REVISTA KRONOS

A reflection on community-service activities: Influence of teaching-learning through community-service activities in undergraduate students

Sandra González González | iD Universidad Nacional de Educación (Ecuador)

ABSTRACT Service-learning constitutes a relatively new activity in Ecuadorian higher education contexts, which aims to provide the community in need with a service while the participating undergraduate students learn about their future profession while practicing in real contexts. This article presents the importance of changes and reflection that the aforementioned Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros (PINE) students experienced during the service-learning practices included in their curriculum. Apprentices who participated in this research were invited to an in-depth interview. They were asked to tell their stories and experiences during their involvement in projects where they taught English to children from 5 to 11 years old in a virtual modality in different PINE programs in the last year. These interviews were later analyzed using the narrative analysis method in its content analysis form, which consists of listening to the testimonies, after recording, transcribing, and coding them, extracting only the most relevant information for the research from students' narratives. After analyzing the interviews, the data showed that PINE students, after a time frame of participating in the aforementioned activities, experienced plenty of changes in their practices when it comes to their professional training linked to the community and reflection played a key role in that process. After the analysis, the results show that students' exposure to service-learning practices greatly influenced their perceptions about teaching and the practices they consider important during formal instruction.

KEY WORDS Service-learning, English education, reflection, undergraduate education, community service, vocational training.

Reflexión sobre las actividades de servicio a la comunidad: influencia de la enseñanza-aprendizaje a través de actividades de servicio a la comunidad en estudiantes de pregrado

RESUMEN El aprendizaje-servicio constituye una actividad relativamente nueva en los contextos de educación superior ecuatoriana, donde el objetivo es brindar un servicio a la comunidad necesitada mientras los estudiantes de pregrado participantes aprenden sobre su futura profesión, ejerciendo la misma en contextos reales. Este artículo presenta la importancia de los cambios y la reflexión que los estudiantes de Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros (PINE), antes mencionados, experimentaron durante las prácticas de servicio comunitario (guiado por el aprendizaje-servicio) incluidas en su malla curricular. Los aprendices fueron invitados a una entrevista en profundidad. Se les pidió que contaran sus historias y experiencias durante su participación en proyectos donde enseñaron inglés a niños de 5 a 11 años virtualmente en diferentes programas del PINE en el último año. Estas entrevistas fueron posteriormente analizadas

utilizando el método de análisis narrativo empleando el análisis de contenido, que consiste en escuchar los testimonios, luego de grabarlos, transcribirlos y codificarlos, extrayendo de las narrativas obtenidas la información más relevante para la investigación. Después del análisis de las entrevistas, los datos mostraron que los estudiantes del PINE, luego de un tiempo participando en estas actividades, experimentaron muchos cambios en sus prácticas referentes a su formación profesional vinculada a la comunidad y que la reflexión jugó un papel vital durante el proceso. Después del análisis, los resultados muestran que la exposición de los estudiantes a las prácticas de aprendizaje-servicio influyó significativamente en sus percepciones sobre la enseñanza y las prácticas que consideran importantes durante la instrucción formal.

INTRODUCTION

Helping our communities has been considered a valuable service throughout the years, and adding that people can learn from those forms of serving during their formal instruction is revolutionary. Students, after learning in real contexts, are called to use those understandings in their profession in the future, which clearly constitutes an innovative way of teaching in instructional settings. This is how the concept of service-learning was born and adopted by educational institutions around the world. Service-learning has been recognized as one of the methods to enhance students' skills beyond classroom environments and make connections with their communities by understanding education yonder the official curriculum (Bruce-Davis & Chancey, 2012). However, we need to start explaining how service learning is defined. The most accepted and cited definition corresponds to Bringle & Hatcher (1996):

> A credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflects on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 222)

Once the concept has been defined, it is clear that using service-learning establishes sturdy parameters to simultaneously help three main actors: Students who need to practice their skills and abilities in real contexts, teachers who need to propitiate immersive scenarios for their pupils to reflect on their undergraduate track, and the communities who are the stakeholders of the services that the two aforementioned actors perform in order to cover the different needs they have at the time of executing the projects. Applying this methodology promises to not just help the students in their forthcoming careers but also enlighten them about the realities in contexts that are different from their own.

