

Impact of Service Learning on the Spiritual Growth of the Students at a Catholic Institution in Kathmandu

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Abstract

Service learning is a crucial pedagogical strategy in higher education which combines academic study with community involvement to foster not just social and intellectual development but also spiritual growth. Service learning is frequently overlooked and neglected by many institutions, despite its critical role in promoting spiritual growth. There is a significant gap in research addressing this area, with limited studies exploring how service learning specifically contributes to students' spiritual growth. The study aims to explore students' experiences of spiritual development and the key factors in service learning that influence their spiritual growth. This study employed a qualitative method and an interpretivist approach, gathering insights from 15 purposively selected participants through semi-structured and in-depth interviews. The collected data was further analyzed using thematic analysis. The study found that service learning fostered experiential learning, personal growth, and spiritual development by integrating community engagement with reflection. It enhanced participants' confidence, empathy, humility, and teamwork skills while deepening their faith, moral values, and sense of responsibility. Although participants faced challenges like leaving their comfort zones and resolving conflicts between their values, mentors, peers, and the community were effective motivators. Overall, service learning fostered a learning environment that was value-driven and purpose-driven, which encouraged a long-term dedication to community service. In order to support students holistic development and strengthen their connections to the communities they serve, findings

highlight the significance of incorporating service learning into academic courses with a focus on meaningful and reciprocal community participation.

Key words: service learning, spiritual growth, catholic, personal growth, moral values,

Introduction

Service learning is a popular pedagogical strategy in higher education for encouraging students' civic engagement, critical thinking, and personal development, which combines academic study with community involvement. (Ka et al., 2018) Service learning initiatives aim to provide formal educational opportunities while addressing real-world community issues. (Billig, 2020)

The term "spiritual growth" describes the expansion of one's sense of purpose, transcendent reality, or interpersonal connection. It often involves meaning-making, introspection, and a greater focus on virtues like self-transcendence, compassion, and ethical consciousness. According to Radecke's study, reflective involvement with service learning significantly influenced students' spiritual life and faith formation (Radecke, 2007). Additionally, students can learn more about global challenges and disprove misunderstandings through service experiences. (McBride et al., 2011). Barrett's study showed that spiritual development occurred in service-learning settings that offered both support (such as peer relationships and academic integration) and challenge (like experiencing social injustice). Students were inspired to reconsider their commitment to others, purpose, and ideals as a result of this introspective, relational, and transformational experience. (Barrett, M. S., 2016).

The value of comprehensive student development, which includes not only professional and cognitive abilities but also spiritual and moral aspects, is becoming more widely acknowledged by higher education institutions around the globe. According to recent research, 78% of undergraduates talk about religion or spirituality with their peers, indicating that students are very interested in spirituality and meaning-making.

Nevertheless, 53% of undergraduates say that their spiritual views are unaffected by their classroom experiences, demonstrating that higher education has mostly failed to meet students' spiritual development requirements despite this clear desire. Service learning has been found to have a significant impact on students' spiritual purpose, caring values, and Catholic worldview, with 46% of students stating that spiritual growth was either the most important or a very important outcome of their service-learning experience. The majority of previous research has focused on spiritual development as a secondary goal rather than as the main objective, which has limited comprehension of the precise processes by which service learning promotes spiritual development. (Barrett, M. S. ,2016).

Although service-learning holds considerable promise for supporting students' spiritual development, existing research offers limited insight into the specific processes, contextual factors, and conditions that enable this growth. This lack of clarity presents both theoretical and practical challenges for educators aiming to purposefully design service-learning experiences that foster holistic student development.

