A Case of Service-Learning and Research Engagement in Preservice Teachers' Education

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Abstract

This article describes a service-learning program developed at the University of Verona, Italy. This community service research learning (CSRL) program involves preservice and in-service teachers and incorporates learning, community service, and research. We detail the program's theoretical basis and then present the results of a research project conducted with 45 students (preservice teachers) involved in the program during the academic year 2017–2018. The aim of the research was to identify the enrichments students' believe they achieved through their program participation and what they considered most relevant from program participation for their professional improvement.

Keywords: service-learning, teacher education, apprenticeship, professional development, research engagement

S ince its first appearance as a pedagogical method in 1966 (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999), service-learning (SL) has increasingly gained popularity as a pedagogical tool (Billig & Waterman, 2014), instigated in part by the passage of the National and Community Service Trust Act (1993) in the United States. Today, SL is a pedagogical strategy aimed at connecting community engagement and academic learning in contexts where students are involved in providing a service to a community, trying to contribute to the solution of a need and at the same time learning from the experience itself (Verducci & Pope, 2001) by connecting what they have learned in class and in the process of giving service to the target community (Carrington & Saggers, 2008). It represents an experiential methodology that is now widely practiced in higher education (Felten & Clayton, 2011). It's popularity stems from its capacity to develop both academic and soft skills, particularly as they pertain to civic analysis and reflection (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Astin et al., 2006; Eyler & Giles 1999). According to Stanton et al. (1999), SL has gained prominence, perhaps to the greatest level, in higher education. Today, SL is found in every academic field and every type of course across colleges and universities. While it first appeared in and expanded within the United States, it has increasingly been adopted in many countries all around the world. According to Stanton et al. (1999), SL has gained prominence, perhaps to the greatest level, in higher education. Today, SL is found in every academic field and every type of course across colleges and universities. While it first appeared in and expanded within the United States, it has increasingly being adopted in many countries all around the world.

Many authors emphasize how SL has become more and more important in the field of teacher education, first gaining the attention of teacher educators in the United States since the 1990s (Erickson & Anderson, 1997; Wade, 1997). In 2003, Anderson and Erickson (2003) counted more than 300 teacher education programs that integrated SL in their curricula. Even though many universities have adopted SL practices in teacher education programs (Anderson & Erickson, 2003), research on this practice is not as robust (Kirtman, 2008; LaMaster,

2001). Nonetheless, the amount of research is gradually growing as scholars try to fill the gap that several service-learning scholars have noted (Furco, 2001, 2003; Furco & Root, 2010).

Other scholars have emphasized how SL is useful to enhance elements that are essential for future teachers: (a) the development of teaching skills (Jackson et al., 2018; Wasserman, 2009) and reflective skills (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007); (b) a student-centered caring approach to teaching (Buchanan, Baldwin, & Rudisill, 2002); (c) a more complex vision of teaching and learning practices (Maddrell, 2014); (d) an attention to children with special needs (May, Chitiyo, Goodin, Mausey, & Swan-Gravatt, 2018; Russell, 2007), and to children coming from different social and ethnic backgrounds (Carrington & Saggers, 2008; Li & Lal, 2005); and (e) a human service-oriented vision of teaching (Wade & Anderson, 1996) and in building a community of practice (Swick, 2001). Conner (2010) emphasizes that all of these learning outcomes can be reached only if SL is a project designed with a clear pedagogical intentionality and carried out through a well-structured and long path. If an SL program is not well-structured, instead of being really educative, it can confirm and strengthen preconceived notions (i.e., stereotypes, prejudices) that students had at the beginning of their training (Baldwin et al., 2007; Chesler & Vasques Scalera, 2000; Coles, 1999; Erickson & O'Connor, 2000; Petersen, 2007), or can generate lack of comprehension or distrust in facing complex situations (Sperling, 2007). In order to avoid such outcomes, it is essential to remember that teaching needs not only tools (i.e., instructional strategies) but also a vision of education able to orient choices and actions (Mortari, 2009).

