

Integrating Service-Learning to Promote Inclusion in Teacher Training

Rocío López-García-Torres*

Department of Educational Sciences, CEU Cardenal Herrera University, Valencia, Spain
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5647-764X>
Email: rocio.lopez@uchceu.es

Elia Saneleuterio

Department of Language and Literature Didactics, University of Valencia, Valencia, Spain
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4060-9518>
Email: elia.saneleuterio@uv.es

Nuria Andreu-Ato

Department of Educational Sciences, CEU Cardenal Herrera University, Elche (Alicante), Spain
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9808-545X>
Email: nuria.andreu@uchceu.es

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Abstract: Inclusive education remains a central challenge in teacher training, requiring pedagogical approaches that bridge theory and practice. Service-Learning (SL) has emerged as a methodology capable of fostering both professional competencies and civic responsibility. This study analyzes the implementation of an SL project in Childhood and Primary Education degrees at a private Spanish university, aimed at preparing future teachers to address diversity and promote social justice in their classrooms. A longitudinal case study was conducted over eight academic years (2017/2018–2024/2025), involving 392 students enrolled in inclusive education courses. The project integrated experiential placements in associations serving individuals with disabilities. Data collection combined qualitative instruments and quantitative measures. Findings revealed high levels of satisfaction among both students and partner organizations. Quantitative data show that over 80% of participants rated the *formative, learning, and service* dimensions as high or very high. Qualitative analysis highlights three core aspects: *cooperative learning and collaboration with professionals, empathy and ethic of care, and respect for diversity and social justice*. Students reported significant personal growth, improved professional skills, and a deeper understanding of inclusive practices. Partner centers confirmed that the service activities effectively addressed their needs. The results confirm that SL is a powerful pedagogical strategy for teacher education, enabling the integration of academic knowledge with civic engagement. The project not only strengthened professional competencies but also transformed students' attitudes toward diversity, fostering empathy and social responsibility. These outcomes support the inclusion of SL as a structural component of teacher training curricula, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals and the European Higher Education Area's emphasis on competency-based education.

Keywords: Service-Learning, Higher Education, Pre-Service Teacher Training, Innovation, Sustainable Development Goals, Inclusive Education.

1. Introduction

The construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) represented a significant change for universities, not only in structural aspects but also in the reestablishment of their social commitment (López-de-Arana Prado, Aramburuzabala Higuera & Opazo Carvajal, 2019). The Bologna Declaration (EHEA, 1999) states that Higher Education institutions must train professionals who become not only competent in their fields but also participative citizens, capable of contributing to the improvement of

society and the support of disadvantaged groups. Universities have a dual commitment: institutionally, to academic knowledge and the development of scientific understanding; and socially, to ethical responsibility and engagement with the social sphere—meaning they must be connected to their surroundings and contribute to the transformation and improvement of reality (Ayllón-Salas, 2024; Filges et al., 2022).

In this regard, the Statute of the University Student, approved by Spanish Royal Decree 1791/2010 (Spain's Ministry of Education, 2010), promotes the combination of academic learning and community service as a means to improve quality of life and foster social inclusion. Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) urge citizens to introduce changes in their lifestyles, in economic and social development, and in the way they think. Consequently, education must be directed toward the development of attitudes essential to civic training that responds to these social needs (Ruiz-Corbella & García-Gutiérrez, 2023). Service-learning (SL) is precisely one of the most suitable and effective pedagogical approaches for achieving both knowledge and civic awareness through reflective social action (López-de-Arana Prado et al., 2019). This project reflects such an experience: an initiative framed within the broader set of innovative actions carried out by a Spanish university, which aims to help transform the culture of teaching by guiding educational activities not only toward students' professional competency but also toward fostering their social responsibility and commitment.

This educational methodology belongs to the pedagogy of experience, which is a teaching approach organized in such a way that it enables students to engage directly with the real-life phenomena they are studying or analyzing (Andreu-Ato, 2025). The SL strategy has long been applied in various contexts, mainly in non-formal education, through volunteer service experiences that, while organized to facilitate learning, also address social needs. However, in recent decades, efforts have been made to systematize and categorize SL—first in the Americas and then in Europe—leading to its expansion in formal education systems. The SL methodology has proven successful both in terms of learning outcomes and in the quality of service delivered. It also offers an additional benefit: the strengthening of civic engagement and community involvement (López-García-Torres, Saneleuterio & Andreu-Ato, 2021). From its inception, SL has served as a valuable tool to promote learning through real-world experiences and service to the community. In short, SL creates a virtuous cycle that connects a social cause to a service carried out by young people—who, in turn, find meaning in their learning through that service. It is as simple as learning by serving the community. Indeed, Santos Rego, Mella-Núñez and García-Álvarez (2021) remind that working in community settings and academic learning are two mutually enriching and reciprocal spheres. This is the strength of SL, according to Zayas Latorre, Gozávez Pérez and Gracia Calandín (2019): building learning through action in society, via associations or community-rooted initiatives, a methodology which is increasingly attracting national and international attention in disciplines such as Law, Economics, Engineering, Social Sciences, and Education (Ayllón-Salas, 2024).