Rationale of the Study

The significance of this research lies in addressing a significant gap in the current literature regarding the impact of service learning on spiritual growth among students. While service learning has been widely acknowledged for its positive effects on academic achievement, social skills, and civic responsibility, its influence on spiritual development remains underexplored. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating how service learning experiences shape a student's spiritual well-being, values, and personal growth.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the holistic development of students, including their emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions. Service learning provides a unique opportunity for students to engage with diverse communities, confront real-world challenges, and reflect on their roles in society. By exploring the relationship between service learning and spiritual growth, this research will contribute

to a deeper understanding of how community service can foster qualities such as empathy, compassion, and purpose, values that are integral to spiritual well-being. It highlights the value of integrating spiritual growth into education for balanced development. Service learning may provide students with a sense of purpose, inner serenity, and deeper relationships in a fast-paced, stressful environment.

The findings of this study will guide educators and curriculum designers in integrating service learning into academic programs to develop students' empathy, compassion, and social responsibility. This research will provide valuable insights into how service learning fosters spiritual growth and promotes positive social values. Ultimately, the research aims to support the creation of holistic educational environments that nurture well-rounded individuals.

Research Questions

1. How do students describe their spiritual development experiences through participation in service learning activities?
2. What are the key factors in service learning that influence a student's spiritual growth?

Literature Review

Spirituality is frequently defined in the educational environment as fostering awareness, purpose, empathy, and connection (Eskandari et al., 2020). Spirituality in education is necessary to improve the quality of learning and teaching. It is influenced by personal, social, religious, and cultural factors. Although it is frequently linked to religion, spiritual development in school settings goes beyond religious teaching (Dhungana & Neupane, 2021). It emphasizes moral responsibility, compassion, mindfulness, and the pursuit of both individual and societal well-being. In both secular and religious institutions, the importance of spirituality in education has been

recognized. Islamic education in Indonesia fosters spiritual development in five ways: self-awareness, empowerment, social role fulfillment, realizing one's potential, and improvement (Misnatun & Ummah, 2023). Globally, contemplative teaching methods like mindfulness and meditation are also becoming more popular. These techniques have demonstrated beneficial effects on students' resilience, emotional control, and perception (Daw & Ma, 2024). The Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP) is a teaching model rooted in Jesuit education. Context, experience, contemplation, action, and assessment are its constituent parts.

It promotes spiritual maturity by encouraging students to think carefully about real-world experiences, including service learning, in order to build inner awareness, personal values, and a sense of purpose. Learners grow into more sympathetic, ethically upright, and spiritually aware people as a result of this cycle. (Garanzini & Baur, 2022)

In Nepal, religious and cultural values are at the core of spiritual development in education. A research study by (Lama & Aryal, 2022) argues in favor of Vipassana meditation being taught in schools because it promotes compassion, peace, and the overall development of students. They emphasize that practices of peacefulness and mindfulness improve one's physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. (Dhungana & Neupane, 2021) presented an eco-spiritual pedagogy that combines spiritual intelligence with ecological consciousness. This teaching approach promotes yoga and Vedic philosophy practices (karma, bhakti, and jnana yoga) to assist students in developing empathy for other people and the environment. One powerful way to integrate and nurture spiritual development within education is through service learning, which provides students with experiential opportunities

Service learning is a dynamic pedagogical strategy that combines academic instruction, critical reflection, and meaningful community involvement. This approach attempts to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world, practical application in order to enhance the educational process, promote civic engagement, and

strengthen communities. In addition to addressing real community problems, the strategy aims to improve students' academic learning and foster their civic and social skills. In contrast to traditional teaching approaches, service learning encourages students to apply theoretical principles in real-world situations by emphasizing both content and process knowledge. (UConn Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, 2021) Service-learning aids educators in cultivating traits like leadership, teamwork, and flexibility that are critical to education in the twenty-first century. It promotes genuine interaction with communities, giving educators a firsthand look at the struggles that schools and kids confront, better equipping them for the classroom of the future. Furthermore, service-learning promotes reflective practice by incorporating service projects into academic courses through carefully planned collaborations, strengthening comprehension of theoretical ideas and social settings. (Mutambara, 2023) The ability of service-learning to encourage social responsibility and active citizenship in students is one of its curricular benefits. Interacting with underrepresented groups enables students to "reach out" and get firsthand knowledge of prejudices in society and a range of perspectives. Students are also urged to "reach in" by critically examining their own beliefs, prejudices, and attitudes, frequently through journaling or group discussions. The educational process becomes more meaningful as a result of this introspective process, which increases self-awareness and promotes personal progress. (Meyers & Roosevelt University, 2009)