A Community's Action: Service and Research

Starting from this premise, we can see that the literature indicates different elements that contribute to developing personal and professional achievements. One of the most important is the connection between preservice and in-service teachers. This connection is important because education is a practice, and for it to be learned, an exchange of experiences, through the cooperation between experts and novices, is necessary (Mortari, 2009). This exchange is represented by entering a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). SL builds a context in which the learner is initiated into the culture of a community and gradually cooperates in building the knowledge that funds it, in a mutual and reciprocal action (Farnsworth, 2010; Hart & King, 2007; Leeman, 2011; McMillan, 2011; ten Dam & Blom, 2006; Yogev & Michaeli, 2011). If the aim of a community is collective improvement, to be part of a community of practice means to look for shared knowledge that arises from working together. For a preservice teacher it is fundamental to learn how to be an educator by sharing educational activities with an expert and being part of a mentoring relationship. Moreover, in an ethical vision, we would like to give form to this relationship not only as a way of learning for the mentee, but it also serves as an enrichment for the mentor and for the whole school community. That is why it is important that the learner acts to benefit the community. SL is a very appropriate method to provide this kind of active support while learning (Boyle-Baise, 1998; Mortari, 2017).

Moreover, if education is a practice, as we already have suggested, there is not a predetermined theory that can be applied in every context exactly as it is learned in books. education, in fact, cannot be pre-programmed (Dewey, 1929). Educative wisdom, as Mortari (2009) asserts is situational. Teachers should face the variability of different problems in educational contexts by analyzing their own actions and producing theories rooted in experience (Mortari, 2017). Teachers' training should be part of a context that is entered not with a preplanned lesson to be taught (as occurs in many teachers' training programs), but rather with an open mind to understand the challenges and a creative look to gain solutions. This is the philosophy that makes SL particularly useful for teachers' training. Anyway, this experience can be possible only if preservice teachers are trained as professionals adhering to a service perspective. SL can be useful for developing research-based learning with a sensitive look at community needs (DePrince, Priebe, & Newton, 2011; Harkavy & Hartley, 2010). Dewey was the first author who conceived research as an essential element for teachers' education, arguing that a practice that does not consider the contribution of scientific inquiry enforces a conventional way of educating, which is at risk of becoming an uncriti-

cal routine (Dewey, 1929). Mortari (2009), developing Dewey's intuition, provided research in a fundamental role in teachers' education, but she specified that

> asking the teacher to carry out research doesn't mean to ask him/her to become a researcher, because his/her duty is not to carry out research but to educate through teaching; instead, he/she is asked to give form to a sufficient competence set allowing him/her to rigorously examine practices acted, and to collect data useful to redefine the theory, and so enabling it to promote a continuous improvement of practices themselves. (p. 35)

Even the European Commission (2014) argues that education to perform research is fundamental in teachers' training, starting from the early stages.

The Verona Program

A Revolutionary Policy of Education

According to these considerations, the University of Verona (Italy) organized for students of the master's degree in primary school education a SL program that assumes the form of community service research learning (CSRL). The CSRL program has a double aim: (1) to promote learning as a service for the classroom in which the students are engaged in their apprenticeship and (2) to envision the research for the writing of each student's dissertation as a work that answers significant questions raised by teachers-mentors. The program involves (a) students of the last two years, (b) in-service teachers coming from different schools, and (c) an academic team that has collectively assumed the role of supervisor. We define this program as community research service learning (Mortari, 2017) because students achieve academic outcomes through a service action aimed at responding to a specific need of a community (in this case a school community). Moreover, they are also called upon to develop educational research related to their service action and write a research dissertation on their experience.

This model of CSRL is grounded in a revolutionary policy of education: the idea of the university engaged in the community, serving it with its research and educational practices (Mortari, 2017). This model starts from the assumption that this choice, on the one hand, reinforces the connection with the community and, on the other, supports the development of the preservice teachers' research skills. The European Commission (2014) considers such skills as key skills for teachers' training because, in order to understand what is happening in a real context, a teacher must know how to get in touch with authentic and not idealized everyday life, and therefore he or she must know how to look "inside" it (Mortari, 2007). Indeed, university policies of education to perform research should be revised. Too often, in fact, undergraduate students' final dissertations are simply a written reflection about an "intellectual curiosity." This can certainly have an interesting outcome but, in most cases, it remains unknown to the community of practitioners. This lack of binding of the research work to a real-world context causes a lack of significance that translates into a cultural diseconomy. Despite the importance that these skills have for the practice of teaching, the training programs directly aimed at developing them are very few; however, in the CSRL program, their development is emphasized.

