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Pedagogical Innovation with Sense? A Seminal Experiment of Service-Learning in Gerontological Social Work

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Abstract: Higher education institutions have been investing in teachers' professional development and pedagogical innovation, on the one hand, aiming to promote the quality of institutions and, on the other hand, aiming to promote students' personal and academic development. One of the methodologies that has received particular attention is service-learning, which aims to promote students' learning by providing a service to vulnerable community groups. In this study, we aim to present the results of the application of this methodology in a fourth-year social work course. To this end, a mixed-methods study was conducted with 10 students in the Contemporary Social Work III course using the service-learning methodology. Students experienced between 15 and 30 h of service-learning, most of them for 7 weeks or more in an elder care institution, with varied activities such as social consulting and home visits. When we tried to understand the students' perceived impact, we found higher mean scores in the post-test, with statistically significant differences on several dimensions, particularly self-confidence, problem solving, adaptability and flexibility, dealing with diversity and multiculturalism, understanding complex social issues, and a sense of purpose and life. These data are aligned with the qualitative analysis, which identified six themes such as the integration of practice and theory, development of skills, positive impact on academic training, valuing practical experience, reflective and meaningful learning, and support and guidance. The results highlight the value of pedagogical innovation for students' skills, especially when it is aligned with the identity and mission of the institution and the values of the study program.

Keywords: service-learning; social work; impact; soft skills; gerontology



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1. Introduction

Since the Bologna Declaration, the European higher education sector has undergone far-reaching changes, aiming to create the European Higher Education Area. Through the strengthening and convergence of the various university systems, the aim is to promote the quality of institutions and learning proposals, to transform education systems, and, above all, to develop the students' attitudes, values, and skills necessary to respond to the problems of the constantly evolving socio-economic and technological ecosystems of the 21st century.

As never before, the world we live in is facing rapid and unprecedented developments and challenges that are significantly affecting many aspects of our lives. Graton [1] systematized these developments and challenges into five distinct domains: (1) rapid new technological breakthroughs that are fundamentally changing every aspect of our lives; (2) globalization, with a growing worldwide market for both talent and labor and also ever-increasing competitiveness and fragmentation; (3) changes in demographics and longevity, with migration and also increases in the average life expectancy, enabling longer, healthier and more productive lives; (4) the challenge in terms of energy resources, with rising costs and the climate crisis that we are already experiencing today; and (5) social

changes in people's lives and communities. These challenges have been exacerbated in more recent years by the experience and impact of a global pandemic and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

These challenges have had a profound impact on the redefinition of the mission of university institutions in terms of teaching and research, with particular emphasis on raising qualifications and preventing students from dropping out [2], promoting the personal development of students through their academic, personal, social, and professional adjustment [3], taking into account the growing importance of employability [4,5] and, in particular, the development of more transversal and generic thinking skills also known as soft skills. These concepts began to take shape following the report published in 1972, by Edgar Faure, entitled "Learning to be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow". In this report, the author introduced two major constructs, "lifelong education" and "learning society" [6]. In the context of post Second World War, and a certain illusion about the unfulfilled proposals of education for peace and social justice, this report highlighted the value of lifelong learning and the need to promote personal skills to foster a more democratic and peaceful society. These "interpersonal skills" or "people skills", popularized as "soft skills", became increasingly popular in the 1970s and 1980s [7,8].

Although it is not a new concept, its definition remains inconclusive. Alternative terms such as key competences, generic competences, transferable or transversal skills, or 21st-century skills are used alternatively in this context [5,6]. Despite the polysemic nature of the concept, it is possible to distinguish between two different types of skills according to their applicability: (i) transversal skills, which can be defined as a set of skills that can be applied in any professional situation or task, regardless of where they were acquired, and (ii) specific or technical skills, which are only applicable in the environment for which they were developed.