In this context, SL is conceived not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a strategic element of the university's institutional culture (Ruiz-Corbella & García-Gutiérrez, 2023), particularly in Education degrees, where the project analyzed in this paper was launched, with a positive impact in helping students acquire both skills and values. The project merges the training of qualified future professionals of Education with the universities' mission to the formation of socially engaged citizens (Filges et al., 2022). For that purpose, the SL strategy is adopted, advocating for a profound shift in educational paradigms—ones

that respond to the needs of a changing society, preparing them not only for technical excellence when they become teachers but also for meaningful social engagement in their local environment. There is no need to overemphasize the importance of inclusive education in today's schools. Attending to each member of the classroom individually is both a legal and ethical obligation for teachers, starting in early childhood training. This project contributes to the development of such competencies and to the comprehensive, values-based education of future teachers, bridging the gap between theory in the classroom and the realities of society.

1.1. The SDGs and Service-Learning

The relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and service-learning (SL) is both close and mutually beneficial. The SDGs have found in the SL methodology an excellent way to engage young people in the transformative changes they propose. In turn, SL finds in the SDGs a wide range of themes upon which to build community service projects. Since SL helps direct excellence and creativity toward social transformation, it becomes a useful tool for aligning education with the SDGs and for turning awareness into commitment, through actions that encourage research, reflect, identify needs, improve realities, contribute to development, connect ideas and agents, act, energize groups, report and solve problems, transform sensibilities and disseminate results (Figure 1).

Figure 1: SL and SDG.



Source. Adapted from <https://www.upv.es/contenidos/APS/info/1083617normalc.html>

SL is a pedagogy capable of generating a culture of co-responsibility in the face of exclusion, aligned with the objectives of human and sustainable development. SL aims at improving and transforming both the individual and the community. It works toward well-being and social justice. However, the connection between the SDGs and SL is not only grounded in the desire to promote better ways of living; it is also supported by sound pedagogical principles. SL is one of the methodologies that asserts the fundamental purpose of education is to address real-world community problems with the goal of promoting the common good. It begins from a core premise: to educate students by involving them in transforming reality. Students become

more competent professionals and better citizens. That is, they are not only made aware: they also become actively engaged and turn into active citizens committed to achieving the SDGs. Education must not be limited to informing, debating, and raising awareness among students regarding current issues; it must involve them in activities aimed at solving real problems within the community. Students must be integrated into the social transformation process as part of their education. This is the most effective way to contribute to their development—as human beings and as agents of change.

1.2. Service-Learning in Higher Education

It is undeniable that Higher Education is undergoing a profound transformation, especially in its teaching practices. This shift is being driven by various innovative methodologies, such as service-learning (SL), which is perfectly in line with new trends related to modern universities' responsibility toward society: they must promote improvement and transformation of reality, establish strong ties with its community, and offer students a comprehensive education aligned with social demands (Cámara Estrella, Díaz Pareja & Ortega Tudela, 2017). University training—both in general and particularly for future teachers—must therefore be holistic, fostering the development of both fundamental and professional competencies, so that graduates can carry out their professional duties—in this case, teaching—with social responsibility, respect, and sensitivity to diversity. As Maravé-Vivas et al. (2022) affirm, Higher Education should not be limited to the mere instruction of professional skills; it must foster the student's integral development, an especially necessary approach in teacher training.

It is essential to instill these competencies in teachers from the outset of their academic training. Opazo, Aramburuzabala and McIlrath (2019) remember that university professors who apply SL integrate elements that enable deep and expansive learning for students, while also realizing the university's social responsibility. Thus, the university must incorporate a distinct social and ethical dimension—an explicit commitment to the social sphere. That is, it must be connected to the suffering reality and contribute to the transformation and improvement of that community environment, which is also a key element in the development of professional ethics (Cámara Estrella et al., 2017; Zayas Latorre et al., 2019). Implementing SL in universities entails opening up to society and creating networks among institutions in order to actively participate in the social fabric students will encounter. The university is a core component of the education system and, as such, cannot ignore the moral culture it conveys—both within itself and to society as a whole (Gómez-Hurtado, Moya Maya & García-Rodríguez, 2019; Santos Rego et al., 2021).