Based on the concept of this method, universities in Ecuador have applied this activity in their curriculum in the last years; a private university in the north of the country was the first one to include it in their General Education Program (Universidad San Francisco de Quito, 2022). Following this path, a public university located in the south of the country asks students to complete 144 community-service activities (adapted from the service-learning methodology) hours through outreaching programs; therefore, students from the Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros (pine) major need to complete this amount of time in 3 semesters (48 hours each). With this aim, students from the lower semesters are included in various programs, one of them where they teach English to children from 5 to 11 years old. In the last 2 years, these activities were implemented through a virtual modality due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019.

These service-learning projects implemented by the aforementioned university aim to serve the community, create consciousness about their needs, introduce students to teaching scenarios, and make them reflect on their practices. Procee (2006) enounced that professionals from different spheres, including teachers, need to be skillful about reflection processes to improve and be pro-

fessional and self-confident about their practices. Additionally, he states that "in education, formal learning and reflection are complementary activities. It would be inappropriate to consider these two activities as competing aspects" (Procee, 2006). Therefore, it is not odd that higher education institutions wanted to implement these activities to help students develop a better competence in their teaching-learning practices and encourage reflection about their performance during these activities.

In the light of the importance of reflection, the researcher found it significant to explore students' thoughts and reflections about the programs where they participated. Hence, a study was carried out with two students who narrated their stories and experiences about their time participating in service-learning practices and how it influenced their lives, practices, and attitudes towards education, community, and vocational training.

This study sought to answer the following research question: What are the changes that PINE students experienced during their service-learning?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this study was a narrative inquiry, which blends the view of particularities of people's experiences and the possibility of an inquiry into these experiences to have an inside interpretation of them in a specific time and context (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Recognizing that a narrative contains a story relevant to the narrator and the audience, we can understand that this methodology has a valid source of information (Moen, 2006). "Narrative analysis takes stories as its primary source of data and examines the content, structure, performance, or context of such narratives considered as a whole" (Wells, 2011). Furthermore, the familiarity students felt when talking to the interviewer was an important matter since, according to Savin-Baden & Niekerk (2007), "when using narrative inquiry it is important that the researcher is not only able to ask questions that elicit stories but also that she/he is able to position her/himself so that stories can be analyzed effectively". Taking this as a basis, the present study was carried out with two students who narrated their experiences during their participation in these projects related to service-learning during the last two years and reflected on their experiences during that period.

DATA COLLECTION

An in-depth interview guide was prepared and applied to two students who participated in two different programs in the PINE major from April 2020 until April 2022 during the covid-19 pandemic, which was why these programs were executed in a virtual modality. The programs taught English to children from 5 to 11 years old for around 3 months and camps that lasted about a month.

Students were prompted to tell their own stories about their participation in the different projects with no restriction, which was helpful since, according to Francis (2018), using the narrative approach can give the researcher a deeper understanding of the subjects' insights and their personal stories. Five open-ended questions were asked to the participants so they allowed individuals to include any type of information they considered relevant according to their personal opinions and experiences. The researcher spent around 5 minutes with each participant to get them ready for the questions answered. The interviews lasted around 30 minutes each, and they were audio-recorded. Participants used their mother tongue (Spanish) since they felt more comfortable using their first language to express their understandings and ideas without any constraint of lack of vocabulary or fluency.

The students' narratives started with their very first moments enrolling in the service-learning project, their feelings, and expectations about it and then, they continued talking about their experiences while they were involved in the activities and how their skills and abilities started to change. Here it was evident that they went through a process where they embraced progression and improvement from the different events that occurred during their permanency in the program. Finally, they ended the interview by stating the experiences that marked them and how they remember their participation in the projects. Later, the testimonies were transcribed and coded, so the relevant information for the study was translated into English. The data collection ended when the interviewees exhausted all their answers. This was evidenced when their answers to follow-up questions turned repetitive or very short. Once the interviews concluded, they were transcribed and coded using the MAXQDA software.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The data analysis started with the transcription of the obtained information from the individuals. Once the texts were available, the data analysis was based on the guidelines provided by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) and one of their four types of reading a narrative: Categorical content perspective. This method, also known as "content analysis," was selected because the individuals' stories can be read by taking into account just the content and not the form of their stories. Therefore, the different utterances and topics that could be mentioned can be "extracted, classified, and gathered into [...] categories/groups" (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998).