In 2006, the European Parliament released the "EU Key Competences Framework for Lifelong Learning", which highlights the competences necessary for a meaningful, productive, and sustainable life. It identifies the eight most important key competences: communication in one's first language; communication in a second or foreign language; mathematical competence and basic sci-tech skills; digital competence; learning how to learn; social and civic competences; a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and cultural awareness and expression [2]. More recently, the World Economic Forum (2020) highlighted the following key competences: analytical thinking and innovation; active learning and learning strategies; complex problem solving; critical thinking and analysis; creativity; originality and initiative; leadership and social influence; the use of technology; monitoring and control; resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility; reasoning and problem solving; and emotional intelligence [9].

Despite the changes in the structure and organization of courses, as well as the improvements in quality assurance and accreditation processes, pedagogical innovation still faces difficult challenges [10], with implications for the development of students' transversal skills. This requires a novel perspective on teaching-learning processes, a redefinition of educational objectives, and the implementation of new methodologies. This is the gap this paper addresses, aiming to explore the impact of an innovative teaching-learning methodology on students' transversal skills development in a social work degree, particularly in the Contemporary Social Work course. In this course, learning objectives include demonstrating theoretical and ethical-political competences to critically analyze social issues in a globalized world and their implications for social work practice. This involves understanding demographic dynamics, particularly the challenges of an aging population and the effects of globalization on the aging processes. Additionally, it aims to examine the specific challenges faced by social workers working with older people, including financial insecurity, health issues, abuse, and inadequate living conditions. Identifying vulnerabilities within elderly communities, such as mental health concerns, substance abuse, and a lack of familial support, is also crucial. Moreover, students learn to experience comprehensive approaches to support the well-being of older people, emphasizing social

workers' roles as agents of change and support within families and communities. The attainment of these objectives enables students to gain the requisite knowledge and skills needed to address the multifaceted challenges of aging populations, thereby equipping them with the necessary competences for effective and compassionate social work practice in contemporary society. Applying multidisciplinary knowledge and addressing real social problems, such as the aging population, we intend to explore the impact of a methodology that is receiving growing interest, service-learning, on students' transversal skills development in the pedagogical experience of social work undergraduates. Considering the reality of demographic aging, it is expected that social workers trained in service-learning might have the chance to develop personal and professional skills. This will be explored using a mixed-method approach and will serve as the basis for a discussion of its implications for both theory and practice.

1.1. Service-Learning: Definition and Impact

Service-learning (S-L) is an educational approach that integrates community service and academic learning in an innovative way, focusing on two fundamental dimensions: the holistic development of the student and social responsibility [11]. This teaching methodology requires integration with the academic curriculum and aims to provide learning experiences based on authentic situations and needs, combining classroom learning with real-life experiences [12]. The approach is not merely concerned with the outcome of learning but also with the process and quality of the learning experience. It seeks to facilitate the integral development of students through educational experiences that promote meaningful change [13]. Seen as an approach to sustainable development, it is profoundly transformative. By bringing learning processes and service actions closer to the community, it is possible to identify experiential teaching opportunities that have the potential both to motivate the exchange of knowledge between teacher and student and to respond to community needs [14,15]. It is therefore a highly effective educational instrument, capable of conferring benefits upon both the student and the community. These benefits include the development of personal and professional skills among the students, as well as the resolution of real-world issues and the promotion of values such as solidarity and social responsibility [16].

This methodology encourages students to become actively involved in authentic challenges in their local communities, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the needs faced by those around them. Furthermore, this integration facilitates critical reflection on social, economic, and environmental issues, allowing students to assess the impact of their actions and, through the application of programmatic contents of the curricula, develop the necessary skills to promote positive change in their communities [13,17].

It can be argued that service-learning consists of merging teaching and learning to expand educational goals by incorporating citizenship education into the curriculum. This approach encourages partnerships between students, teachers, and communities to achieve mutual benefits and promote co-development [18]. It is a community solidarity project, actively led by students and consciously linked to learning activities based on different components. These include the community of learners, comprising students and teachers, as well as community and social institutions. Additionally, the project incorporates critical student learning, transformative intentionality, both of the reality and the participants, and social justice [19]. In particular, teachers encourage students to collaborate with excluded communities and/or those in situations of vulnerability [13], supporting groups that face the deprivation of rights and access to society. In the latter case, vulnerability can arise from a variety of circumstances. In general, vulnerable groups are made up of different segments of society that are more likely to fall into the poverty trap in society.