The EHEA already emphasized the importance of competency-based education, as established in various legal frameworks across participating countries. In Spain, this was reflected in Royal Decree 1393/2007 (Spain's Ministry of Education and Science, 2007), which states that study plans leading to a degree must prioritize competency acquisition, broadening—without excluding—the traditional focus on content and classroom hours. This supports not only a formative dimension (concepts and procedures), but also a broader pedagogical vision that integrates axiological and attitudinal components alongside academic content (Álvarez-Arregui,

2019). According to Maravé-Vivas et al. (2022), these EHEA guidelines has driven a notable pedagogical renewal in European universities in the 21st century: active and participatory methodologies are now widely applied and offer the necessary tools for students to develop competencies that go beyond purely academic ones. Likewise, in 2011, the Barcelona Declaration on Service-Learning urged universities to enhance activities that emphasize returning value to society, with the academic rigor and pursuit of excellence expected of a quality institution (González Geraldo, Jover & Martínez, 2017). The declaration calls on universities to recognize the value of such practices in terms of social responsibility and commitment, and to facilitate their implementation.

As such, SL has generated reasonable expectations within the educational system as a key pedagogical strategy. It offers the possibility of shaping intellectual development in young people in such a way that the theoretical foundations of a subject or curriculum can be transferred to real-life contexts for their transformation (Santos Rego et al., 2021). In the university setting, SL projects fall within educational models aimed at improving quality through the practice of university social responsibility and civic engagement (Opazo et al., 2019). Thus, the SL methodology is far more than just a didactic strategy in Higher Education; its value as a pedagogical program lies in its deep axiological significance and relevance to the ongoing debate about the university's role in rebuilding citizenship and fostering a more critical society in the face of social inequalities (Santos Rego et al., 2021).

1.3. Service-Learning and Inclusive Education

As mentioned earlier, there is little need to insist on the importance of addressing diversity in today's school classrooms. Paying individualized attention to each student within a classroom group is not only a legal requirement but also an ethical obligation for teachers, beginning from the early childhood education stage. The goal is to foster the inclusion of differences within the classroom by attending to specific needs. According to UNESCO (2005, 2017), inclusive schooling involves designing and implementing a wide range of learning strategies that specifically respond to the diversity of learners. Currently, inclusive education remains a significant challenge for pedagogical practice. The real task lies in designing learning environments based on increasingly inclusive approaches, settings, and practices that ensure everyone is included on equal terms and with respect for diversity. Nowadays, a school open to all is required, where differences are not seen as a source of exclusion or problems, but rather as a value that enriches everyone. In this context, the work by Mella-Núñez, Quiroga-Carrillo and Crespo Comesaña (2021) has shown that SL can provide a meaningful framework for students to develop competencies that will later be applied professionally within an inclusive paradigm, in both formal and non-formal settings.

The experience allows students to develop a deeper understanding of the social reality affecting members of the community, encouraging a desire for social transformation and contributing to increased individual well-being and social inclusion. This educational approach fosters encounters with others, countering the individualism that strongly affects today's youth. It is essential that young people learn to view the world with a new perspective: with attentive eyes and ears, and with hearts open to people's needs. SL guides students in this direction by providing

the experience of encountering “the other”. Simply contemplating another’s face and struggles carries unquestionable value in inclusive education—something that often happens in SL projects, which are rooted in practical action.

This is a more complete form of learning, one situated in a real social context, and thus it acquires greater meaning for students. Furthermore, the nuances picked up through this learning process could not be gained in any other way. Gómez-Hurtado et al. (2019), for example, present a collaborative educational experience at the University of Huelva involving university students, students with special needs, and educators. It focused on adapting teaching resources to promote inclusive education and universal accessibility. Data were gathered from student records, academic outcomes, and interviews. The project improved student training, fostered professional collaboration, and supported learners with special needs. Also Maravé-Vivas et al. (2022) affirm that the SL enhances students’ knowledge and understanding of the groups served through the project. When pre-service teachers are directly exposed to social or cultural realities different from those they are used to, they strive to understand them and reevaluate their own values and beliefs. This has a positive impact on their training and on their understanding of inclusive education (Opazo et al., 2019). Thus, it is important to emphasize the benefit of learning through experience—based on real needs—and learning alongside expert professionals (Andreu-Ato, 2025).

2. Method

2.1. Methodological Design

With SL and inclusive education framework in mind, the CEU Cardenal Herrera University, launched for the degrees in Education a community service project during the 2017/2018 academic year, and it continues until now. The initiative aimed to contribute to the development of professional competencies and the integral, values-based education of future teachers by bridging the gap between classroom theory and a specific social reality: that of disability.

Table 1: SL Innovation Project for the Education Degrees at CEU Cardenal Herrera University.