After reading the transcripts several times, the process of coding was carried out using the MAXQDA software. The coding was based on stressing the ideas that were repeated or similar in the testimonies of the two students who participated in the study. Highlighting the comparable narratives from the students allowed the researcher to identify different aspects that were repeated in both testimonies. Therefore, these pieces of information were used through the content analysis method to detach them from the story itself and compare them to their parallel ones, extracted from the other student. This process showed that individuals who were part of this research went through alike experiences while they were part of the service-learning programs.

It is important to evidence that due to the similar stories narrated by the students the researcher could find, analyze, and reflect on the three categories that are explained below (see Figure 1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

IMPROVEMENT OF SKILLS IN TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESSES

It is important to mention that the students started this process when they were in the first and second semesters of the degree program when they performed this activity, so they were merely starting their major studies when they participated in these projects. Nevertheless, participants expressed that during the time they belonged to the project, they were able to enhance their skills in classroom management, especially the abilities regarding their speaking skills and the facility to express themselves in front of the children. This

Figure 1. Service-learning reflection on chenges experienced by PINE students
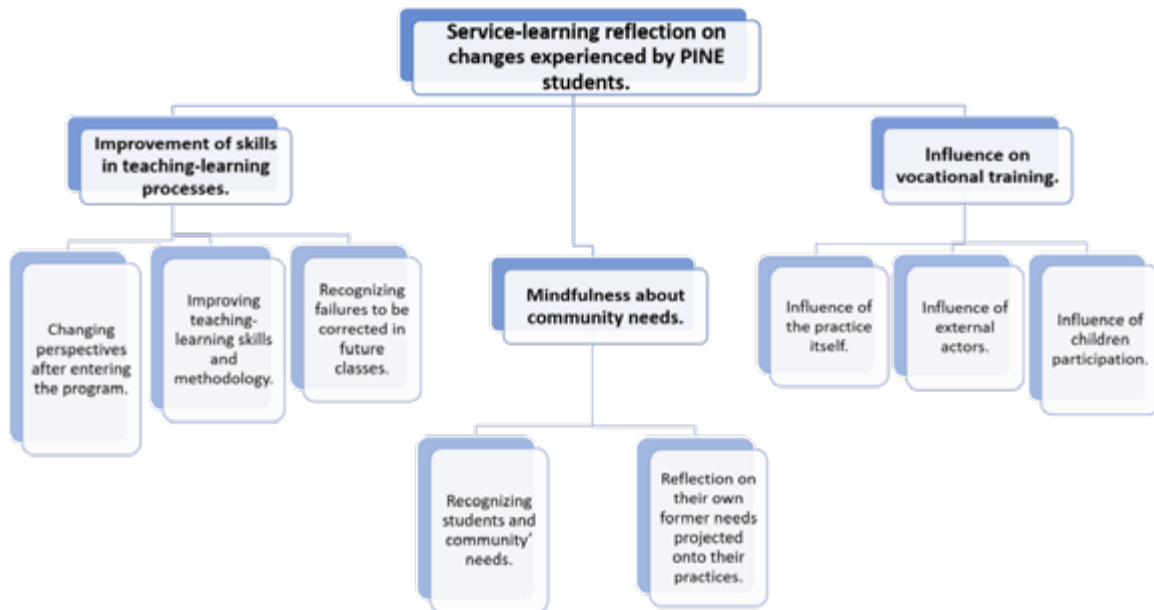
matches the idea that one of the main things students improve in service-learning scenarios is their confidence (Prentice & Robinson, 2010).