Service-learning, a pedagogical strategy that combines community service and academic study, has gained popularity as a way to improve student learning and civic participation. (Ka et al., 2018) It is well known that incorporating service-learning into curriculum may help students develop critical skills and values, especially those pursuing careers in social work and related professions. (Gruslyte, 2021) Service-learning initiatives provide students direct exposure to a range of social concerns and demographics, which fosters cultural awareness and the ability to collaborate with people from different backgrounds. Collaborative initiatives facilitate the development

of leadership skills, contacts with community partners and service beneficiaries improve communication skills, and real-world difficulties foster problem-solving abilities. (Angwaomaodoko, 2024) The benefits of service-learning for students include improved self-perception, increased school and learning engagement, improved social skills, increased civic participation, and higher academic achievement. According to the study, service-learning participation typically results in significant gains in all of these categories, particularly when programs include suggested behaviors like community involvement and reflection. According to the meta-analysis, service-learning has a major positive impact on students' social and personal growth, promoting more self-assurance and academic success. These results are improved by putting important strategies into practice, such as connecting to the curriculum, giving students a voice, and stressing reflection. However, efficiency varies according to the precise tactics employed and the quality of the program. (Celio et al., 2011) Service learning becomes more impactful when students reflect, helping them understand their experiences and grow spiritually.

Reflection, a key component of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP), helps students develop spiritually by challenging them to think critically about their beliefs, feelings, and behavior. It enables students to progress beyond brief interactions and develop a more profound feeling of connection and purpose. Learners can internalize their service experiences and develop spiritually by using strategies including meaningful discussions, silent reflection, and journal writing. (Chien, 2020) demonstrate that reflective activities derived from IPP cultivate inner consciousness, and regular reflection cultivates moral and spiritual insight among students.

Theory

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), proposed by David Kolb in 1984, emphasizes that learning is an active process that occurs through direct experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. According to Kolb (Kolb,1984), Kolb's learning cycle consists of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract

conceptualization, and active experimentation. Service learning aligns with this model by immersing students in real-world experiences, encouraging them to reflect on their actions, derive meaningful insights, and apply their learning to future situations. As students engage in service activities, they encounter real-world challenges that encourage self-reflection, empathy, and moral awareness. This process deepens their understanding of values like compassion, humility, and social responsibility, ultimately contributing to their spiritual development.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) can be applied in this research to explore how service-learning impacts students' spiritual growth. According to ELT, learning occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In service learning, students engage in real-world service activities (concrete experience), reflect on their emotional and moral responses (reflective observation), link these experiences to broader spiritual values such as compassion and social responsibility (abstract conceptualization), and then apply these insights to future actions (active experimentation). This cycle can help track how service learning influences students' spiritual development, fostering empathy, purpose, and moral growth.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the impact of service learning on the spiritual growth of students. Interpretivism served as the guiding research paradigm, enabling an in-depth exploration of students' personal experiences, reflections, and values as shaped by their participation in service-learning activities. The study was conducted at St. Xavier's College, Maitighar, Nepal as it is one of the leading catholic institutions in Kathmandu offering various bachelor's and master's level programs, and provides a unique context where service learning is intentionally integrated into education. The sample consisted of 15 students who had participated in service-learning programs, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and

depth of insight. The study relied on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility and depth as participants describe their spiritual growth. Secondary data was obtained from academic journals, research reports, and credible online sources related to service learning and spiritual development. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions that encourage students to share personal stories, reflections, and emotional responses related to their service-learning experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes that reveal how service learning contributes to students' spiritual development. Validity was ensured through a well-structured research design and the pilot testing of interview questions to enhance clarity and appropriateness. Likewise, ethical considerations were thoroughly addressed by obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring voluntary participation, maintaining confidentiality, and securely storing all research data.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

1. Service-Learning Activities and Lived Experiences

The concept of service learning is understood differently by the participants; however, they have knowledge of its main concept. Most participants described service learning as a process of learning by actively engaging in practical work and giving back to society by applying the knowledge and skills they have acquired. It means going out into the community, helping others through different activities, and then reflecting on what they learned from that experience without any expectations of return. One of the participants mentioned that "service learning means doing activities to support the community and then thinking about what you learned from that experience. It's about connecting what you study with real-life helping, not just in the classroom."