Thus, service-learning not only enriches the academic progress of the students but also strengthens the connection between academia and society, creating a lasting and substantial impact on the well-being of communities [20,21]. In this way, the implementation of service-learning is an opportunity for higher education institutions to get closer to societal demands,

recognizing that the learning process makes a valuable contribution to the promotion of social justice [20,22]. There are different typologies and approaches to S-L, ranging from indirect service, without direct interaction with the supported community, to fieldwork, where the learning process takes place outside the institution itself and does not necessarily lead to contextual or social improvements. It ranges from joint activities with organizations or elements of the community, where students carry out community service in response to the needs of a specific situation, to research-based service activities on issues relevant to the community, disseminating scientific information [19,23].

To integrate the reasons why universities promote the soft skills development of their students through S-L, Culcasia and Venegas [24] carried out a systematic literature review. Considering 88 articles, most were qualitative studies (57%), followed by mixed methods (26%) and quantitative (17%), published between 2013 and 2020, and the motivations were as follows: (1) students' integral development and holistic education, acknowledging that institutions should prioritize the promotion of social and emotional skills alongside technical and professional competences, aiming to train students to become well-qualified professionals and also socially responsible and engaged citizens [25]; (2) student employability and career development, providing experiential learning opportunities, thus addressing the challenge of reducing the gap between the demands of the labor market and the students' skills, facilitated by S-L as it integrates both hard and soft skills in a real-world environment [26]; and (3) university civic engagement as universities have a moral and ethical obligation to give back to the community [27], enabled by applying teaching and learning methods to address relevant issues in their social environment. In general, the outcomes of these initiatives are positive. Studies examining the application of service-learning in the context of social work with aging populations indicate various benefits for students [28]. These benefits encompass the enhanced understanding and challenging of representations and stereotypes regarding aging and older people, the cultivation of self-awareness and efficacy in contributing value to the community, and the reinforcement of future career aspirations. Other recent examples of the application of service-learning to aging show how it can provide tangible benefits to older people while also providing a valuable learning experience for students by fostering a broader understanding of aging issues and preparing them to be more aware and compassionate professionals [15,29]. In addition, working with older people exposes students to the new forms of exclusion and poverty that arise in this context, allowing them to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying causes and the strategies needed to address these challenges [15].

To achieve its benefits, the service-learning project required careful planning, close monitoring, and continuous evaluation from the teacher of the course, as well as a shared commitment of all the involved stakeholders. According to the literature [19,30,31], we can identify three main steps in the implementation of the S-L methodology, such as (1) planning by reviewing with the students the learning objectives, identifying the social institution with which to collaborate, reflecting with it to detect real needs, thinking about relevant projects that could enable learning goals and add value to all community, and finally building a specific practice to be carried out; (2) implementation by continuously monitoring and tutoring the practices and the learning progress, constantly communicating with the institution and the students; and (3) reflection/evaluation, which implies an accurate assessment and reflection on the learning objectives and the competences developed by the students, as well as on the value added or not to the community.

1.2. "Ser Cuida(I)doso": From Theory to Practice

In Portugal, a population of around 25% of older people over 75 live alone, totaling around 304,000 citizens, of whom three-quarters are women [32]. Portugal also has a high prevalence of dementia cases compared with other OECD countries, and based on the data from the 2021 Census [33], there are 182 older people for every 100 young people, reflecting a significant population aging trend. With a rate of 20 cases per 1000 inhabitants, the country is one of the most affected by this condition [34]. In this context, social institutions

emerge as fundamental pillars to mitigate the vulnerable situations of older people. These institutions represent an important source of employment for social workers, especially in technical management/coordination positions [35]. Their responsibilities include not only supporting vulnerable older people but also coordinating services, financial administration, human resources management, and social services, reflecting the versatility of the functions performed by these professionals [36]. Despite the numerous opportunities it presents, gerontology remains an area of limited interest for social work students, particularly when selecting academic internships. In this context, the application of service-learning as a teaching methodology becomes crucial. Thus, using service-learning in this course has the potential to open students' horizons to the complex realities of aging [37], to others, and to themselves and to enhance their skills in building healthy and productive relationships with older people.