Participant A, the first student, told her story and started stating that she did not have a clear idea about teaching itself. Her initial words said:

> Service learning is not an activity I wanted to do per se. I joined it because I was told it was part of my major curriculum. I did not have a clear idea of what teaching was, nor how to manage a group; however, three semesters have passed, and I had the opportunity to practice and improve. It was difficult initially because I was nervous, but later, you became more confident, and you can build trust among the students. (Participant A, personal communication, May 18th, 2022)

Additionally, Participant B was also interviewed, and she provided the following insights about the beginning of her service-learning participation:

> I enrolled for this activity because I received a piece of advice saying that if I did not do it, I would be in trouble. It was not the best way to say it. Nevertheless, after that, I actually enjoyed being part of the program. Before the service-learning program, I would have said that it was just to complete my curriculum hours, but after I was part of that, I do not see it like that anymore. (Participant B, personal communication, May 19th, 2022)

These findings contrast previous thoughts about education and teacher candidates since some decades ago, it was thought that "most preservice teachers believe that they already possess the attributes most important for successful teaching and that they will not have to face the problems faced by most classroom teachers" (Pajares, 1993). Hence, we can observe how the perception of education changed from 'know-it-all' profiles to more reflective and conscious undergrad learners.

This is directly related to the motivation and willingness that pre-service teachers have to acquire new learning (Ojala, 1997). For instance, if students felt that they already knew how to manage a class or teach, they may not have been interested in being part of the teaching program. However, contrary to that, students stated that their teaching practices themselves changed when they got involved in the process:

> At first, I thought 'I will be a teacher. I'll stand in front of my students, and I will talk to them,' but now that I was already in front of a group, it is not just that. It is much more than that. It is preparing material, catching their attention, and keeping everything on point because you need to care about your students. It is not just lecturing them but being humans, understanding how it is that they learn and what activities make them feel more comfortable. This process helped me improve my activities as a future teacher and be more confident about myself. (Participant A, personal communication, May 18th, 2022)

Participant B contributed to this idea as well:

> I think the main thing I improved was my patience. I used to be very impatient, but now I have worked on that because I understand what I know they did not know, so I needed to be patient. Also, I learned to be a teacher; I learned how to teach those kids and not just tell them when something is wrong but explain to them and talk about their mistakes. I try to help them. I even had a notebook just for this activity where I took notes of the words I needed to research because I did not know them, but I wanted to give my students a quality class. (Participant B, personal communication, May 19th, 2022)

It is worth emphasizing that "the increasing prevalence of standards, high-stakes testing, and outcomes assessment obscure the value of reflection, and much else, from fields of vision" (Ward & McCotter, 2004); nonetheless, in this study, the researcher considered reflection as one of the critical results due to the nature of the research paper. Then, as the third piece of information of this code, students revealed their reflection on the practices that they recognized to be faulty by proposing ideas to improve those areas:

> I recognize that I need to improve things. I am studying my fourth semester yet, and there is a long way to the top. Mainly, I would say that I need to improve my time management. In some classes, I ended up not doing one or two activities that were planned because I did not manage the previous activities correctly, and I was just focused on seeing my students having fun. In general, I think I have to organize my classes better, especially in timing matters. (Participant A, personal communication, May 18th, 2022)

> I used to think that the topics for my students who were 10 to 11 years old could be the alphabet or colors, but then my guide teacher suggested using routines and more complicated things, and at first, I thought it would be difficult, but then I learned they could do that and more. After the practice, I recognized I used to be very bitter. Then, if there is another chance to enter this program, I would be more dynamic and play more games because, in virtual education, it was sort of difficult to do that. In a face-to-face program, I would be able to see them, and I would do my best. (Participant B, personal communication, May 19th, 2022)

Students, according to their narratives, evinced that the changes in their views and reflections did not appear from the very first moment they were involved in the practice. Based on their reflections and stories, we can show it was part of a process where they gradually acquired different skills, abilities, and awareness. After analyzing these testimonies, the key codes that were constantly repeated included the words 'difficult', 'improve', and 'learn'. As an interesting fact, we can take these three codes to delimit the time frame that they went through during their practices to notice the changes in their viewpoints.

According to the testimonies, it is evidenced that students at first were afraid or unwilling to be part of the proposed project and it was difficult for them to start the process or follow the expected instructions for effective classes. Later, the ongoing practices pushed them to learn how to teach, how to manage a class, and how to put into practice what they already knew with the guidance of their teachers. Finally, based on what they already knew, they identified opportunities to improve their performance based on the students' interaction and the effectiveness of their classes according to their own reflections on them. Thus, based on this reflection, we can remark on the transformative potential essence of the service-learning experiences.

