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Empowering Students, enhancing communities: Integrating service learning as a character education methodology in a Chilean School

Francisco Moller

Paloma Redondo-Corcobado

Juan Luis Fuentes

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4875

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

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Abstract

This study evaluates the impact of Service-Learning (SL) as a pedagogical strategy for fostering empathy and civic engagement in students. The intervention involved 72 students participating in an intergenerational project addressing elderly loneliness. Quantitative analysis was conducted on matched pre- and post-survey data from 53 students, using four validated scales. Results showed no significant changes across the full cohort but revealed differences based on household composition and initial performance levels. Students living with both parents demonstrated increased empathy, while those from single-parent households experienced declines. High-performing students showed a significant decrease in civic engagement ($p = 0.0032$), while low-performing students exhibited significant increases in empathy ($p = 0.039$) and civic engagement ($p = 0.0284$). Qualitative focus groups revealed enhanced empathy and moral reflection, with students recognizing the value of social connections and expressing intentions to engage more actively with family and community. The project was praised for promoting practical skills like project management. The findings highlight SL's potential to integrate moral and civic education in formal learning contexts, challenge individualistic notions of character education, and foster democratic engagement. However, limitations such as sample size and lack of a control group call for further research to enhance generalizability and long-term impact evaluation.

Keywords: Service learning – Character education – Civic engagement - empathy

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, concerns have grown across various countries regarding the deterioration of democratic systems, the intensifying polarization that threatens social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, evolving patterns of public participation, and the diminishing political engagement of citizens—particularly among adolescents and young adults (Campus Compact, 2024; Cortina, 2022; Gil, 2004; Naval et al., 2019; Sandel, 2020). Central to this unease is the phenomenon of social isolation, often rooted in a civic and moral disconnection that erodes empathy, civic engagement, and a sense of collective responsibility (Cabrera-Vázquez et al., 2022). This has contributed to a generation of young people increasingly detached from their roles as active contributors to the preservation and strengthening of democratic coexistence (Fonseca & Maiztegui, 2014), struggling to envision themselves as agents of meaningful political and social change (Jover, 2001).

In response to these challenges, education—particularly its civic dimension—has emerged as a critical arena for intervention. Civic education transcends the mere transmission of knowledge, emphasizing the deeply social nature of human beings who, as Aristotle observed, depend on communal relationships not only for survival but for achieving their fullest potential and flourishing. However, the development of civic education programs has often faced criticism, both theoretical and methodological. Critics argue that civic education, at times, has been co-opted to advance the political agendas of those in power, raising concerns about its ideological underpinnings (Arthur, 2005; Davies & Chong, 2016). Others contend that civic engagement cannot be cultivated solely through theoretical instruction, mirroring debates in moral education. These critiques emphasize the necessity of integrating behavioral and emotional learning into civic education, ensuring that knowledge is accompanied by actions rooted in internalized motivations and values—a framework often associated with holistic character development (Annete, 2005; MacLaughlin, 2000; Whiteley, 2014).

In this context, Service-Learning has emerged as a promising methodology, gaining significant traction in recent years (Redondo & Fuentes, 2020). This approach integrates practical learning directly aligned with the official curriculum while addressing tangible community needs, making it particularly suited for formal education. Moreover, it provides a robust theoretical framework for cultivating various virtues. These include intellectual virtues, fostered through its connection to academic content; civic virtues, encouraged through student participation in projects aimed at addressing real-world issues within their communities; and instrumental virtues, such as teamwork, perseverance, and interpersonal communication, which are essential for executing complex projects.

Despite its potential, recent research on Service-Learning has largely focused on theoretical justifications and case studies, predominantly in higher education contexts, with less attention paid to its implementation at other educational levels or its measurable academic outcomes. The inherent complexity of this methodology—owing to the diversity of stakeholders involved and its aim to address multiple dimensions of student development—necessitates rigorous evaluation processes. Such evaluations must employ mixed methods,

combining quantitative and qualitative data collection, and adopt pretest-post test designs to ensure greater reliability and validity of findings.

