context and Participants

The context of this study is a project within the Campus Bizia Lab (CBL) program at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). This program aims to articulate an interdisciplinary approach to education for sustainability. To achieve this, it promotes the development of Final Degree Project (FDP) and Master Thesis (MT) based on challenges related to social, economic, and environmental issues.

The CBL project “Transforming Realities: University and Community Cooperating to Humanize Education through S-L in the Final Degree Project and Master Thesis” (Transforming Realities) is linked to the experiences and narratives analyzed in this study. It proposes the implementation of S-L as a methodology in the FDP course in Early Childhood and Primary Education Degrees or in the MT course in the Master’s program in Secondary Education, Vocational Training, and Language Teaching at UPV/EHU. Thus, it is an innovative teaching project that has been consolidated year after year, since 2018, in the Faculty of Education and Sport and the Faculty of Education, Philosophy, and Anthropology at UPV/EHU.

The students participating in the “Transforming realities” project as part of their FDP or MT must design, implement, and evaluate a solidarity-based service coordinated with and for the community, with the goal of addressing real social deficiencies identified in the most vulnerable local environments, thereby reducing inequalities. The services are typically linked to SDGs four (quality education), five (gender equality), and ten (reduced inequalities). The most common themes addressed include support for education in areas such as inclusion, gender, physical education, the arts, and digital resources.

Additionally, students are committed to engaging in critical reflection processes to identify the most significant aspects and outcomes of their learning experience (Escoda, 2017). To do this, students document what happens during their S-L projects through field notes with observations, anecdotes, or other evidence, including photographs (while ensuring the confidentiality of service recipients). Then, students use the collected documentation to develop a narrative script (Deeley, 2016), in which they delve into aspects of planning, implementation, and evaluation, such as the suitability of the methodology, agreements made in meetings, emotions and feelings, facilitating and hindering factors, and the quality and resolution of critical events.

At the conclusion of the service, students prepare the information gathered in their diaries for analysis. This process is carried out qualitatively through coding,

categorization, and interpretation (Barbour, 2013). Subsequently, in their FDP or MT, students present conclusions about their personal learning process.

For this study, a total of sixty-five narratives have been considered. Fifty-eight narratives were produced by fourth-year students from the Early Childhood and Primary Education Degrees who completed their FDP at the aforementioned faculties. The remaining seven narratives were created by students from the specified Master's program who completed their MT. All FDP and MT analyzed were developed and defended during the 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22, and 2022/23 academic years (see Table 1). The conditions for selecting the narratives included, on one hand, their belonging to the CBL project "Transforming realities" during one of the enumerated academic years and, on the other hand, that the author of the FDP or MT signed their informed consent.

Table 1

Distribution of the Number of FDP and MT Related to the Project Developed and Defended by Academic Year

Academic year	Number of FDP Defended	Number of MT Defended	Total narratives
2018/19	6	2	8
2019/20	21	1	22
2020/21	10	1	11
2021/22	10	1	11
2022/23	11	2	13
TOTAL	58	7	65

Source. Own elaboration.

Participation in the research has been entirely voluntary, with prior consent from all participants. Furthermore, the research has been conducted in accordance with ethical principles and the General Data Protection Regulation.

Instruments

Students participating in the CBL project "Transforming realities" must produce a reflective ethnographic narration throughout their S-L project, which will later be analyzed to assess their learning process and reflect on the results and conclusions. These conclusions from the FDP and MT have served as the primary instrument for gathering information for this study.

In the reflective ethnographic narrations, students document their observations, needs, interests, and involvement through their lived experiences, evaluations of the service, feelings during the process, reflections on critical events, and the most significant evidence (Rekalde et al., 2014). Analyzing all these elements and drawing conclusions allows students to become aware of what has been done and/or achieved (Puig et al., 2012).

Analysis

After completing and defending their FDP and MT based on S-L, students were asked for their informed consent to extract and analyze information from their written reports. The theses were stored, and to meet the study's objective, the conclusions section of each thesis was analyzed.

The narratives were coded with an alphanumeric code, following this formula: "E" for "estudiante" (student), followed by a number assigned alphabetically based on the author's name, an underscore, and the year of the thesis defense (e.g., E3_2019).

To ensure the analysis progresses from the particular to a more general perspective, a deductive-inductive categorical system was constructed (Rapley, 2014). This system was supported by both the reviewed theories and the emerging information from the narratives, which represents the main ideas in the form of dimensions and categories, as well as the hierarchical relationships between them (Coffey & Atkinson, 2003) (see Table 2).