A few said that service learning means applying the theories that we have learned in class for the betterment and sustainable development. Some said that service learning means finding purpose in life through service. Likewise, participants also said that a small act that can have an impact on others' lives is service learning. The participants said that they participated in service learning activities through different events organized by the college, such as the Rural Immersion Camp, St. Ignatius Day, donation drives, and outreach club activities.

2. Distinctiveness of Catholic Institutions

Participants highlighted how Catholic institutions, particularly St. Xavier's College, differ from other educational settings in their approach to service learning. Unlike other institutions where service activities are often not prioritized or conducted outside the curriculum, St. Xavier's integrates service learning into all courses regardless of the subject studied. Many participants emphasized that Catholic institutions focus not only on the act of helping others but also on understanding the deeper reasons behind service. Several participants noted that service learning in Catholic institutions is strongly linked to faith, values, and social justice principles. Students are encouraged to recognize the dignity of every individual, especially those who are poor, marginalized, or voiceless, and to serve them with compassion and respect. This spiritual and ethical foundation was seen as a key element that sets Catholic institutions apart. A few participants also said that Catholic institutions are different because they encourage students to reflect on their service experiences. This reflection helps students connect what they do to their faith and values, which deepens their empathy and understanding of justice and human dignity.

One of the participants mentioned that "In a Catholic institution, even if we come from different religions, it has taught us that we share the same purpose in life, which is compassion, service, and dignity. This makes the learning environment more value-driven and purpose-oriented compared to non-Catholic institutions." Similarly, another

participant mentioned that “ Even though service learning was mentioned earlier in life, in different institutions, this institution has emphasized and focused on helping others. In non-Catholic institutions, the concept of serving others is not always emphasized; it may not be deeply rooted. But in Catholic institutions, the value of service is built in; it becomes a natural part of the environment and feels like a culture.”

3. Connection of service learning with spiritual growth

All the participants agreed that service learning is closely connected to spiritual growth. They said that through these activities, they realized they have a bigger responsibility, not just for themselves but for how their actions affect others. Many shared that they learned a lot from the people they served, and this inspired them to join more service-learning activities. A few participants said the experience motivated them to take part in service work outside college as well. Service learning taught them kindness and the joy of giving. They added that while they weren't very active during their +2 level, service learning encouraged them to be more involved and make a positive difference. Many also said that it increased their compassion and gave them a stronger sense of purpose in life. Some participants mentioned that service learning brought them happiness and self-satisfaction. They believe that feeling content and satisfied through serving others connects them spiritually. Many said service learning motivated them to empower themselves and those around them. It made them feel grateful and helped them better understand feelings, values, and beliefs.

Several participants explained that when they serve others, they are not just helping people; they are also living their faith. They said that service learning provides a way to connect with God through actions and helps them become better human beings. It also taught them to empathize deeply, not just feel sympathy. A few participants said service learning helps them become more humble, thankful, and compassionate. It changes how they see the world, through love, equality, and justice. It teaches them to care less about themselves and more about what others need. It also builds a willingness

to give their time, energy, or resources to help others. Others shared that service learning taught them patience with others and how to forgive mistakes. Even in difficult circumstances, many felt more optimism and inner peace.