2023/2026	Teaching Innovation and Quality Improvement Project 2023/2026: “Service-learning for promoting inclusion and equity: developing professional and personal skills of future teachers through inclusive approaches in the university classroom”
2022/2023	Teaching Innovation and Quality Improvement Project 2022/2023: “Service-learning in the university classroom. Optimizing future teachers’ competencies through practical music therapy and inclusiveness activities”
2021/2022	Teaching Innovation and Quality Improvement Project 2021/2022: “Inclusion and service learning: three scenarios for action in the initial training of future teachers”
2020/2021	Teaching Innovation and Quality Improvement Project 2020/2021: “Virtual Service Learning (VSL) within the framework of diversity pedagogy: adaptation in times of Covid-19”
2019/2020	Teaching Innovation and Quality Improvement Project 2019/2020: “Service-learning practices within the framework of diversity pedagogy” <i>[interrupted by the Covid-19 social and health crisis]</i>
2018/2019	Teaching Innovation and Quality Improvement Project 2018/2019: “Socio-educational practice: consolidating the pedagogy of experience”

The project was based on the SL methodology, began as a pilot initiative and was ultimately consolidated and formalized thanks to its success. Since then, the project has continued to expand (Table 1) and aims to complement the curricular training of future teachers. The present study is situated within a qualitative research design supported by descriptive quantitative techniques, adopting a longitudinal case study approach. The case under analysis concerns the service-learning (SL) project implemented at CEU Cardenal Herrera University's teacher training over eight consecutive academic years (2017/2018–2024/2025), specifically in the Early Childhood Education and Primary Education programs. The choice of this design responds to the need to gain an in-depth understanding of how inclusion training for future teachers is articulated through service experiences in associations dedicated to diversity support.

Among the activities carried out within the framework of the projects listed in Table 1, this paper focuses exclusively on the service experiences developed in associations and centers working with people with disabilities or special educational needs. Thus, the learning achieved by students through the service is aligned with the theoretical content of courses on inclusive education within the study plans of the degrees in Early Childhood and Primary Education. This pedagogical proposal seeks concrete ways to involve students in the everyday life of nearby associations and organizations. It is framed within experiential education and, following Santos Rego et al. (2021), is characterized by five features: student protagonism, response to a real need, alignment with curricular objectives, execution of the service project, and reflection.

2.2. Objectives

The project was conceived to give future teachers a broad and realistic understanding of diversity to contextualize their future professional practice. The pedagogical objective was to develop competencies in Education students that will serve them in their professional future through the provision of a service—fostering student learning while also improving the context in which that service takes place (i.e., responding to the demands, interests, and needs of the host centers). Therefore, the aim of the research presented in this article is to determine the extent to which the project's goals were achieved, and it is broken down into five specific objectives:

SO1: To reflect on the social dimension of academic knowledge, which enables students to identify real needs.

SO2: To assess the extent to which the project fosters cooperative learning and collaboration with other professionals.

SO3: To analyze the reflective spaces in which students internalize their experiences and transform them into meaningful learning.

SO4: To understand students' perceptions regarding the improvement of their empathy and ethic of care, as well as their sense of collectivity in contrast to a culture of individualism.

SO5: To measure the presence of values such as respect for diversity, social justice, and the defense of equal rights and opportunities.

2.3. Participants

2.3.1. Students, Teaching Staff, and Administrative Personnel

The experience developed over eight academic years involved 392 students enrolled in Education degrees, both Early Childhood and Primary Education, distributed into annual cohorts of between 45 and 55 students per year. All participants were enrolled in courses related to inclusive education and joined the project as part of their curricular training. They were expected to improve their motivation and willingness to participate actively in the project and in civic life more broadly. Also, their sensitivity and openness to diversity was expected to grow, as well as their a sense of social justice and the defense of equal rights and opportunities, and democratic, civic attitudes oriented toward collaboration and social transformation. A critical and reflective mindset is also essential—as are values such as responsibility and respect, which are part of education's moral dimension. In addition, this methodological approach required both knowledge and commitment from teaching and administrative staff at various institutional levels. That included the dedicated involvement of faculty members responsible for the relevant courses, as well as academic and general administrative staff, who managed the signing of cooperation agreements with participating organizations.

2.3.2. Centers and Associations

As Mella-Núñez et al. (2021) explain, “the capacity to build bridges between social and educational entities is especially emphasized in Education degrees, where SL has had an excellent reception. Indeed, new collaboration agreements between the CEU Cardenal Herrera University and different local Valencian centers and associations are signed every year. As a result, there are now partnerships with 45 organizations working in the field of disability and special educational needs: they support people with disabilities, early childhood neurodevelopment and intervention, intellectual disabilities, Down syndrome, ADHD, autism spectrum disorders (ASD), motor and sensory impairments, Noonan syndrome, Prader-Willi syndrome, and others—as well as special education centers. These partnerships help the project continue to meet the objectives while also deepening the university's commitment to society. Establishing partnerships between university and civil society organizations opens up opportunities for learning that serves the world, while also strengthening students' cognitive scaffolding, civic responsibility, and moral development (Santos Rego et al., 2021).