For the dimensions, the blocks proposed by Arias-Sánchez et al. (2018) for analyzing field diaries of S-L experiences at the university level were used: Conceptual Learning, referring to disciplinary knowledge and/or curricular content associated with university training; Procedural/Professional Learning, relating to professional competencies; Identity Change Processes, regarding values; Experience Evaluation, considering more methodological aspects. Emerging categories in the analyzed narratives were placed within these dimensions.

The categorization process was defined and validated by four members of the research team involved in the CBL project "Transforming realities," all of whom are specialists in the field. Initially, the documents were individually analyzed, and emerging themes were extracted. These proposals were then shared and compared to define the dimensions and categories, considering both the proposed blocks and the emerging results from the analysis. Once the categorical system was defined, the information from the narratives was individually categorized, followed by cross-checking the analysis in pairs and between the pairs.

The dimensions and categories were turned into nodes in the NVivo software, which facilitates the organization, systematization, and analysis of

qualitative information through branched nodes that emerge from categorizing the information. This tool not only organizes the information but also allows for dynamic manipulation or modification of the initial classification and the counting of voices within each node.

The information was triangulated multimodally across different participants and at different stages (before, during, and after) (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2017).

RESULTS

The results are structured according to the categorical system. The number of occurrences of the dimensions and categories in the files, as well as the categorized references, are detailed in the table below, along with the percentage (rounded) of each number relative to the total (see Table 2).

Table 2
Categorical System

Dimension	Category	Files	%	References	%
Conceptual Learning				414	44
	Planning of teaching-pedagogical proposals	58	100	135	14
	Management of implementation	58	100	194	21
	Inclusion	21	40	48	5
	Disciplinary knowledge	27	51	37	4
Procedural Learning				258	27
	Relationship between theory and practice	9	17	11	1
	Critical thinking	19	36	51	5
	Reflection on educational/professional practice	45	85	102	11
	Autonomy	12	23	29	3
	Decision-making	23	43	47	5
	Social competencies	13	25	18	2

Dimension	Category	Files	%	References	%
Identity Change Processes				103	11
	Emotional competencies	19	36	24	3
	Commitment and involvement	24	45	43	5
	Awareness and social justice	21	40	36	4
Experience Evaluation				166	18
	Achievement of objectives	41	77	84	9
	Meaningful learning	42	79	73	8
	Reflective practice	6	11	9	1
TOTAL		58	100	941	100

Source. Own elaboration.

Conceptual Learning

Regarding learning related to disciplines and curricular content, the references in the analyzed narratives are abundant. A total of 44% of the references (n: 414) relate to this block, making it the most prominent.

All the narratives refer directly to the proposals designed and implemented as community service, as this is one of the central axes of S-L projects. The need to provide a creative response to a real need for a specific context has been a significant challenge for most students. This has required the implementation of various methodological strategies and the creation of original and specific materials. This is directly connected with curricular content from the different areas of their university training, including general and specific pedagogical and didactic knowledge.

“The meetings (dialogue and coordination) are essential for adequate planning. They allowed for an in-depth analysis of the center’s needs to direct the service to what had been diagnosed.” (E4_2019)

The implementation of the planning was an approximation to educational reality and the teaching profession, as it was necessary to analyze and make modifications during practice to correctly carry out the service and meet its objectives satisfactorily. Students had limited time (ten hours), which many found to be an obstructive factor. The timing of actions is not an easy task, especially in educational areas where they have no prior knowledge. On the contrary, the support from collaborating agents,

as well as the involvement and motivation of the service recipients, were seen as positive and even decisive factors for success.

"Certain aspects that may seem uncertain in the planning phase were naturally resolved during implementation, such as groupings for dynamics." (E29_2021)

"As a suggestion for improvement, the first thing I would mention is the lack of time. Before offering the service, it is important to get to know the users. This way, there would be more chances to prepare high-quality sessions that achieve the objectives. (...) Getting to know the environment and the people allows for tracking achievements and evaluating the impact of the service. In my case, I would have liked to have had more sessions." (E12_2020)

"I appreciate the great effort made by the center to carry out the project correctly." (E49_2023)

"In this sense, it is important to highlight the strength and desire to do things that the service users have." (E29_2021)

Students believe that this experience has been a great opportunity to complete their previous academic training. The proposals mainly aimed to improve and complement education so that it can respond comprehensively to today's reality. Disciplines such as physical education, coeducation, cooperation, oral expression, the digital realm, and especially inclusion were addressed. Due to the nature of S-L, university students chose to develop their services in educational centers and/or non-profit organizations that cater to vulnerable people or small, isolated populations, such as individuals with disabilities, functional diversity, or those in prison.