One of the participants mentioned that “ Service learning has contributed to my spiritual growth by bringing me peace of mind and a deep sense of self-satisfaction. The act of helping others and sharing knowledge has made me feel more connected and grateful. These experiences have not only strengthened my inner peace but also aligned my actions with a greater purpose, showing how service and spirituality are deeply linked.” Similarly, another participant said that “service learning has played a significant role in my spiritual growth by enabling me to see the world through different lenses, particularly from an intersectionality perspective. This approach helped me recognize how various aspects of identity, such as culture, religion, gender, and social status, intersect and shape people’s experiences. By understanding these complexities during service learning, I was able to deepen my empathy and broaden my spiritual awareness, which led to more meaningful and holistic personal growth.”

4. Faith and Moral Reflection through Service

Most participants said that service learning made their moral values stronger. It taught them the importance of being “people for others” and made them realize how lucky and privileged they are. It encouraged them to use what they have to help others in need.

Participants also said the experience helped them think more deeply about their beliefs, faith, and values. Many participants said that when they worked with people who were struggling, they started thinking about their beliefs, how they treat others, what really matters in life, and what kind of person they want to be. They began to understand that faith is not just about going to church or temple or praying; it’s also about showing kindness, love, and respect to everyone through actions. A few said that the experience challenged some of their old ways of thinking, like not being grateful for what they have.

Some mentioned that they were pushed to think about what they truly believe when it comes to fairness, kindness, and human dignity. They used to think helping others was something extra or optional. But through service learning, they realized that helping is actually an important part of being human.

One of the participants said that “Coming from a strict upbringing, I realized that simply following those same patterns would not lead to meaningful change. I faced a dilemma, but chose to act in a way that felt morally right. Through this journey, I engaged in deep self-exploration, which helped me better understand myself and also improved my ability to understand others. It became easier to see things from different perspectives. This shift in communication and interaction has changed the way I perceive people and situations, contributing to my moral and value growth.”

Another participant mentioned that “My beliefs and values have remained the same, but what has changed is my actions. Before, I wouldn’t take action; maybe that was the issue, but now I do take action to achieve something based on those values and beliefs. Earlier, it felt like I was being dictated; there was no autonomy in my decisions. Now, my decisions are autonomous and don’t require others to guide me. Additionally, a feeling of spirituality and morality has grown. My perspective on society has shifted, and I have started to understand my role as a changemaker. It has helped me realize my potential to make a difference.”

5. Factors in Spiritual Growth through Service Learning

All participants said that mandatory attendance was one of the main reasons they stayed committed to service learning, which helped their spiritual growth. It ensured that everyone took part and stayed engaged. Some mentioned that the community they served and the positive feedback from the people they helped were strong motivating factors. These experiences made them feel valued and inspired them to continue serving. Most participants shared that the college’s approach, making the program student-led and giving students chances to take on leadership roles, was very important. It gave them

a sense of responsibility and ownership, which helped them grow. Many said that reflecting on their service experiences and the values taught by the institution helped them understand the deeper meaning of service and how it connects to personal and spiritual growth.

A few participants also pointed out that having supportive mentors and teachers and being in a positive, encouraging environment made a big difference in their learning journey. Several shared that group sharing, open discussions, facing challenges, and personal growth moments were key parts of the service learning experience. These moments helped them think deeply, connect with others, and grow both emotionally and spiritually. One of the participants said that “ Motivation to help others has been a key factor in service learning, which helps in spiritual growth; one can participate in service learning but still not meet its true objective. In my case, spiritual growth has been influenced by the environment around me and the sense of collectiveness within it. These elements have played a significant role in shaping my spiritual development during the service learning journey.”

6. Influence of mentors, peers, or community members

Most participants shared that the community they served had the biggest impact on their service learning experience. One said, “The people we served had very little but still showed so much kindness, gratitude, and strength. It really touched us.” Many said that seeing this made them reflect on what really matters in life and helped them become more humble and thankful for what they have. As they taught or supported the community, they also felt that the people they were helping were teaching them in return. They learned how to be grateful, kind, and hopeful, even in difficult situations. The experience influenced not only their beliefs but also gave them a stronger desire to give back to the community.