To develop skills and deal with stereotypes about this population, training for appropriate care was promoted. This followed what Hughes [38] states about the attitudes of social work students, considering that aging is often influenced by ageism, reflecting structural inequalities and generalized negative stereotypes about older people. Contacting people and with the appropriate supervision, many students perceive working with older people as routine and with high emotional demands associated with aging [39]. Considering the reality of demographic aging, social workers trained in service-learning will be empowered to deal with these beneficiaries, considering biological issues, such as aging and health problems, the lack of access to health services, and also social issues, such as the absence of family support networks, losses, isolation, and the level of education [40].

The present study was carried out in the fourth year of a social work undergraduate program in the Contemporary Social Work course. The project was called "Ser Cuida(I)doso" [this is a word pun that could be translated as Care(elder)ful] and was structured in five phases: in the motivational phase, the S-L methodology and its applicability were presented, encouraging, although not obliging, the active participation of the students; in the diagnosis phase, visits were made to the institution hosting, which allowed students to understand the social challenges faced by older people and to relate them to the theoretical concepts covered in the classroom; in the design and planning phase, the project objectives were defined, a timetable was drawn up, and the resources needed to carry it out were identified; in the execution phase, students implemented the project, which included several activities, such as individual assistance to users, home visits, the application of assessment scales, training in a computer program for the social management of social institutions, and group activities; and, finally, in the closing phase, there was a moment of celebration and reflection on the project.

In this context, we conducted a concurrent mixed study [41], which, via the logic of the complementarity and triangulation of data, allowed us to obtain a more complete view of the phenomenon under study and a greater reliability of the results. So, in the quantitative component of the study, we aimed to characterize the S-L experience, evaluate the impact of S-L on students' transversal skills, and explore the relationship of personal variables with students' skills. In the qualitative component, we aimed to understand the students' experience during the S-L experience.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Following a complete collection procedure [42], the participants consisted of 10 undergraduate students in their 4th year of social work, as "experiential experts" [43], insofar as they have practical and experiential knowledge of the phenomenon, in this case, the S-L methodology. They were aged between 21 and 23 years old ($M = 21.75$, $SD = 0.886$), most of them female ($n = 9$). Their parents had an education between basic and higher education studies (M_{dn} father = between the 3rd cycle of basic and secondary studies; M_{dn} mother = the 3rd cycle of basic education).

2.2. Measures

A sociodemographic questionnaire was used to collect data from the sample, namely gender, age, professional status, and parents' education.

A questionnaire was used to describe the service-learning experience, previous experience in service-learning or volunteering, number of hours and weeks dedicated to service, type of institution, final beneficiaries, and main activities.

A skills perceptions scale [44], developed under CAPS: Universidade Católica and Service-Learning: Innovation and Social Responsibility project, was used to assess the students' perception of skills. Based on the literature and given the need for a short measure to evaluate the students' perception of the development of specific skills, a measure was developed with 16 items to evaluate the same number of skills, using a closed response scale with six options, from 1—none to 6—advanced.

As part of the self-report measures, written reports were collected for the students' evaluation of their experience with service-learning and to reflect on the development of professional and personal skills.

2.3. Procedures

During the 2023/2024 academic year, the project "Ser Cuida(I)dos", integrated into the curricular unit of Contemporary Social Work III, involved 12 final-year students of the degree in Social Work and benefited 63 older people from the social institution that collaborated with the implementation of the project. Only 10 students from the class participated in the study. The participating students were divided into three groups, each of which consisted of four elements, for a total of 42 h of interaction with the institution and its beneficiaries.

For the preparation of the study, permission to use the instruments was requested. Also, teachers had previously been trained to use the S-L projects. Finally, before the start of the course, the elderly care institutions were contacted, and cooperation protocols were established for the implementation of the intervention. After being approved by the Ethics Committee in 17 March 2023, the experiments were implemented in the fall semester of 2023, and data were collected in the classroom at the end of the S-L experience, considering the evidence of response bias in the pre-test evaluation when evaluating the then/post responses in the post-test moments [45]. The students were invited to reflect on the experience and contribute their evaluation to this project, and the objectives were explained and informed consent given.