This paper seeks to address these gaps by analyzing the outcomes of a Service-Learning initiative conducted in a Chilean school, with a specific focus on the development of key virtues such as empathy, civic engagement, and project management skills. The central research question guiding this study is:

Can a seven-week school-based intervention employing Service-Learning and project management strategies foster empathy and civic engagement?

To explore this question, the first section of this paper outlines the theoretical foundations of Service-Learning and its intersections with character education. It also introduces the main features of the Proyectos con Causa (PCC) initiative, within which this study is situated. The subsequent section details the mixed-method evaluation approach employed, followed by a comprehensive presentation of findings, which triangulate quantitative pre- and post-survey data with qualitative insights derived from focus groups. Finally, the discussion contextualizes these findings within the broader international research landscape, drawing comparisons with similar studies and offering recommendations for future research on this methodology.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Cultivating Virtues Through Education

In the field of moral education, the increasing prominence of civic and character education, expressed through diverse approaches, is well-documented (Johnson & Morris, 2012; MacLaughlin, 2000; Walker et al., 2015). These two domains are intrinsically interconnected (Carr, 2006; Peterson, 2011), emphasizing the role of education in cultivating virtues that not only enable personal flourishing but also contribute to societal progress. Within this framework, interpersonal relationships are pivotal, with the ultimate aim of fostering just and supportive societies where young individuals assume active, responsible roles as engaged citizens (Jubilee Centre, 2017).

Grounded in a Neo-Aristotelian perspective, this pedagogical approach extends beyond the mere transmission of ethical and civic knowledge as cognitive achievements. Instead, it focuses on fostering habits and dispositions that enable individuals to act consistently in alignment with moral principles in their daily lives (Kristjánsson, 2015). Aristotle's philosophical naturalism underscores that human fulfillment is tied to the cultivation of virtues, which, through habituation, enhance individuals' inherent potential. Importantly, Aristotle situates the development of virtues within the context of the community, emphasizing the centrality of political and social life. In his view, political engagement, second only to the contemplative life, represents the highest form of human existence, whereby individuals prioritize not only their own well-being but also governance that promotes the common good. This perspective integrates individual and social ethics as

essential components of human nature, contributing to the realization of *eudaimonia*—the highest human good (Aristotle, 2004).

This Aristotelian framework aligns closely with a realistic philosophical anthropology, which perceives the human being as oriented toward holistic development, harmonizing personal flourishing with the pursuit of the common good. Authors such as Pieper (2022) emphasize the cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—as foundational to personal growth, underscoring their role in guiding ethical action and shaping character. Similarly, Guardini (1989) highlights the relational nature of human beings, arguing that true fulfillment is achievable only in community, through the exercise of virtues that advance the common good.

2.2 Virtue Development in School-Based Interventions

Building on these philosophical foundations, educational programs are increasingly oriented toward providing students with opportunities to engage in practical activities and intergroup interactions that require the application of virtues in social contexts. These initiatives hold promise not only for individual development but also for broader societal benefits (Arthur et al., 2015). Schools, therefore, should be envisioned as spaces that facilitate interpersonal experiences grounded in ethical and social principles. Such efforts transcend extracurricular or family-driven initiatives, which are often limited in scope, situating virtue education within the core curriculum of formal education (Arbués et al., 2015).

Experiences arising from these initiatives can foster transformative "epiphanic moments," characterized by profound realizations that expand students' perspectives, challenge their mental frameworks, and evoke a deep sense of satisfaction and personal growth (Kristjánsson, 2020; Maslow, 1991). These moments often occur spontaneously under conducive conditions and are not necessarily the result of structured or prolonged interventions.

Within this context, the Positive Youth Development (PYD) model offers a practical framework for integrating virtue education into schools. This model promotes holistic development by focusing on six dimensions: competence, confidence, character, connection, caring, and contribution (Sherrod, 2007). By engaging students in community-based projects addressing real-world issues, PYD empowers young people and fosters their transformation into socially conscious and proactive citizens. Examples include youth activism programs centered on social justice and community organization, which provide experiential learning opportunities for civic engagement and social responsibility (Fonseca & Maiztegui, 2014).