The Structure of the Program

The program is implemented in five steps. In Step 1, students attend the SL program during the Course of Educational Research (60 hours) and the related Workshop (15 hours). During the course, students become familiar with the SL theoretical basis and the methodological tools needed to plan, observe, document, and analyze their SL experience. More specifically, they learn how to identify a school need, how to design an intervention starting from it, how to use qualitative observation tools, how to create a qualitative report of the experience, and how to analyze actions to improve their efficacy. During Step 2, every student (preservice teacher) chooses the level of school in which he or she wants to be trained (kindergarten or primary school), and then each student is put in connection with an in-service teacher, paying attention to the fact that a good relationship should be established between a student and his or her mentor, since they have to share two years of school together.

Step 3 is focused on the identification of the community's need. What differentiates the Verona program from many other SL

programs is that this identification does not precede the entrance of the students into the context. On the contrary, the community need is defined jointly by the in-service and the preservice teachers during the first weeks of their induction as a result of the cooperation between them. Indeed, students are called upon to put into action what they have learned during the Course of Educational Research in order to help the in-service teacher identify the problem on which the action will be focused. Step 4 concerns the service action: preservice and in-service teachers, by mutual agreement, design an action (an educational program, a teaching program, an evaluation program, etc.) aimed at responding to the previously identified needs. In this phase, the academic team supervises the design of the action, supports preservice and in-service teachers in case of need, and mentors the preservice teachers in order to guide the achievement of their academic outcomes and the development of the educational research that they are called upon to conduct. This interaction between the step focused on the action and the one focused on the research is symbolic of the interaction between two kinds of knowledge: the academic "news" brought by preservice teachers and the deep experiential wisdom elaborated by practitioners.

Finally, Step 5 of the program regards the development of the dissertation that students are called upon to write in order to achieve their degree. The writing of the dissertation is the moment when students put their research project into words, from the needs identification to the collection and analysis of data. Thanks to this writing they reflect on the practice and really learn a pedagogical posture. In this regard, it is worthwhile to emphasize that, during the SL program, students are required to write a reflective journal in which they write thoughts, feelings, and actions related to their SL experience.

The Research Question and the Methodological Framework

Start From the Question

In order to analyze the CSRL program, during the academic year 2017–2018 we decided to conduct a study that involved 45 students, in order to: (1) define what are, according to their experiences, the achievements that these students have earned from their participation in our SL program; and (2) identify what students consider important for their personal and professional growth. Indeed, our CSRL is built on the conviction that a SL practice helps future teachers develop essential professional skills (reflective, civic, teaching, etc.), but, starting from their own experience, what do students really feel they have learned? Hence, the research question that guides our study is "Starting from their own experience, what achievement do students think they have achieved through their involvement in the CSRL program?"

Coherently to our aim, we developed a study that follows an ecological paradigm, according to the idea that in order to throw light on something that happens in a real context, you must interview those who are involved in it (Merriam, 2002; Mortari, 2007). We chose a phenomenological approach because it is particularly suitable for exploring the meanings that people give to their experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method of inquiry is inspired by the phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy, because its aim is to examine the problem starting from the subjects' lived experiences (Mortari, 2007). The data collected are the reflective texts connected to students' dissertations. This method of gathering data leads the researchers to acquire direct knowledge of the subjects' world, following the principle of adherence to reality. The analysis of the data is inspired by content analysis because it allows defining and organizing the meaning of a text to discover its core elements without losing its undertones (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This tool is set into a more articulated analysis method that interconnects the empirical phenomenological method (EPM) and grounded theory (GT; Mortari, 2007). This method takes inspiration from the EPM for the posture of analysis that allows us to pay attention to the visible profile of things, remaining faithful to the qualities of the phenomenon and leading to a rigorous description of it. On the other hand, this method is connected with GT because it gives us a way to build a systematic process of analysis through different steps (Mortari, 2007; Mortari & Silva, 2018).