Quantitative data were collected digitally, using a questionnaire prepared in the Qualtrix platform, after the presentation of the informed consent, which guaranteed the anonymous, voluntary, and confidential nature of the data collection. After data collection, students' answers were coded and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 28. Non-parametric tests were used, considering the number of participants in the study. Written reports were analyzed qualitatively, using grounded analyses, a data analysis method that makes it possible to understand and systematize the content. As a starting point, we carried out open coding, a lengthy process that was refined by analyzing and comparing the different reports. Although many codes were initially identified, by grouping them by the proximity of content and analytical relevance (selective coding), we developed a set of categories that represented the relevant themes.

To ensure validity, this process was carried out by two researchers following the consensus analysis procedure [46].

3. Results

This section was organized in four parts to accomplish the aims of the study.

3.1. Description of the S-L Experience

According to the students' answers, the S-L experience lasted up to three weeks for one student; between four and six weeks for two students; three were between seven

and 10 weeks; and four 11 or more weeks in context. In terms of the number of hours involved, they ranged from 7 to 30 ($M = 22.125$, $SD = 8.01$) in a presential format, with direct intervention with beneficiaries (100%) in elder care institutions ($n = 7$) or elder and people with disabilities care institutions ($n = 3$). In terms of activities, all students conducted interviews; six performed home visits, and four students conducted social counseling.

3.2. Influence of Personal Variables on Students' Skills

As there was only one male student in the sample, it was not possible to investigate gender differences. No correlation was found at the age level ($p > 0.05$). Positive correlations were found between the parents' education and students' skills, particularly in father's education and empathy ($r_s = 0.730$, $p = 0.016$), teamwork ($r_s = 0.661$, $p = 0.038$), creativity and innovation ($r_s = 0.721$, $p = 0.019$), dealing with diversity and multiculturalism ($r_s = 0.679$, $p = 0.031$), social responsibility ($r_s = 0.713$, $p = 0.021$), and civic/community involvement ($r_s = 0.770$, $p = 0.009$). The mother's education was only correlated with empathy ($r_s = 0.637$, $p = 0.047$).

3.3. Impact of S-L Experience on Students' Skills

To evaluate the impact of a service-learning experience on students' skills, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used. As presented in Table 1, significant differences were found in self-confidence ($\chi^2 = -2.121$, $p = 0.034$), problem solving ($\chi^2 = -2.000$, $p = 0.046$), adaptation and flexibility ($\chi^2 = -2.236$, $p = 0.025$), dealing with diversity and multiculturalism ($\chi^2 = -2.000$, $p = 0.046$), understanding complex social issues ($\chi^2 = -2.236$, $p = 0.025$), and sense of purpose in my life ($\chi^2 = -2.271$, $p = 0.023$).

Table 1. Impact of S-L experience on students' skills.

Please Indicate Your Level of Performance in the Following Competences/Aspects	Before S-L Implementation		After S-L Implementation		χ^2	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Self-confidence	3.90	1.101	4.50	1.179	-2.121	0.034
Empathy	4.60	0.699	5.00	0.667	-1.414	0.157
Leadership	3.90	1.101	4.20	1.033	-1.732	0.083
Teamwork	5.00	0.943	5.30	0.675	-1.732	0.083
Communication skills	4.10	1.101	4.60	1.075	-1.890	0.059
Creativity and innovation	4.00	0.943	4.50	0.707	-1.890	0.059
Problem solving	4.00	1.054	4.40	0.843	-2.000	0.046
Adaptation and flexibility	4.10	1.101	4.44	0.882	-2.236	0.025
Dealing with diversity and multiculturalism	4.20	1.033	4.44	0.726	-2.000	0.046
Awareness of my beliefs and prejudices	4.40	0.966	4.89	0.601	-1.890	0.059
Understanding complex social issues	3.90	0.994	4.40	0.843	-2.236	0.025
Sense of purpose in my life	3.80	1.033	4.60	0.843	-2.271	0.023
Social responsibility	4.60	0.966	4.90	0.738	-1.732	0.083
Civic/community involvement	4.20	1.033	4.60	0.843	-1.633	0.102
Academic involvement in the course in general	4.60	0.843	4.90	0.738	-1.732	0.083
Career goals	4.70	1.059	5.00	0.816	-1.732	0.083