2.3 Service-Learning and Its Holistic Approach

Service-Learning (SL), often aligned with the PYD model, has emerged as a particularly effective methodology for cultivating virtues through experiential education. Widely implemented in Europe and the Americas, SL combines practical action with moral learning, making it a compelling Neo-Aristotelian approach to character education. Its holistic focus addresses a wide range of virtues, from intellectual to civic and instrumental, reflecting a comprehensive vision of human development (Berkowitz, 2011; Boston, 1997).

Other pedagogical models, such as *Normative Case Studies*, also demonstrate potential for virtue education. This approach, proposed by Meira Levinson and Fay (2016), integrates ethical and civic education through structured reflection on complex moral dilemmas. By engaging in group discussions and analyzing ethical consequences, students apply critical reasoning to real-life scenarios, fostering the internalization of virtues within their character and actions. However, such approaches are often critiqued for their limited emphasis on behavioral outcomes, underscoring the need for more comprehensive frameworks that encompass both cognitive and affective dimensions (Fuentes & García Bermejo, 2024).

2.4 Proyectos con Causa: An Integrated Model

The Proyectos con Causa (PCC) program exemplifies a practical application of these theoretical principles. Rooted in the philosophical, pedagogical, and anthropological foundations of character education, PCC fosters holistic student development by prioritizing the cultivation of civic engagement and empathy. These virtues are critical for rebuilding social connections and fostering a cohesive community capable of addressing collective needs.

Civic engagement is conceptualized as a multidimensional competence, encompassing knowledge, skills, and attitudes that drive active participation in civic and political life (Blanco-Cano & García-Martín, 2020). It strengthens social cohesion by facilitating dialogue between citizens and institutions, fostering democratic coexistence (Fonseca & Maiztegui, 2014). Empathy, meanwhile, is regarded as a cornerstone of moral and civic education, enabling individuals to navigate social relationships with respect, tolerance, and solidarity (Seoane, 2024). Adolescence, characterized by significant cognitive and emotional development, offers a critical window for cultivating these virtues, with lasting implications for adult social integration (Allemand et al., 2014).

PCC integrates these virtues into its curriculum through initiatives that encourage students to design and execute social impact projects addressing real community challenges. This approach fosters not only empathy and civic engagement but also an entrepreneurial spirit, equipping students with the skills and mindset necessary to lead transformative efforts in their communities (Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013). By combining experiential learning with virtue development, PCC aims to cultivate empathetic, proactive young leaders committed to creating a more just and compassionate society.

This integrated model addresses pressing educational and societal needs, positioning schools as pivotal spaces for moral and civic development. It aspires to drive social change, laying the foundation for communities grounded in justice, equity, and mutual care.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1 Overview

This study employed a non-experimental pre-post design to assess the effectiveness of a school-based intervention aimed at fostering empathy and civic engagement among Chilean students. Quantitative data were collected through validated self-administered scales, while qualitative insights were obtained via a focus group with participating students. The methodological approach followed the Evolutionary Evaluation Protocol proposed by Urban et al. (2018), emphasizing the use of straightforward evaluation methods during the piloting stage of the program to ensure feasibility while maintaining methodological rigor. While pre-post designs are effective for assessing changes over time, they are limited in accounting for confounding variables, necessitating caution when interpreting causal relationships (Alessandri et al., 2017; Mardsen & Torgerson, 2012).

3.2 The Intervention

The intervention, Proyectos con Causa (PCC), consisted of eight guided classroom sessions, each lasting two hours, followed by a practical implementation stage in the community. This iteration of the program focused on addressing the issue of unwanted loneliness, with in-class projects designed to recognize and address this problem among elderly residents of a nearby care facility. The sessions included an introductory session, two sessions dedicated to researching and understanding the issue, three sessions focused on designing impactful social actions, and two final sessions for evaluation and project closure.