The Process of Analysis

This systematic process of analysis is guided by several main "rules" and is organized

in different steps. The rules guide the re-searcher to proceed in certain ways:

- reading data many times;

- exploring data without a map of ideas or epistemic moves already defined (i.e., cultivating open attention);

- recursively going back to data in order to have the possibility to understand the smallest details;

- being patient: The researcher must develop a restful posture of the mind in order to listen to the text; and

- during the process of constructing the descriptive theory, monitoring the words to enable them to faithfully express the meanings emerging from the analysis itself. (Mortari, 2007)

This tool of analysis is organized into eight steps or phases. The first phase can be considered Step 0, which is aimed at gaining an overall knowledge of the research material, which is necessary to grasp the overall meaning of the data, in order to provide a context for the emergence of specific units of meaning. In the next step, Step 1 the text is divided into meaning units and the researchers generate descriptive labels for every unit, comparing their ideas and examining the descriptive alignment and interpretive dissonances between them. The aim of this step is the development of a provisional coding characterized by descriptive labels to identify the specific quality of every meaning unit. Step 2 is optional, but it is needed when something unclear has emerged in the previous step. This step involves holding a specific data analysis session with subjects in order to clarify the meaning of excerpts for which researchers' interpretations vary widely.

In Step 3 the provisional coding is verified through a recursive process to monitor the capacity of the coding to describe every unit of meaning in an adequate and effective way. The aim of this phase is to redefine the labels, testing their descriptive adequacy in achieving a faithful conceptualization of the different aspects of the phenomena. Step 4 regards a kind of "tuning" of the coding, which is refined in order to make it not only appropriate but also clear. In Step 5 the descriptive grains (labels) are organized in categories that help us to define more precisely the "shape" of the phenomena we are investigating. In order to complete this step, the labels are regrouped into categories (second–level labels) with analogous types of meaning units, and they are then placed into homogeneous sets, producing a list of categories that characterize the qualities that mark the different aspects of the phenomena. Hence, this step allows the researchers to define the coding of analysis. In Step 6 all the meaning units are classified (using a table) according to the final coding system and, after that, the researchers focus their attention on the categories (or the labels) that emerge to make them more coherent with the research question. This second level of mapping makes clear the distributions, the frequencies, and the interconnections of the various categories, and it leads to the emergence of a descriptive theory inductively constructed through a gradual process of interpretation of the data (Mortari 2007; Mortari & Silva, 2018).

Findings and Conclusion

The research was conducted between October 2017 and November 2018 and involved 45 students. Every student is assigned an anonymizing identifier (e.g., S1, C2). The analysis leads us to elaborate a coding system (presented in Table 1) that describes the achievements that students, starting from their lived experience, think they have earned at the end of their SL experience.

In this article, we do not present the entire set of findings but, in alignment with the research question that we had submitted, we focus our attention on the professional skills and particularly on the categories "development of research skills," "development of reflective skills," and "development of a service perspective." We focus our attention on these elements because, as we have previously noted, research skills are what make the future teachers able to transition from technicians to competent professionals (He & Prater, 2014), to become someone able to modulate his or her professional behavior according to the context of emerging needs (Kellehe & Farley, 2006), and to transform his or her own experiences into experiential knowledge. This knowledge leads to interrogating practice to construct educational theories and able to enlighten practices, rather than merely "applying" knowledge that is developed by someone else (Mortari,

Table 1. Self–Reported Skills Students Gained From the CSRL Program	
Professional skills	Increasing of professional knowledge
	Completion of professional profile
	Development of reflective skills
	Development of a service perspective
	Development of research skills
"Transversal" (or "personal") skills	Development of the skill to learn from mistakes and manage a crisis
	Development of skills useful to handle the unexpected
	Development of self–critical skills
	Supporting motivation
Interrelational skills	Development of collaborative skills
	Development of empathic listening
	Development of a child–centered approach

2007, 2017). In order to do this, it is also necessary to develop reflective skills, because it is through reflection that the subjects reelaborate their experience in systematically structured systems of thought, allowing a critical analysis of action that permits the elaboration of experiential knowledge (Eyler & Giles, 1999; McCarthy, 2010; Mortari, 2009; Wade, 1995). The SL experience adds a further enriching aspect because it not only allows the development of research and reflective skills of future teachers, but it does this starting from a service perspective. This connection between research and service perspectives echoes the thought of Rorty (2002) and his pragmatist vision of research. According to Rorty, research must be focused on solving the real problems of a context. This is possible only when starting from an ethical posture open to the other's needs, which "should not be understood as the passive bending to every request that comes from the context." Rather it is the ability to be engaged in an action starting from "a negotiation of the meanings that leads to a common framework" (Mortari, 2017, p. 31).