2.4. Project Phases

2.4.1. Design, Planning, and Preparation

The SL project was first submitted to the Vice-Rectorate for Faculty and Strategic Planning of the CEU Cardenal Herrera University in September 2018. From the outset, it included a detailed description of its objectives and a plan for the SL experience to be carried out. Following the planning phase and once the project had been approved, the preparation phase began. This phase proved particularly important

both for logistical readiness in the students' placement in centers and for fostering attitudes and commitments among students. As part of student awareness-raising efforts, the *Teaching and Solidarity: Learning by Helping* conference is held every two years at the beginning of the academic year. In addition, specific educational materials explaining what SL entails have been progressively updated at the website. Each year, new collaborating centers, organizations, and institutions have also been added to the project.

2.4.2. Implementation

From the students' side, this SL experience entails a minimum of 1,5 ECTS (15 hours per academic year). As previously explained, during this time students are immersed in specific environments related to the care of children or adults with disabilities. This allows them to link experiential learning—developing competence in supporting individuals with specific support needs—with social engagement. In this way, they consolidate what they learn and put it at the service of others.

2.4.3. Evaluation and Data Collection

Evaluation takes place on two levels: first, assessing the impact on students, both in terms of curricular competencies and ethical and civic development; second, gathering feedback from partner centers. Evaluation of student outcomes is conducted through three instruments, which also served as methods for obtaining the data that would later be analyzed in order to achieve the research objectives mentioned above:

- Guided reflective journals, semi-structured, focusing on: cooperative learning and collaboration with other professionals (SO2); empathy and care (SO4); and respect for diversity and social justice (SO5).
- An individual questionnaire primarily designed to assess students' perceptions of their acquisition of professional competencies during the SL experience (SO1). Initially, a custom-made, non-validated questionnaire was used. Later, the validated instrument by León-Carrascosa, Sánchez-Serrano and Belando-Montoro (2020) was adopted.
- Shared reflection sessions in the classroom (SO3), which facilitate the internalization of experiences and acquired learning.

As for evaluation by centers and associations, this is conducted through dialogue and participatory reflection, to know if their demands, interests, and needs were addressed (SO1).

2.5. Data Treatment

2.5.1. Qualitative Study

The diaries and group reflection sessions were analyzed through a systematic process of thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying categories related to *cooperative*

learning and collaboration, empathy and ethics, and respect for diversity and social justice. Figure 1 shows an example of the coding of a one-day experience recorded by a student—(C) Cooperative Learning and Collaboration, (E) Empathy and Care, (R) Respect for Diversity and Social Justice. In addition, this information was contrasted with that gathered in interviews with the staff responsible for the participating centers.

2.5.2. Quantitative Analysis

As mentioned above, structured questionnaires were used—initially ad hoc and, from 2020 onward, the validated instrument developed by León-Carrascosa et al. (2020). The analysis consisted of descriptive analyses of frequencies and percentages of the following dimensions: *training, learning, and service.*

Figure 1: Example of Coding.

Intense day at the association. We first met with the educator to organize the materials and divide up the tasks (C). ***** explained how to adapt the story using pictograms and gave us some advice on how to maintain the group's attention. Then a classmate told the story. I was assigned to accompany a boy who became anxious because he could not fully understand... (E). I had to speak to him slowly; I encouraged him a lot and helped him keep up with the pace. Later, he had to read a sentence, and when he did it—very well!—he looked at me proudly. The effort is truly worthwhile (E). After that, we played a game with colored cards. We had to support them so that everyone could participate (R). The goal was to make the necessary adjustments so that all could take part. ***** is exceptional. She always steps in calmly and creatively, and with a smile. And together we proposed solutions (C). At the end, we held a brief sharing session. We all agreed on how important it is that no one is left behind, and that everyone can learn (R).
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Note. Anonymized and translated into English from the original in Spanish. Instrument from León-Carrascosa et al. (2020).