To ensure active participation, students were organized into small groups of four to five. Each group proposed a project, with the most promising project selected for implementation. PCC provided structured didactic guides, digital classroom resources, research materials, and templates to support all stages of project development. Teachers involved in the intervention received two two-hour preparatory sessions, during which the program and its materials were thoroughly explained. The implementation of the community project required parental consent, as activities took place outside school premises.

The intervention was grounded in the Service-Learning methodology, integrating real-world problem-solving with educational objectives (Tapia, 2005). Furthermore, it drew inspiration from agile project management methodologies, emphasizing iterative cycles of planning, execution, and evaluation (Arcega et al., 2021). This approach allowed for the continuous adaptation of activities based on feedback and context-specific challenges, fostering students' active engagement and the development of transversal competencies (Salza et al., 2019).

3.3 Participants

Participants were 72 male students aged 16 and 17 years from a public school in the Valparaíso region of Chile. According to school records, 87% of the students' families were

categorized as vulnerable based on household income. More demographics can be seen in table 1.

Table 1: Participants descriptive data

Variables	N	%
Age		
16	39	72
17	14	18
Household composition		
Live two parents	24	45
One parent or less	29	55
Electronic device use outside school time		
Less than one hour	3	6
Between one and two hours	3	6
Between two and four hours	21	40
More than four hours	26	48

Parental consent was obtained for all participants, ensuring ethical compliance in data collection and project participation.

3.4 Instruments

To measure changes in empathy and civic engagement, the study utilized four validated scales alongside demographic information. Civic engagement was assessed using McLoughlin et al.'s (2023) Civic Engagement Scale, which was translated and reviewed for cultural relevance, and the civic engagement scale developed by Arbués et al. (2012) and adapted by the Chilean Ministry of Education. Empathy was measured using a Spanish adaptation of Bryant's (1982) empathy scale and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1980; 1983), adapted for adolescents by Mestre et al. (2004).

Demographic variables included age, household composition (coded as 1 = both parents present, 0 = one or no parents), and time spent on mobile devices outside of school (coded as 0 = less than four hours, 1 = more than four hours). Additional covariates, such as academic performance (coded as 0 = above the cohort mean, 1 = below the cohort mean) and financial support received from the school (coded as 0 = no financial support, 1 = received financial support), were obtained from administrative records.

A focus group was conducted to complement the quantitative data. Five students were randomly selected to participate in a two-hour session exploring their perceptions of empathy

and civic engagement. The discussion was guided by a script designed to explore practical and abstract aspects of the virtues targeted by the intervention. Transcripts of the session were coded and validated through triangulation among three researchers to ensure reliability.

3.5 Procedures

The survey was administered to students before and after the intervention. Pre- and post-intervention scores were paired based on student identifiers, and Likert-scale items within each instrument were averaged to calculate total scores. Paired-sample t-tests were used to evaluate changes in empathy and civic engagement at the cohort level. To examine subgroup differences, students were stratified based on demographic variables such as academic performance, household composition, and financial support. Additionally, the sample was split into two groups based on pre-intervention scores to investigate whether initial levels of empathy or civic engagement influenced the degree of change, following Kristjánsson's (2015) assertion that virtue development depends on initial dispositions.

Quantitative data were cleaned in Excel and analyzed using STATA version 18. Qualitative data from the focus group were thematically analyzed using the approach described by Cresswell & Poth (2018). Coding focused on identifying patterns related to cognitive and emotional empathy, as well as attitudes toward community participation and civic responsibilities. This mixed-methods approach provided a nuanced understanding of the intervention's impact on the targeted virtues.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Survey

From the total 72 students enrolled, 53 Pre and Post records were effectively matched. In 19 cases students missed one or the two points in time when data was collected. Descriptive statistics and correlations between scales per point in time can be seen in table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and correlations between Pre and Post scales