Research Skills

The development of research skills, this is an explicit goal of our program, and the students are made aware of this. Moreover, from student feedback, we have learned that these skills are something that students consider relevant for their future professional practice. As one student stated, "I would like to bring with me . . . my being a

researcher. . . . I will enter in the school not only as a teacher but also as a researcher" (D1).

In their texts, students express their views of what characterizes the professional profile of a teacher who adheres to a research perspective. The first element that they emphasize is that this kind of teacher is someone who applies the tools that research offers to analyze and evaluate the teaching and learning processes with a transformative purpose. In other words, to be a teacher with research skills means to have a powerful tool that not only represents an interpretive aid for analyzing the context, but also a device to be used in solving the problems that emerge from the context.

> The posture of the researcher leads a teacher to examine in a rigorous way the practices put in place in classroom and [this means] to develop a habit that considers research as something aimed at promoting the quality of educational actions. (R1)

The second element, according to our students' experiences, is that the development of research skills had represented for them a kind of "catalyst," able to activate other forms of professional growth. This means that the achievement of the research skills for these future teachers is not only an important acquisition on its own, but because these competencies are connected to the development of a critical and analytical vision

of professional practice that enables them to develop a professional practice, they are skills oriented toward lifelong learning.

> The research experience had represented a real opportunity for training and learning. [P1]

This statement also recalls what official documents affirm regarding the need for teachers to adhere to a lifelong learning perspective (European Commission, 2014). However, many researchers have emphasized that this disposition should be cultivated from the early stage of teacher training in order for it to be embedded into the teachers' teaching ethos (Day, 2002). Starting from our students' experiences, the development of a research habit seems to be a way to promote commitment and enthusiasm for lifelong learning.

> Something that I have learned from this experience is that a teacher . . . is someone who can be an active actor in the construction of the future of people, being in a lifelong learning perspective with and for others. (Z1)

It is interesting to note that students consider lifelong learning an expression of their responsibilities toward their pupils. Indeed, in the expression "with and for others" we can find the meaning of educational research that is enrolled in a participatory dimension, not only because it sees the involvement of teachers as active agents in research actions in which the pupils also play an active role (Mazzoni & Mortari, 2015), but also because it acquires meaning through a principle of utility aimed at improving the well-being of the pupils the teachers are responsible for (Mortari, 2009).

Reflective Skills

As we have previously noted, the development of research skills is strictly connected to the development of reflective skills. Nevertheless, these competencies are also something that characterize the profile of a good teacher, so these competencies have a double relevance in the professional development of a research-oriented teacher. Reflection is a critical component of thinking that allows us to look at the context, identifying critical areas and assuming effective educational strategies because it is not only a cognitive act able to analyze a

problem and propose solutions, but it also throws light on the dynamics of thought that accompany this path (Mortari, 2009). For this reason, reflection is for a teacher "an intentional act of the mind" that makes him or her able to investigate his or her own way of teaching (Lyons, 2002, p. 99), transforming experiences into experiential knowledge, a thoughtful and critical knowledge that interrogates practice to construct theories able to enlighten it (Mortari, 2009). The students' texts emphasized the importance that reflexivity has held for their professional development.

> Self-reflective practice . . . [is an] activity of critical vigilance on thought, which I have been able to exercise along the entire path. (R1)

> [This program] has led me to grow in reflexivity. . . . I have ventured into a continuous reflection on my experience. (O1)

The students were encouraged to write a journal that kept track of both the practical and reflective dimensions of their experience. These field notes are composed of observational notes and reflective notes, which draft the thoughts that accompanied the actions.