3.4. Reflection on Experience and Skills Developed with S-L

Based on the analysis of the students' final reports, we carried out a content analysis according to the grounded analysis method, which allowed us to find six themes, although we did not reach theoretical saturation:

(1) The importance of the integration of practice and theory: Students emphasize the importance of the practical application of the knowledge acquired in the theoretical context of the course. In this sense, it is assumed that the service-learning experience provided a valuable link between theory and practice. As stated by participant A6, "I think Service-Learning is fundamental to any course. Service-learning is about showing what you've already learned and what you learn during the course, not only theoretical but also, at the internship site, more practical".

(2) Skills development: The students' speeches mention the development of soft skills such as adaptability, responsibility, understanding, empathy, communication, reflection, and creativity. In this regard, participant A1 refers to "The ability to adapt, responsibility, understanding and empathy, several fundamental pillars worked on during this journey, are reinforced".

(3) Positive impact on academic training: Students recognize the positive impact of the service-learning experience on their academic career, highlighting the partner institution's total openness and availability of the partner institution in welcoming the students, the participation of older people, and the importance of the supervision and accompaniment of the institution's social work team, as illustrated by participant A7: "This experience had a positive impact on each student's academic career, highlighting the institution's openness, the participation of users and the collaboration with the technical team as the main aspects".

(4) Valuing practical experience: The reports emphasize the importance of practical experience in the training of future professionals, allowing for a deeper understanding of the work of the social worker in the context of aging. In the words of participant A4, "At the end of this report, I recognize that this experience not only contributed to my academic training but also served as a catalyst for developing a more mature and informed perspective on the practice of Social Work, especially in the context of ageing".

(5) Reflective and meaningful learning: Students express deep reflections on their experiences, recognizing the importance of a holistic approach in social work and the value of service-learning as a powerful educational and social tool, as stated by participant A2: "I can also see that this Service-Learning has been successful when it integrates a meaningful service and responds to the needs of society (for example, as seen in the home visits); also, this learning is linked to the academic curriculum; the fact that it makes us reflect until we can answer the questions we had; and also, the students have an active role in the whole process".

(6) Support and guidance: The support and guidance received during the experience are mentioned, emphasizing the role of the teacher and the institution's technical team in the learning process. In this regard, participant A5 states "I would like to thank teacher A who motivated us and made us embark on this adventure. I would also like to thank Dr. X. for accompanying us on all the home visits and helping us with everything we needed".

The findings highlight the positive impacts of the S-L experience on the students' professional and personal development. Despite these results, which could be considered positive outcomes of the experiment, the students also unanimously pointed out that the experiment was so rich that more time is needed to make the most of the benefits of this educational approach.

4. Discussion

Considering the Bologna process and the necessity to promote students' competences [3–5], several pedagogical innovations have gained interest and enthusiasm in educational contexts. It is imperative that university institutions and educators reflect on the adequacy of the institution and the program to guarantee the most optimal alignment with the vision and mission of the institution, as well as to achieve the learning objectives of the program. In this context, the training of social work professionals requires the development of both technical and personal skills, and S-L seems to be perfectly adapted in terms of focusing on the integral human development of students and their commitment

to social responsibility [11]. There are vulnerabilities in society that justify calls for social support and intervention, and service-learning brings universities closer to their contexts and contributes to social change.