Scales	*n*	*M*	*SD*	McLoughlin´s C.E	Arbués C.E	Bryant Emp	IRI Emp
Pre Intervention							
McLoughlin´s C.E	53	3.59	.798	—			
Arbués C.E	53	3.83	.593	0.711**	—		
Bryant Emp	53	14.35	3.01	0.353**	0.35**	—	
IRI Emp	53	3.08	.482	0.463**	0.459**	0.51**	—
Post Intervention							
McLoughlin´s C.E	53	3.69	.655	—			
Arbués C.E	53	3.81	.585	0.764**	—		
Bryant Emp	53	14.39	3.39	0.436**	0.38**	—	
IRI Emp	53	3.08	.446	0.373**	0.376**	0.354**	—

**$p < 0.001$

Correlations between scales within the same point in time were significant (p<0.001) in all cases and combinations. No statistically significant change was seen between both points in time in any of the four scales considering the whole cohort. Marginal decreases were seen in McLoughlin´s Civic engagement scale (Pre mean: 3.59, SD: 0.798; Post mean: 3.69, SD: O.655) and Arbues´s Civic engagement scale (Pre mean: 3.83, SD: 0.593; Post mean: 3.81, SD: 0.585) whilst an small increase was identified in Bryant empathy scale (Pre mean: 14.35, SD: 3.01; Post mean: 14.39, SD: 3.39) and no change was seen in the IRI index (Pre mean: 3.08, SD: 0.482; Post mean: 3.08, SD:0.446).

Looking at academic performance, the differences between groups above and below the average final grade were not statistically significant in any of the four scales (p<0.05) as well as when splitting the sample among the ones who received financial aid from those who do not. Similarly, when looking at the use of mobile devices non statistically significant differences were seen in any of the two groups (using mobiles devices less or more than 4 hours outside school time) in any of the four scales. The number of siblings at home also did not show a statistically difference between group in any of the four scales.

Regarding students' household composition, significant differences (p<0.05) were seen in the Bryant empathy scale between points in time in both groups. Students living with their two parents showed a significant increase $t(23) = -2.43$, $p = 0.0235$ whilst students living with one parent or less showed a significant decrease $t(28) = 2.59$, $p = 0.014$ between both points in time.

Finally, differences based on pre survey scores were calculated. High performers decreased their scores in the four scales but the difference was statistically significant only in McLoughlin´s C.E (Pre mean = 4.37, SD = 0.38; Post mean = 4.01, SD = 0.50); t(22) = 3.30, p = 0.0032. Lower performers showed an increase in the four scales but the differences were statistically significant in Arbués C.E (Pre mean = 3.40, SD = 0.45; Post meant = 3.56, SD = 0.48); t(27) = -2.32, p = 0.0284 and Bryant empathy scale (Pre mean = 12.11, SD = 2.02; Post mean = 13.30, SD = 2.80); t(27) = -2.16, p = 0.039.

4.2 Focus group

Students reported gaining new knowledge about concepts such as undesired loneliness and understanding the realities faced by the elderly. This learning enhanced their awareness of social issues and contributed to their empathy. For instance, one student noted:

"*We learned about loneliness, which is more than just being alone. It's about not having someone to share your feelings or time with.*"

Students described experiencing heightened emotional engagement during the intervention. Many expressed imagining themselves in similar situations:

"*If I were in a nursing home with no visitors, I'd feel so unmotivated and sad*."

Some students reflected that their ability to empathize had improved during the project, even though they did not always recognize these changes explicitly. One shared:

"I think I became more empathetic, but it's hard to notice changes in yourself. You just start doing things differently."

However, a subset of students believed their empathy levels were already high, attributing this to their personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. They viewed the project as an opportunity to put their pre-existing empathy into practice. The project seems to influence students' behaviors, particularly in their interactions with family and community members. Some participants mentioned increased engagement with their families, such as spending time with elderly relatives or helping others in small but significant ways:

"*I now visit my grandmother more often. We play dominoes together, and I feel more connected to her.*"

"If I see an elderly person at the bus stop, I stop to talk to them and listen. It feels like I can make a difference."