"Getting to know other realities up close changes previous ideas (or prejudices) and strengthens the perspective of inclusion." (E30_2022)

"My conception of inclusion has changed, and I have understood that real inclusion is still a challenge to overcome. Diversity is a great treasure and, at the same time, a constant challenge that teachers must respond to in a fair and democratic way." (E38_2022)

Procedural Learning

A total of 27% of the references (n: 258) refer to professional competencies related to the teaching career, with the following competencies standing out: the relationship between theory and practice, critical thinking, reflection on educational practice, autonomy, decision-making, and social competencies such as communication and teamwork.

By putting into practice what was learned theoretically, students activated critical thinking, accompanied by reflective action and self-criticism about their

teaching work. The narratives show that students were able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their projects, being aware of the possibilities and limitations in each context and situation. Sometimes, both theory and service development or impact are questioned, demonstrating a mature pedagogical perspective. For this, the diary has been a helpful tool.

“Of course, there is no pedagogical action if we do not question ourselves. We must be critical, not with the environment, but with our own thoughts and beliefs.” (E9_2020)

“It is a proposal that allows us to integrate the learning of knowledge with service to others, being responsible. Ultimately, it has allowed me to reflect on educational action and enrich my personal view as a teacher.” (E56_2023)

As S-L is an active methodology where students are the protagonists, autonomy stands out as a determining factor and is perceived as significantly developed. A clear example of this is the real-time modifications made throughout the implementation, mentioned in the context of conceptual learning. After each modification, there is a critical incident, a pedagogical observation, a critical reflection, a decision-making process, and a response based on all of this. A large part of the students describe these decision-making processes in their narratives.

“S-L projects consist of various phases, and I must be the active protagonist of all of them. This is a great challenge that motivates me, but at the same time, it scares me.” (E46_2022)

“I believe these practices have given me different moments of reflection regarding my role as a future teacher. Being in front of a class always raises doubts, especially when something new is implemented. These are doubts that don’t stay in the gym next to the session you carried out, but go with you and remain until you find an answer. Writing the diary has given me the opportunity to remember the sessions over and over again, identifying areas for improvement without diminishing the value of those that made the service reach all students in the best way possible.” (E7_2020)

Regarding the development of social skills, students report that they have strengthened their communication skills and ability to work collaboratively. Designing, implementing, and evaluating S-L projects requires building relationships with community organizations, communicating and coordinating with responsible persons, and interacting actively with the service recipients.

“Moreover, I have developed competencies that are often given less importance than they should, such as social competence and initiative.” (E2_2019)

Identity Change Processes

S-L projects seem to have a direct impact on academic-professional and personal development. In 11% of the references extracted from the narratives (n: 103), emotional aspects are mentioned, with a focus on the values developed or strengthened.

The voices of the protagonists show the community-student bonds, materializing in social awareness and involvement. Diagnosing and responding to real needs has activated the empathy necessary to gradually build democratic citizenship.

"The diary has been vital for turning the experience into a personal reflection exercise, and it has activated emotional and intrapersonal intelligence." (E50_2023)

"I think this is an opportunity to get involved in a real need." (E42_2022)

"I have learned from this work as a teacher that one of my main objectives is to ensure that the school and the classroom are safe environments. In this way, all students would have the freedom to be, feel, and express themselves as they wish. Achieving that climate will respect each person, regardless of personal identity, sex, origin, needs, culture, etc. That is to say, a climate of respect will help reinforce the self-esteem and identity of students and teachers, while at the same time building a collective identity. However, this requires effort, and for that, my duty is to be in continuous learning, because I have internalized the ideas transmitted to us by the culture we were educated in, and this requires a process of deconstruction and reflection." (E20_2020)

The reasons why people flee their countries of origin are many, but by getting to know them, we realize we are privileged. The project has helped me to be grateful and to understand what is really important." (E30_2021)

Students mention values such as commitment to sustainability, emphasizing the importance of working on social justice through education. In many cases, the practice and subsequent critical reflection on S-L projects have led to active awareness.

"The service I provided has been a very enriching and educational experience for me. Through the service, I developed my social consciousness and responsibility, acquiring the necessary tools for my future teaching profession." (E29_2021)

"Often, we talk about social transformation in a very general way. We need to be aware and commit ourselves to social responsibility as active citizens. If we do not, social transformation becomes an empty concept." (E48_2023)

Experience Evaluation

In the narratives, students also analyze and evaluate S-L as a methodology, as indicated by 16% of the references (n: 166). S-L is described as a suitable means for university education and competency development, specifically referring to the Early Childhood or Primary Education Degree, and therefore to initial teacher training. S-L is an active methodology that transforms the way of learning.