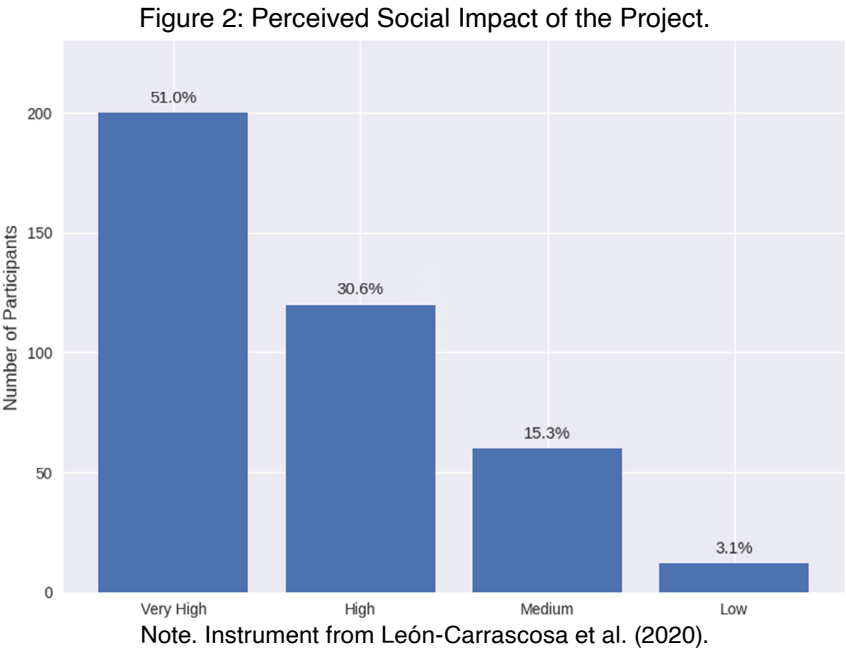
3. Results

The results of this project, which is grounded in the SL methodology, demonstrate multiple benefits for both future teachers and the receiving centers. When analyzing during eight years the impact of the experience on both students and participating centers, a high level of satisfaction was observed. Some of these outcomes were already evident during the early stages of the project and were shared at academic conferences and symposia. Nevertheless, here we analyze them in their entirety:

3.1. Social Dimension (service)

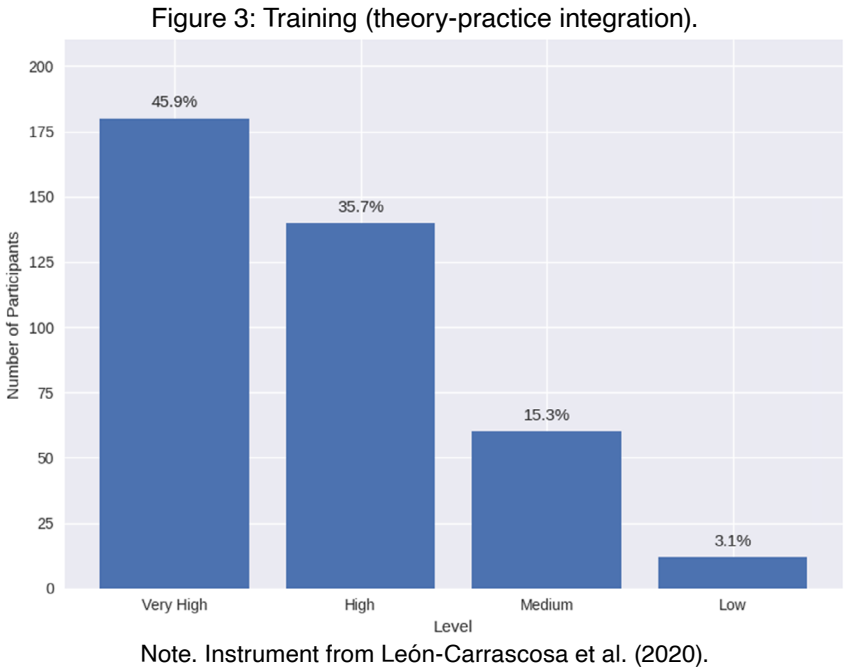
Regarding the outcomes of the services delivered to centers and associations within the Valencian network, it is possible to affirm that these entities benefited from the actions carried out by the students, who responded effectively to the stated needs and demands. This is evident in the results for the *service* dimension, shown in Figure 2:

Also they recognize these benefits by interviews conducted with the leaders of the involved organizations. Moreover, this social dimension was perceived by the students—through the oral reflections that were carried out—as being effectively linked to academic knowledge and the competencies of their degree programs, as shown below.



3.2. Curricular Competencies

Figure 3 and Figure 4, in turn, display the results for the *training* and *learning* dimensions, respectively:



In accordance with the curricular competencies of each degree program (Early Childhood Education and Primary Education), the participant students identified the following ones (Table 2 and Table 3, respectively):

Table 2: Specific Competencies – Early Childhood Education (According to Order ECI/3854/2007).