The intervention also prompted moral reflection among students, particularly regarding their long-term values and aspirations. For example, students considered how they could maintain connections and avoid isolation in their own lives. One student remarked:

"*Thinking about the loneliness of the elderly made me realize I don't want to be forgotten. I want to build stronger relationships now*."

Additionally, students expressed a desire to participate in similar projects in the future, though they acknowledged potential barriers such as time constraints or lack of institutional support.

Finally, students highly valued the opportunity to design and manage the project themselves. They praised the structured, hands-on approach as a critical aspect of their learning:

"*What I liked most was planning the project. It wasn't just an idea; we spent months on the details and learned how to manage something real*."

This aspect of the intervention emphasized not only the development of civic virtues but also practical skills such as project management.

5. DISCUSSION AND PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to answer whether a seven-week school-based intervention employing Service-Learning (SL) and project management strategies could foster empathy and civic engagement. The findings highlight the relevance of SL as a pedagogical strategy for character education within formal learning contexts. This relevance stems from SL's ability to foster moral knowledge in students, as well as behaviors and attitudes towards ethical and civic issues. Unlike other approaches to moral and civic education, which often focus solely on the acquisition of ethical knowledge, SL enables practical and affective engagement with ethical and civic challenges. This aligns with neo-Aristotelian character education, which views ethical learning as intrinsically tied to action and emotional dimensions (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Kristjánsson, 2018).

The findings corroborate the arguments presented in previous theoretical works and add empirical evidence to support SL's suitability for character education (Boston, 1997; Fuentes & López Gómez, 2018). More specifically, they align with research demonstrating SL's potential to promote empathy (Maravé-Vivas et al., 2019) and enhance social and civic engagement (Volchok, 2017; García-Rico et al., 2021) among university students. However, this study focused on a younger cohort, and the results, while promising, require careful interpretation due to the complexity of the findings and methodological constraints.

Quantitative data revealed no statistically significant changes across the whole cohort in the four scales measured—civic engagement (two scales), empathy, and the IRI index. Nonetheless, subgroup analyses highlighted several patterns that provide important insights into the intervention's effects. For instance, students living with two parents showed significant increases in empathy on the Bryant scale, whereas students from single-parent or other household structures experienced significant decreases. This suggests that family stability may play a mediating role in the effectiveness of the program. Additionally, low-performing students showed significant gains in empathy and civic engagement, particularly on Arbués's Civic Engagement scale and the Bryant Empathy Scale, whereas high performers experienced decreases in these dimensions, most notably in McLoughlin's Civic Engagement

scale. These findings suggest that the intervention may be particularly beneficial for students with lower initial levels of ethical-civic virtues, pointing to its potential as a targeted strategy for addressing educational and social inequalities.

Qualitative findings from the focus groups enriched the quantitative results by shedding light on students' lived experiences during the intervention. Students reported gaining new knowledge about social issues, such as undesired loneliness, which enhanced their moral awareness and emotional connection to these challenges. Many students expressed heightened empathy for the elderly, often imagining themselves in similar situations and reflecting on the emotional realities of loneliness.

The program also influenced students' behaviors and interactions within their communities. Participants reported engaging more with elderly relatives, helping others, and reflecting on how they could make small but meaningful differences in their daily lives. These behavioral changes suggest that the program's emphasis on real-world problem-solving and intergenerational interaction was successful in fostering civic engagement and empathy in tangible ways. However, some students viewed their empathy levels as already high, attributing this to prior experiences, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened their sensitivity to issues like loneliness. This self-perception highlights the complexity of measuring empathy development, as students may not always recognize changes in themselves even when they begin to act differently. As one participant noted, "I think I became more empathetic, but it's hard to notice changes in yourself. You just start doing things differently."