> Writing helps to gather the [pedagogical] knowledge and the reflections on it, giving the possibility to retrace one's own step, to be able to observe it from different points of view and to capture aspects which at first you have not notice. (P1)

Writing is essential for the development of future teachers' reflective skills because it helps activate a critical vision of their professional practice that leads to developing "anticipatory reflection"—that is, the ability to reflect on actions in a future-oriented mode (van Manen, 1995, p. 33). Indeed, the teacher should be able to reflect in a pendulum that temporally goes from the moment that precedes the act, transits to the action itself, and closes, in a circular perspective, with the phases that follow it. The purpose of this transversal reflection is to weave, in a critical way, the moment of intervention planning, the implementation phase, and the evaluation, directing future practices more effectively (van Manen, 1995). The writing of a journal that keeps track of his or her own experience can help the teacher

develop this kind of reflection (Mortari, 2009). Furthermore, writing a journal helps future teachers develop the narrative dimension of their actions; indeed, the narrative thought allows teachers to revise their actions starting from multiple points of view and leads the subject to bring to light values, beliefs, and theories that are subtended to their behavior, guiding them to a deeper and better articulated reading of their lived experiences (Conway, 2001; Jalongo, Isenberg, & Gerbracht, 1995). During the program, moments of shared reflection were also organized in different forms (peer groups, small and large groups with the support of the academic staff, and so on).

> An element that I considered essential in developing this experience was the frequent occasions for thinking, either individually or with the help of the team of university professors who supported us. (M1)

This choice has precise reasons: on one hand, peer coaching supports preservice teachers in developing reflective skills because it helps each student go deeper into his or her own perspective and compare it with others' perspectives. Indeed, peer confrontation leads to developing a kind of reflexivity able to relate, with an open mind and thoughtful approach, to the complexity that characterizes educational contexts (Lee & Choi, 2013; Mortari, 2009). On the other hand, the support of the academic staff is aimed at helping students cultivate the ability to analyze the cases and develop new solutions, keeping contact with the reality from which it is born and to which it must return, accompanying the teacher in a process of elicitation of his or her knowledge through a critical and systematic analysis (Mortari, 2009).

> [Reflecting] has always helped me to implement a good teaching and grow professionally. I hope not to lose this ability but rather to further refine it to become a good teacher, able to observe and design following the needs of my students. (S1)

From these words emerges awareness of the importance of reflective practice as a daily habit in order to support the future teachers' capability to continuously reinvest energies in their own professional training starting from everyday actions, despite the fact that it is hard to put *reflective practice* into action during the flow of the teaching activity. The reflective teacher is the one who looks at his or her own experience, analyzing it through a variety of tools and from different perspectives, in order to highlight his or her potential and areas that need improvement (Mortari, 2009). Reflective competence is essential as a contrast to the idea of teaching as a routine practice, which produces a standardization of thought in younger generations and a general failure of critical thinking (Mortari, 2009). All these considerations have a great impact on the development of the debate on teachers' training, leading to the concept that the development of reflective skills is one of the cornerstones for teachers' professionalism, with a solid theoretical base, an in-depth knowledge of educational contexts, and the improvement of evaluative skills (Yost, 2006).

The third element connected to the development of research and reflective skills of future teachers is the development of a service perspective.

The Service Perspective

The development of a *service perspective* is crucial in a SL program, and it is essential to clarify that it should not be interpreted in a pietistic or philanthropic sense that considers "service" as "charity" (Mortari, 2017). Indeed, this interpretation of the concept of service echoes the idea of an act of restitution to society in order to cover a debt that the subject contracts by virtue of a privileged position that can lead to underestimating the civic role and the transformative value of these experiences (Gorham, 1992; Sandaran, 2012). Indeed, the service perspective that SL promotes is based on an idea of equality between all the subjects involved because all of them should "gain" something from the SL experience: the students (development of professional and personal skills) and the community (receiving concrete help in solving a real problem; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). In this regard, it is interesting to note that the students observed how this is a difficult perspective to assume, particularly at the beginning of the program, because it is experienced in some way as a leap into the void.

> Putting oneself at the service of someone "blindly" means in a certain sense take a risk. (C2)

From the texts of our students emerges that what transforms their experience into a positive one, making them really able to develop a service perspective, is the relationship with the in-service teacher. In many cases the relationship between the student (preservice teacher) and the tutor (in-service teacher) was characterized, while their mutual knowledge increased, by respect and collaboration leading to a reciprocal enrichment.