“I have moved away from the traditional model and have learned and collaborated actively.” (E22_2020)

“This pedagogical model is consistent with the demands of constructivism, active pedagogy, cooperative learning, and active methodologies.” (E12_2022)

Participating students believe that S-L provides an opportunity to complete learning from different perspectives and in a meaningful way. The projects result in real experiences where the responses designed and implemented are also real, offering contextualized, practical, and active learning, while being transversal and integral. The achievements gained through service and the reflective practice promoted by the methodology are key.

“I consider it to be a very enriching project for my training. Academically, I have had the opportunity to contextualize the learning acquired in the degree, which I would have hardly had the chance to put into practice if it hadn't been for S-L. I have identified that contextualized learning is more meaningful than isolated learning.” (E3_2019)

“I think it is essential to bring university students closer to reality and provide service to the community. In my case, throughout the degree, I missed this type of learning, one that connects with the community so that the learning is effective and closely linked to the curriculum. S-L methodology could be further encouraged through practices in various subjects, thus giving more meaning and application to learning.” (E33_2021)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the impact of S-L projects on university students involved in these projects as part of their FDP or MT. Through an ethnographic analysis of their reflections, the study explores the impact on students' professional training and social commitment when they actively engage in experiential learning processes.

In the narratives, various conceptual and/or procedural learning processes are mentioned that are directly related to the basic competences of initial teacher training and to the specific competences that should be reflected in the TFG or

TFM, coinciding with the results of works such as that of Zygmunt et al. (2020). Services have been required to design, plan, monitor and evaluate teaching and learning procedures both in terms of curricular content and interdisciplinary knowledge. As noted by Marques et al. (2021), S-L projects present challenges such as planning and time management, which can be difficult for students, but these challenges are also a valuable source of practical learning. These difficulties are balanced by the support from other stakeholders involved, which often serves as a positive driving force for the students. The challenges have provided university students with a working knowledge of the classroom and its management and, as they have had to be addressed effectively, have directly impacted on the maturity of the critical perspective (Giles et al., 2021). Also, due to the contexts in which the services have been targeted, the disciplines most emphasised by the participating students are attention to diversity and inclusion, as in the work of Chiva-Bartoll et al. (2019).

The active role and leadership of students in S-L projects is evident in the narratives. This is consistent with similar findings in the literature (Butler et al., 2021; Campo, 2014; Fernández-Hawrylak et al., 2020; García & López-Vélez, 2019). The narratives show that the students' direct engagement with real-world situations allowed them to develop professionally, socially, and reflectively. As they sought solutions to identified community needs, students not only applied their theoretical knowledge but also engaged in self-assessment, which led to the growth of a more nuanced, critical perspective. This process of critical reflection triggered the development of their professional autonomy and decision-making capacity. S-L projects also created environments for collaborative work, fostering communication skills as students interacted with various community sectors and stakeholders.

The experiences have also maximized their interpersonal development. In the narratives, amidst emotions of doubt or fear, the values of responsibility and social justice stand out. The services have been based on active involvement and this has awakened the awareness and commitment of the students who are part of the project. Collaborating with different sectors of the community, becoming agents of change, contributes to assuming the educational dimension and the ethical sense of the teaching function to create a more sustainable community and foster democratic citizenship. All of this coincides with the keys identified in previous research with a similar objective (Aramburuzabala et al., 2015; Capella-Peris et al., 2020; López-de-Arana et al., 2019; Santos-Pastor et al., 2021; Zygmunt et al., 2020).

Regarding the assessment of S-L as a methodology, the students mention its functional value. As it involves real proposals in close environments, they describe it as an opportunity to carry out more meaningful actions that provide greater learning.

The narratives confirm that it is a competence-based approach characterized by the active protagonism of the students in their learning process. As described in the work of Capella-Peris et al. (2020) and Lorenzo et al. (2019), learning (content, skills and values) takes place in action and in cycles of reflection, understanding inequalities, working in teams and applying what they have learnt to become involved in the community. Therefore, the participating university students agree with Zarzuela et al. (2016) and argue that applying S-L in other higher education subjects can positively influence the quality of education as an emancipatory initiative.

In conclusion, S-L can be presented as an effective educational strategy and a driver for social change. The study advocates for the broader implementation and institutionalization of S-L in higher education to provide students with holistic learning opportunities while also fulfilling the university's social responsibility to address contemporary societal challenges.

It is important to note that, while the findings of this study may be applicable to higher education in general, the starting point of the analyzed narratives is the initial teacher training context. Therefore, one of the main limitations of this study is that the participating students are from a specific educational institution, and they were involved in the "Transforming Realities" CBL project. As a potential future direction, the research could be expanded to similar narratives in other contexts with different characteristics.

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