MINDFULNESS ABOUT COMMUNITY NEEDS

For the students who participate in service activities, it is significant to be aware of the issues influencing the stakeholder communities in outreach programs. Service-learning does not only focus on enhancing students' abilities but also on merging it with a service and reflection about the people who are beneficiaries of the performed activities. Then, we can highlight the importance of this by stating that "Scholarship on the learning outcomes of service-learning emphasizes the importance of facilitating connections between the academic material and the service experience" (Blouin & Perry, 2009).

Based on this premise, the participants also reflected on the outcomes they could observe from their involvement. Hence, Participant A expressed that:

> I think the beneficiaries, besides us as students, were the people in our society. So giving these children the opportunity to attend these classes, giving moms, who do not have enough economic resources to access an English course for their kids, the chance to be part of this, I think is beneficial. So in that way, children can learn English.

From the previous testimony from Participant A, we can indicate that the student greatly understood and implemented one of the main objectives of service-learning, which is the awareness of providing a service to a community. Furthermore, this partaker has explored the justice cause that some authors claim should be included in service-learning from a political perspective (Lambright, 2008). Participant B, as well, commented on this particular characteristic of service-learning;

> Some kids don't really know many things about English. The first group I had was from big schools (from bigger cities and towns) and performed well, but the second group was from a smaller town, and it was evident those kids needed more help. They did not know about colors or verbs that are very frequent, and it made me realize there is a lot of need for the language in these places. (Participant B, personal communication, May 19th, 2022)

An additional important feature revealed is that both students reflected on their own needs when they were kids and remembered their school experiences as not very pleasant, so they reflected on their own needs when they were school students and projected them into their classes. Therefore, they expressed they wanted to change that in their lessons:

> Sometimes, when I was a kid, and something happened, something like a stomachache or so, we as children were afraid to tell the teacher. I used to think the teacher would scold me, and I did not say anything. Now I think that children have needs and I need to talk to them, be their friend and know how they feel because that is important in education.
> When I was a kid, teachers were not patient with us. They used to shout at us, just tell us something was wrong, and that was it. They never corrected us or gave us feedback. I tried to do it differently with my kids. I corrected them, I try to explain things well, and we have conversations. (Participant B, personal communication, May 19th, 2022)

This last reflection should help students understand that teachers, even when seen as figures of authority and total respect for the kids, "are half-full vessels that need to be filled with the knowledge of outside experts" (Oleson & Hora, 2014). Consequently, as future teachers, participants reflected on the needs their former teachers had so they do not repeat it with their students. From this experience, participants identified unknown problems until then due to their lack of familiarity with some of the ill-fated backgrounds children in the program had. Fortunately, these situations triggered their reflection on the need to help these stakeholders in teaching-learning English scenarios.

It is also worth mentioning that these PINE students found out that English plays a key role in people's lives. They included phrases assuring English was important and that this language opens doors, which can be also taken as an indicator that they learned the value of not just learning a second language but teaching it to people who can take advantage of

it in future scenarios. As students of the PINE major, it is a vital acknowledgment that can help them reflect on the service they provide adducing that this is one that only effectively trained English teachers can make available.

INFLUENCE ON VOCATIONAL TRAINING

The primary decision of being a teacher may depend on many different variables such as tilts toward kids, previously identified skills, political motivation, etc. Nonetheless, service-learning can provide pre-service teachers motivation to ensure that they select the right professional training. In the light of this discernment, participants talked about their vocational training motivation and how it changed in this context:

> These practices served as the basis of what was coming next. We're studying to be teachers and this is taking the first steps toward there. This process caught my attention and made me want to be better. It helped make me see myself in the future and say, 'This is what I want to do, this is what I want to do for a living, and this is what I want to work for". (Participant A, personal communication, May 18th, 2022)
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> This was a beautiful experience as the kids helped me a lot. It widened my mind because, at first, I wanted to be a translator, but then I taught those kids and realized this is the place where I belong, this is my vocation, and I want to culminate in this major. (Participant B, personal communication, May 19th, 2022)

The previous statements agree with some other studies carried out in different majors related to education. For instance, a study about pre-service teachers of Physical Education revealed that "positive direction students expressed about this service-learning experience and its influence upon their continued desire to remain in the PETE program with an ambition to teach physical education provides some contribution toward a democracy of meaningful learning through service" (Miller, 2012). It is also stated that this experience "reinforced their call to teach" (Miller, 2012). Then, comparing this study to the previous participants' testimonies, we can observe the desire of remaining in the same major pursuing the selected career after experiencing firsthand teaching.