> To make oneself available to the other is not a simple thing, initially there are many doubts. In time, however, we get to know each other and if you know and respect someone, you want to help him. (S1)

There are two more elements, partly connected to the relationship with the in-service teacher, that are positively connected to the development of the service perspective: (a) the sense of usefulness that students witnessed in feeling they were part of the solution to a problem that concretely affected the quality of life of a class and (b) the awareness that the in-service teachers trusted them. As regards the first one, many students have emphasized their feeling of being part of the class and therefore being responsible for the solution to the problems of the class, making the service action a goal that they felt as primary.

> I was able to experience what it means to actually offer a service. . . . For the first time I felt really useful in the face of a real need for a teacher in the classroom. (B2)

This community and participatory aspect of service-learning is linked to a concretely acted civic engagement in which community service activities do not represent a corollary of the training path but constitute "the backbone" capable of promoting a teacher figure characterized by a strong ethical and civic dimension (Mortari, 2017).

As regards the second element that we have underlined, the importance for students of feeling that tutors trust them, in the words of our students it emerges that this awareness is at the base of a new confidence that they felt as a "reward" for their actions and as a proof of their being able to "make a difference" thanks to the alliance they had made with the tutor.

> Planning together . . . with the aim of improve the learning experience of the children has allowed me to feel the value inherent in the service. During this journey, I have always felt useful, and I felt the trust that the teachers had in me and their desire to feel supported by me to discover what was "going wrong." (G2)

This feeling of usefulness emerges from the lived experience of our students to be an element that had a crucial role in the reinforcement of their motivation, particularly in the difficult moments. Anyway, we think that it is important for another reason also. It is through this feeling that students discover their being really part of the community, a part that can concretely contribute to its quality of life. Each student's action of service is therefore not only a "duty" but becomes the manifestation of an idea of civic responsibility that finds its inspiring principles in participation and sharing.

In this sense, the service action takes the role of an actualization of the ethic of care, assuming the principle of mutual well-being as a daily and possible inspiration within a genuinely understood community dimension (Mortari, 2017). This gives a new significance not only to the service action, thanks to its being a concrete help that students provide to the teacher, but also through the research actions they carried out with the aim of improving the quality of class life.

> Returning the data and reflections to the teacher [. . .] makes this research [. . .] an authentic service oriented research. (V2)

From the words of our students emerged the idea of service-oriented research, meaning research that wants to be at the service of the participants, with the aim of promoting the improvement of an educational practice designing new educational experiences and subjecting them to rigorous scientific analysis. At the same time, a dual objective is thus pursued: to increase pedagogical science and qualify educational contexts. To be in a perspective of "service" means to assume a precise sense of the gift concept, which means to give something to the other responding to a personal inner need without expecting something in return. This is reminiscent of the words of Seneca (*Benefits*,

I, v, 1, ca. 59 A.D./2000), who defines the gift as "a thing that responds to a spiritual order" and consists "in the willingness to give." This gift is care, a care that inspires an ethical vision of life (Mortari, 2017). Care, in its ethical core, means to act looking for the good not only of the individual but also of others and of institutions (Ricoeur, 1992). In order to do this, you should be able to put yourself in brackets, because otherwise you cannot understand what is good for others and direct personal actions from a service perspective. These reflections are coherent with what emerged from our students' feedback and show us that our SL program improves civic skills inspired by an ethic of care in our students. This ethic of care puts this concept into a political framework that goes beyond a narrow vision of the teaching profession and sees it as the core element to reach a more democratic vision of society that nourishes a public life inspired by the principles of solidarity, responsibility, and commitment to the community (Mortari, 2017).

From our study it emerges that what characterizes this kind of teacher is (a) ability to use the research tool interpretively to analyze both the needs of the contexts and his or her own educational practice; (b) a research habit oriented to a transformative purpose, which means being involved in concrete actions aimed at solving the problems emerging from the contexts, meshing this action with a commitment to lifelong learning; (c) the use of reflectivity to transform the educational experience into experiential knowledge, assuming a critical and thoughtful posture to interrogate contexts with a high level of complexity in order to construct theories able to enlighten them; and (d) the development of a participatory vision of his or her professional practice inspired by a concretely acted civic engagement and a concept of care that inspires an ethical vision of life. This shows how the CSRL program promotes in our students a vision of teaching guided by the principles of utility, reflexivity, participation, civic engagement, and care, a vision that we hope will inspire all their future professional practice.

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