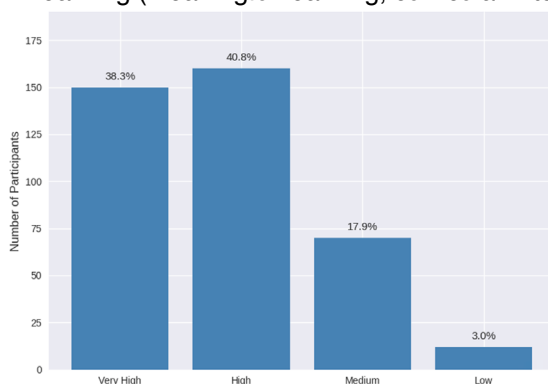
3	To design and organize learning environments in diverse contexts that address the specific educational needs of students, gender equality, equity, and respect for human rights.
19	To identify learning difficulties, cognitive dysfunctions, and issues related to attention.
20	To be able to inform other professional specialists in order to support collaboration between the school and the teacher in addressing special educational needs that may arise.
21	To acquire resources to promote the educational inclusion of students with learning difficulties.

Table 3: Specific Competencies – Primary Education (According to Order ECI/3857/2007).

4	To identify learning difficulties, report them, and collaborate in their treatment.
6	To identify and plan the resolution of educational situations that affect students with different abilities and learning paces.
22	To relate education to the surrounding environment, and to cooperate with families and the community.
69	To be familiar with ways of collaborating with the various sectors of the educational community and the broader social context.
92	To be capable of valuing the dignity of every human being, especially in situations involving developmental or learning difficulties.
93	To be familiar with the school curriculum in such a way that it enables the adaptation of the student's educational pathway according to their individual needs and learning difficulties.
94	To acquire resources to intervene appropriately in educational settings where specific support needs are present.
96	To deepen knowledge in educational psychology as a foundation for addressing various learning disorders.

As can be seen, the last three competencies listed for the Early Childhood Education degree (Table 2) are related to the module on learning difficulties and developmental disorders, in turn, the final four competencies highlighted for the Primary Education degree (Table 3) specifically pertain to the specialization in Special Education.

Figure 4: Learning (meaningful learning, curricular integration).



Note. Instrument from León-Carrascosa et al. (2020).

3.3. Cooperative Learning and Collaboration

The learning journals demonstrated the connection between students and with the staff of the partner organizations, as they reflected the coordination required among them. Likewise, in the surveys, students acknowledged the role of the experience in enhancing their collaborative work skills. This reflective journals contain, valuable insights on how participating in the SL experience fosters cooperative learning and how real learning occurs through collaboration with professionals on interdisciplinary teams.

3.4. Empathy and Ethics

The analysis of reflective journals confirms that working through SL leads students to not only curricular enrichment, but also personal growth, particularly with regard to empathy and an interest in caregiving. As Carrington et al. (2015) point out, future teachers perceive that participating in SL connects directly to their future teaching practice, as it familiarizes them with inclusive education and promotes values—such as respect and empathy—that foster acceptance of diversity, as will be discussed in the following section.

3.5. Respect for diversity and social justice

This project places strong emphasis on reflection. The experience encourages students to think critically and draw their own conclusions. Furthermore, SL fosters core values such as respect for diversity and advocacy for equal rights and opportunities. As also reported by Carrington and Sagers (2008), results indicate a significant improvement in attitudes toward diversity in general and disability in particular, as well as the deconstruction of stereotypes. Overall, the experience leads students to critically reflect on the social and educational care of individuals with disabilities and specific support needs.

4. Discussion

The results obtained after eight years of implementing this service-learning (SL) project at CEU Cardenal Herrera University demonstrate a significant impact on both students and the collaborating organizations. The *service* dimension is the most notable: over half of the students (51 %) rated the social impact and their commitment to inclusion very highly. The strong evaluation in this dimension confirms that participants not only responded effectively to the associations' needs but also internalized a social commitment that extends beyond the academic sphere. These findings align with the repeatedly highlighted potential of SL to foster active citizenship and community responsibility (Ruiz-Corbella & García-Gutiérrez, 2023; Santos Rego et al., 2021).

Regarding the *training* dimension, this also reaches a very high level (45.9 %), reflecting that students perceive SL as helping them integrate professional competencies. Students reported a robust integration between theory and practice, suggesting that SL constitutes a privileged space for the acquisition of professional competencies in real-world contexts. This outcome reinforces the relevance of experiential methodologies in initial teacher education, as noted by Maravé-Vivas

et al. (2022), who emphasize that teaching competence cannot be separated from sensitivity toward diversity and social justice. Practice in associations serving people with disabilities allows future teachers to directly confront the challenges of inclusion, fostering learning that would be difficult to achieve in purely theoretical settings. The *learning* dimension, however, shows a certain balance: although most students rate it as high or very high (79.1 %), a slightly larger percentage falls into the medium level (17.9 %), indicating that not all students perceive the same degree of curricular integration. This finding calls for strengthening guided reflection spaces and deepening the reflective process to ensure that experiences translate into transformative learning rather than isolated encounters.