Given the results of this seminal study, conducted with a small sample, we can understand the positive impact of service-learning experiences on key competences [5,6]. These include self-confidence, problem solving, adaptability and flexibility, dealing with diversity and multiculturalism, understanding complex social issues, and sense of purpose in life. These are particularly complex concepts, but it is important to consider the seminal results for future studies. The results appear to demonstrate positive impacts, not only in the self-report questionnaire but also in students' reports, which clearly indicate the perception of the development of adaptability, responsibility, empathy, communication, reflection, and creativity. These competences are intricately woven into the profile of a social worker, as highlighted by various authors. Mullins and Kirkwood [47] emphasize the indispensable skills of respect and warmth, which are deeply rooted in the core values of social work. Davis [48] underscores the importance of characteristics such as being present, listening, hearing, assessing, advocating, empowering, and helping, all of which are greatly valued by service users. In addition to quantitative data, it is especially important to highlight the qualitative findings that reinforce the positive impact of service-learning on academic training. These qualitative insights include the students' recognition of the positive effects on their academic careers and the openness and engagement of partner institutions in welcoming and involving students, as well as the pivotal role of supervision and mentoring provided by the institution's social work team.

Service users express high levels of appreciation for social workers who support them in defining their agendas, allocating time, offering accessible spaces, ensuring the continuity of support, demonstrating reliability and responsiveness, possessing knowledge and expertise, and truly valuing the service user [49]. Aligning with the Deontological Code of Social Workers in Portugal [50], relational competences prioritize fostering relationships based on respect, trust, empathy, and cooperation to facilitate necessary changes, including the establishment of networks and partnerships. Wilson and colleagues [51] emphasize also the significance of communication characterized by empathy, respect, and authenticity, particularly in interactions with older people, considering their social and health contexts, as well as their life stories, which is particularly important in elder care, where the challenges of contemporary societies are particularly complex.

Furthermore, the data gathered are particularly noteworthy for its insights into the impact of service-learning on the integration of practice and theory. This is evident in the challenges of dealing with diversity and multiculturalism and understanding complex social issues and also in the reports, focusing on the value of practical experience in their preparation as social workers in the context of aging. The reality of low pensions and retirement is a significant concern for many, particularly given the accumulation disadvantage throughout the life course, which can result in economic insufficiency and significant financial difficulties [52–60]. In addition, physical and mental health problems [61] are common, as are situations of abandonment, and domestic, physical, and financial violence [62–65]. The lack of adequate housing conditions [66], such as insalubrity and malnutrition [67,68], is a current problem. Alcohol-related problems and early neurodegenerative diseases [69–71] are also among the many problems that social workers encounter in their professional practice. In addition, the presence of older people with mental disabilities [72,73], such as oligophrenia, without appropriate community responses is an additional concern and challenge. Furthermore, changes in family structures [74] and the lack of adequate family support [75] and backup, which are becoming increasingly prevalent, should also be noted.

The aforementioned vulnerabilities underscore the need for comprehensive and integrated approaches to guarantee the well-being and quality of life of older individuals, in which social workers can play a pivotal role as agents of change and provide support for the older population, their families, and communities. However, it is of paramount importance to cultivate such skills through early integration into their profession during

their training. If this is the case, then it is evident that working with the elderly population presents challenges that professionals and universities should address as early as possible in their training.

In this realm, service-learning appears to facilitate the students' integration of practice and theory as it allows them to apply the knowledge acquired in the theoretical context of the course in a practical setting. It is therefore assumed that the service-learning experience provides a valuable link between theory and practice, enabling students to master the programmatic content of the curricula and develop the necessary skills to promote positive change in their communities [13,17]. In line with Culcasia and Venegas [24], it is possible to understand the possibilities of developing soft skills through S-L in the holistic development of a person, preparing them for career development and promoting the connection of universities with communities, favoring the civic engagement of the students and also of institutions. In this way, it is possible to highlight the moral and ethical compromise with their communities [27].

Furthermore, by involving older people in the assessment process, these tools promote their active participation and empowerment as an integral part of the provision of care and services. Despite the limitations of the sample size, these evaluations enable students to understand the potential and the limitations of their intervention, reflecting on the needs in the community, on the boundaries of their profession, and the skills they need to improve in their practice.

Likewise, team meetings following individual consultations played a pivotal role in the students' learning process. These meetings provided an opportunity for students to share cases, reflections, and possible interventions, thereby enhancing the collective comprehension of the needs and challenges faced by users and their social intervention. It is crucial to highlight that the participation of the teacher responsible for the curricular unit and the social worker from the partner institution at these meetings provided more guidance and helped students to develop their analytical skills and their interventions. Additionally, students were required to write social reports based on the consultations or home visits. These aspects are of particular significance for the socialization of social worker students as they learn through experience and interaction with professionals and target populations. The support provided during these experiences, along with accurate mentoring, appears to confirm its determinant role in developing students' skills.