The structured, hands-on approach of the intervention, which involved students designing and managing their own projects, was another critical factor in its success. Students praised this aspect for not only deepening their understanding of civic virtues but also equipping them with practical skills such as project management and teamwork. This dual impact emphasizes the unique capacity of SL to extend beyond moral education into areas of personal and professional development.

Despite these promising outcomes, the study has some limitations that warrant consideration. The absence of statistically significant changes across the entire cohort raises questions about the robustness of the intervention's impact. The relatively short duration of seven weeks may not have been sufficient to produce measurable changes in deeply ingrained virtues such as empathy and civic engagement. This aligns with the literature suggesting that sustained interventions are often necessary to foster long-term character development (Kristjánsson et al., 2024). Furthermore, the lack of a control group limits the ability to attribute observed changes exclusively to the intervention, while the small sample size reduces the generalizability of the findings.

At a conceptual level, this study highlights the potential of SL to challenge common myths about character education. By integrating formal and informal learning contexts, SL addresses critiques that character education is overly individualistic and disconnected from broader political dimensions (Kristjánsson et al., 2024; Suissa, 2015). The intergenerational

and community-oriented nature of the intervention created opportunities for civic friendship and mutual understanding, aligning with Aristotle's vision of character as inherently social and tied to the flourishing of communities (Walker et al., 2015). These interactions are particularly relevant in today's polarized societies, where building bridges between diverse groups is essential for fostering democratic and inclusive values (Sandel, 2020).

This study also raises important questions about the transformative potential of SL. Exposure to new realities, such as the challenges faced by the elderly, can evoke profound emotional and cognitive shifts in students, akin to what Kristjánsson (2018) describes as "epiphanic experiences." These moments of awe can break previous cognitive limitations, encouraging students to perceive social issues in new ways and fostering a sense of shared responsibility. Future research should further investigate how such experiences contribute to the development of empathy and civic engagement over time.

Additionally, the strong connection between empathy and civic engagement identified in this study suggests that empathy may serve as a prerequisite for sustained civic action. This underscores the importance of fostering empathetic capacities as a foundation for broader civic virtues. At the same time, the findings highlight the significant role of family dynamics in shaping students' development of these virtues. Positive family relationships appeared to enhance the program's impact, while less stable family contexts may hinder its effectiveness. This suggests that explicit civic education programs like this intervention are particularly crucial in schools serving socially vulnerable populations. Without such programs, the responsibility for civic education might fall disproportionately on families, perpetuating social inequalities and neglecting the educational system's role in fostering reflective and engaged citizens (Berkowitz, 1992). However, the study also recognizes the need to address certain limitations in the program's design and implementation. For example, while the intervention incorporated cognitive learning about social issues like undesired loneliness, it lacked a direct connection to the official school curriculum, a key feature of SL (Tapia, 2010). Strengthening this link could enhance the program's coherence and effectiveness. Methodologically, expanding the sample size, incorporating control groups, and accounting for additional covariates—such as students' social media use or participation in extracurricular activities—could improve the reliability and depth of future analyses.

Finally, the study's findings point to several promising directions for future research. Longitudinal studies that track the sustained impact of SL interventions over time could provide valuable insights into how these programs shape students' character development. Expanding the intervention to different cultural and educational contexts, such as Spain, with appropriate adaptations, would enable comparative studies and a more nuanced understanding of SL's effects. Moreover, exploring the role of awe and epiphanic experiences in fostering empathy and civic engagement could open new avenues for integrating emotional and cognitive dimensions into character education.

In conclusion, this study provides partial evidence that a seven-week SL intervention can foster empathy and civic engagement, particularly among students with lower initial levels of these virtues. While the overall impact may be influenced by contextual factors such as family stability and prior civic engagement, the program's ability to foster moral awareness,

emotional connection, and behavioral change underscores its potential as a valuable tool for character education. However, realizing this potential will require longer interventions, stronger curricular integration, and continued refinement of program design and research methodologies. In doing so, SL can contribute to a renewed vision of character education that is deeply social, political, and transformative, equipping students not only to flourish as individuals but also to build more empathetic and engaged communities.

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