Moreover, student narratives reveal a sensitivity to participants' emotions, evolving from initial uncertainty to the ability to accompany and support. Here, the ethics of care emerges: being a teacher is not only about transmitting content but also about caring for and sustaining others. This is the pedagogy of encounter—"seeing and listening to the other" as a foundation for inclusion (Santos Rego et al., 2021). Respect for diversity and social justice is the most salient aspect in the diaries. Students recognize that diversity is not an obstacle but a source of educational and social richness.

Overall, the results confirm that SL is a methodology capable of articulating critical elements in teacher education: the acquisition of professional competencies, the development of an ethics of care, and the internalization of values such as respect for diversity and social justice. This also corroborates the observations of Opazo et al. (2019): SL enhances network-building and shared responsibility between university and society, generating deeper learning, particularly through cooperative learning and collaboration with other professionals. Furthermore, the satisfaction expressed by participating associations legitimizes the value of the project beyond the university context. The reciprocity between service and learning, evidenced in the data, constitutes a strong argument for considering SL as a sustainable strategy. In this regard, the analyzed project provides empirical evidence supporting the need to consolidate SL as a structural component of Education curricula, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals and the demands of an increasingly diverse society.

5. Conclusions

The data analyzed by García-Gutiérrez and Corrales Gaitero (2021) reinforce the idea that, as institutions, universities have not only a formative and research function, but also a civic or social mission. According to the findings of their study, this third mission has found in SL an appropriate approach for its fulfillment. Indeed, the types of learning described are essential for individuals who will soon be entering the educational system. The "immersion in reality" that SL provides makes possible learning experiences that would otherwise be unimaginable. Gaining in-depth knowledge of a social group—its reality, challenges, and expectations—enables students to overcome barriers and preconceived ideas often found in the collective imagination.

As demonstrated in this paper, Gil-Gómez, Chiva-Bartoll and Martí-Puig (2015) and Ruiz-Montero et al. (2019) support SL as a tool that facilitates the development of positive attitudes and acceptance of diversity. It also provides direct experience and methodologies that place students in real-life situations—situations that prompt critical reflection and meaningful learning. SL offers the opportunity to learn content

grounded in real-world contexts, thereby producing knowledge while simultaneously addressing social needs, as the study by Cámara Estrella et al. (2017) stands. The SL experience gives students a broad perspective on the reality they are called to engage with and transform. The learning process is nurtured and shaped through environments and situations that foster the development and reinforcement of values essential to students' academic and social preparation. Educational initiatives like this one, which connect student learning with the community, are appropriate strategies for addressing the moral dimension of education and contributing to the construction of a more committed and socially responsible society.

As a core component of the education system, Higher Education cannot detach itself from the moral formation it imparts to both students and society. Teachers cannot ignore the impact of SL on the education of future professionals, in special if they will be teachers. SL promotes the development of participatory, critical, and democratic citizenship competencies in young people, while its research supports broader social improvement (Opazo et al., 2019). It is an urgent commitment for all universities. Moreover, these achievements are substantial, as the development of such skills not only affects pre-service teachers but also empowers them to promote civic attitudes and competencies among their future students. In this context, the spread of teaching innovation projects offers relevant possibilities for Education degrees, where program design has often lagged behind in terms of inclusion.

This research confirms, according to the objectives, that working through SL leads students to not only curricular enrichment (SO1, SO2, SO3), but also personal growth (SO4, SO5). This indicates that all of the specific objectives were successfully achieved. In summary, the analysis of students' journals and questionnaires reflected the acquisition of the social dimension of the academic knowledge aligned with their degree programs and relevant courses (SO1), as well as learning related to teamwork and professional collaboration (SO2), and the development of social awareness and empathy (SO4). Shared classroom reflections and interviews with centers and associations also confirmed that the experience enhanced the acquisition of curricular competencies (SO3) and it fostered core values such as respect for diversity and advocacy for equal rights and opportunities (SO5). From the analysis of the results, the main conclusions can be grouped into three levels:

1. Academic level: the analyzed SL experience increased student motivation and commitment to their future profession.
2. Personal level: participating students expressed high levels of satisfaction.
3. Social level: students enhanced ethical and social commitment.

SL not only enhances the quality of initial teacher education but also contributes to the cultural transformation of the university by placing inclusion and social commitment at the core of its mission. It goes without saying that SL initiatives serve to build lasting partnerships with other organizations in the local community network and offer an excellent context for developing both professional competencies and active citizenship. This is why many universities are embracing SL as a high-quality practice (López Alonso, 2025; Ruiz-Corbella & García-Gutiérrez, 2023). All participants benefit: both those who receive the service and those who provide it are enriched.

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