The service-learning methodology, especially that which focuses on working with older people in social institutions, is highly relevant and appropriate for the Contemporary Social Work III curricular unit, in line with previous research. It provides students with a valuable learning experience [76,77] and enables them to be more aware and compassionate towards others [29]. The qualitative and quantitative data appear to indicate that the practical experience gained in this context provides an enriching complement to the theoretical concepts discussed in the classroom. This experience allows students to deepen their theoretical skills by applying them in real-world situations with older people. In this sense, by interacting with this population, students are challenged to develop a critical view of on the unfolding of the social issues in the globalized world, recognizing the current demands placed on the profession. In addition, the experience of working with older people exposes students to the new forms of exclusion and poverty that arise in this context, allowing them to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying causes and the strategies needed to address these challenges. The integration of these results demonstrates that the positive impact of service-learning with older people not only aligns with the objectives of the Contemporary Social Work III course but also offers students a valuable opportunity to bridge theory and practice, fostering a holistic and sensitive approach to the needs of vulnerable populations. The integration of qualitative with quantitative data supports the importance of supervision and guidance of the lead teacher and the social worker from the partner institution, ensuring that the ethical, technical, and professional principles are guaranteed. Furthermore, the importance of self-reflection and evaluation as a pathway to improvement in the development of personal and professional skills is highlighted.

5. Conclusions

Service-learning offers social work students a distinct opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge and gain practical experience in a range of complex social issues. The “Ser Cuida(I)doso” project proved to be a valuable experience for all those involved, including students, beneficiaries, and social workers. The results of the qualitative and quantitative data appear to corroborate the positive impact of service-learning on the development of students’ academic careers, with a positive impact on professional skills and especially on personal skills.

Methodologies such as these represent an important step in strengthening the training of future social workers. They promote skills for dealing with diversity and multiculturalism, understanding complex social issues, enabling students to work effectively and compassionately with the elderly population, and can also be an opportunity to promote the recognition and appreciation of this sector. Finally, the project provides a valuable opportunity for students to broaden their vision of the profession and to make a meaningful contribution to the well-being and quality of life of older people. By actively participating in the service-learning project, students also develop a sense of belonging to the university, strengthening their academic identity and contributing to their comprehensive training as future social work professionals.

Regarding the limitations of the present study, it is important to consider the number of participants as one of the most significant factors. This limits the ability to generalize the results and prevents comparisons of the development of skills by gender based on the quantitative analysis, as well as the achievement of the theoretical saturation of the qualitative data. Furthermore, other statistical procedures could be employed with a broader sample. For instance, it would be valuable to assess whether the number of hours or the type of activities were the determining factors in the improvement. It is therefore crucial to continue this study by recruiting a larger sample to carry out more robust studies to clarify this issue. Also, implementing more measures related to the previous experience with S-L, like volunteering or other extra-curricular activities, and assessing the importance and meaning of the experience as confounding variables, as well as evaluating the development of personal and professional values, could be interesting to explore in a future research project. Multimethod analysis gives us a more detailed analysis with concrete implications for theory and practice. Nevertheless, for quasi-experimental studies, a broader sample and the administration of the measures to a larger sample and a control group could provide us with more information about the impact of this experiment on students and even on institutions or beneficiaries. In a context where the value of skills and values are increasingly relevant to institutions and to the development of societies, experiences with service-learning seem to contribute in a significant way to personal and societal transformation. More studies, however, are necessary for a deeper understanding of service-learning’s effectiveness and application in higher education. This should encompass not only the skills developed by students but also the experiences of teachers involved and the final beneficiaries of the projects. In degrees such as social work, acknowledging the close relationship between theory and practice and making critical reflections about contemporary social contexts and policies are significant as the role of civic engagement and participation in the construction of a common good project is an objective to achieve. Moreover, whilst this may appear feasible in several domains, it is of particular significance in the field of social work.

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