Connected to the realization of their vocation, students also expressed that there is external motivation provided by different actors involved in the process. Some of these groups are parents and guide teachers who are key in developing service-learning activities. For example, the first participant highlighted the role of parents in her motivation changes:

> At the end of the course, some parents reached me and asked me to continue teaching their kids in particular classes. I said no because I did not feel I was prepared for that yet, but it made me feel good about myself because it told me I did a good job and other people recognized it. It made me feel proud of myself. Parents trusted me, which is also part of being a good teacher. (Participant A, personal communication, May 18th, 2022)

On the other hand, Participant B expressed that motivation also came from her guide teacher, who helped students in different situations:

> I think our guide professor was always there for us, and it was important. He never left us 'on seen', and he tried to help when there was any problem. He never blamed anything on us when anything went wrong but tried to find a solution. That was motivating. (Participant B, personal communication, May 19th, 2022)

This last statement matches the claim that teacher educators should guide students in the creation of principles when performing their educator roles and also help them build heuristics from the different teaching-learning experiences. These actions will shape students' decisions and profiles as future teachers when they relate these experiences to real future contexts (Whitney et al., 2013).

Finally, students expressed their greater motivation that changed initial perceptions about their profession came from the kids, expressing that:

> When I started teaching my first group, the kids were so participative that I loved to be in that class. When it came to the second group, they were even more participative, and they talked to me telling stories and expressing how they liked the classes. I could see myself in the future saying this is what I want my students to feel, I will try to be their friend and address them in the best way possible. (Participant A, personal communication, May 18th, 2022)

> The kids helped me a lot all the time. They entered the classes because they wanted to learn; they liked English and expressed it. When the course was over, they kept telling me not to go; they said they loved me. This was amazing because I felt I did things well. This was the best experience, although I cried a lot. (Participant B, personal communication, May 19th, 2022)

Reflecting on the stories that the participants presented, it is revealed that they did not feel influenced only by the practice itself but also by the actors who were involved in the process. Therefore, we can highlight that here it is evidenced that service-learning is "a social network setting that comprised of so many individuals; the community people, school teachers/administrators, and students from different socio-cultural, background and locations" (Deba et al., 2014). Consequently, experiences are varied, multidimensional, and likely to deliver diverse results about students' changing their viewpoints about their practices depending on these variables.

The obtained information made it clear that students who participated in this study found service-learning to be an experience that greatly influenced their practices, although they had to go through a process before the reflection itself happened. Students evinced they were afraid and even reluctant at the very beginning of their practices; however, as time went by, they acknowledged that providing the community with a service while they were learning and improving their performance as future teachers was even more valuable than just learning in the university campus.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that the PINE students who participated in this study experienced significant changes in their practices after exposure to service-learning activities. Their teaching-learning skills, awareness of the community's needs, and vocational training were greatly swayed depending on the different events happening around their performance during their involvement in the different projects and following a time frame of evolution during their participation. The value of activities like service learning in preparing students for their future careers as a teacher is demonstrated in this research. Students found out that their pre-conceptions and previously learned skills could be improved once they met real contexts and practices. Abilities to teach, mindfulness of the community's needs, and motivation to pursue their vocational training were reinforced while they were part of these projects. Nevertheless, as it can be observed, students need to be willing to acquire innovative knowledge and reflect on their performance while being part of service-learning programs so their learning can be meaningful.

Furthermore, comparing these outcomes to other studies evinced that service-learning is a powerful tool to introduce pre-service teachers or professionals to their future real job scenarios and identify if they selected the right career. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that this study has some limitations since it cannot be generalized to other service-learning practices due to the nature of the study and that the sources of information are individuals who told their experiences from their point of view. Finally, for further research, it

is recommended that wider studies be carried out by analyzing the identified and coded changes in categories using a larger sample to evidence service-learning's impact.

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