Some participants also said that teachers played a big role in guiding them. They were like a light in every step, not just telling them what to do, but helping them

understand why it matters. Teachers shared personal stories and reflections, which inspired students to stay motivated and committed to helping others. A few said that working alongside friends and classmates made the experience even better. Seeing how seriously their friends took the work inspired them to try harder too. Sharing stories and learning from each other helped them become more open-minded, empathetic, and better at teamwork. They said it helped them listen more and understand different points of view.

7. Challenges and difficulties

Most participants said the biggest challenge was stepping out of their comfort zone. They felt shy or unsure when talking to people in need or visiting new places. They faced challenges in adjusting to the environment and connecting with a new place and culture. A few mentioned that witnessing people suffering or living in hard conditions was very difficult. They sometimes felt like they weren't doing enough or couldn't make a big difference. One participant shared, "One of my biggest challenges was seeing injustice, how some people are treated unfairly because of poverty. It made me angry and sad." Several participants also said that overcoming a lack of motivation at the start or seeing service as just a task was a major challenge they had to face.

One of the participants mentioned that "The major challenge I faced was that while providing service, not everyone is willing to change, and people don't always perceive things in the same way. Some communities are so backward that even when trying to do something good, it can trigger a trauma response; they may show hostility or reject the effort. This can create a dilemma. As a human, I am naturally receptive, and if others are not open or present, I feel hesitant to carry out the task."

8. Overall Personal Development

The participants in this research experienced meaningful personal growth through their involvement in service learning. They noticed a real shift in how they think and felt their emotional intelligence improve, which contributed to their overall growth as whole

individuals. Support from faculty and the focus on teamwork motivated them and helped build their confidence, empathy, gratitude, and ability to connect with others. Many also became more punctual, disciplined, and willing to step out of their comfort zones to take initiative. Their communication skills softened, becoming kinder and less judgmental, and they became more empathetic. Being involved in different service activities helped them stay grounded and see challenges as temporary hurdles rather than permanent problems. This mindset shift reduced their ego and desire for material things, allowing them to become more mindful and spiritually aware.

One participant shared, “I’ve become a person with more values. I’m kinder now, I help people more, and I don’t get into fights like before.” Similarly, another participant said, “It strengthened my belief in humanity. I learned that even small actions can make a big difference. It made me think more clearly about what is right and wrong.”

Major Findings

1. Service learning helped participants learn by doing real work in the community. They gave back to society and reflected on their actions without expecting anything in return.
2. Catholic institutions like St. Xavier’s College deeply integrate service learning into all subjects, making it part of their culture and values. They connect service with faith, compassion, and justice, creating a purpose-driven environment that respects all individuals.
3. Service learning was deeply connected to participants’ spiritual growth, helping them feel a greater sense of responsibility, inner peace, and self-satisfaction. It taught them kindness, humility, gratitude, empathy, forgiveness, and the joy of giving. Many felt more connected to their faith, developed a deeper understanding of humanity, and became more aware of their blessings and values in life.

4. Spiritual growth was fostered through mandatory participation, student-led roles, community engagement, reflection, motivation, supportive mentors, and a positive, value-driven environment that encouraged deep connection and personal growth.
5. The community served, mentors, and peers inspired participants through examples of resilience, gratitude, and teamwork and motivated participants to engage in community service even outside academic settings.
6. The biggest challenges were stepping out of comfort zones, feeling shy, adapting to new environments, confronting poverty and injustice, conflict in values, and coping with low motivation and resistance from those they aimed to help.
7. Service learning helped participants grow personally by boosting their confidence, discipline, and teamwork skills, while making them kinder, more mindful, and better at handling challenges and reducing their biases and assumptions.
8. Service learning strengthened participants' faith and moral values by inspiring ethical practice, self-reflection, and a deeper sense of purpose and responsibility to help others based on their beliefs.

Discussion

The study aimed to explore the spiritual development experiences of the students through service learning and identify key factors in service learning that influence students' spiritual growth, and the findings indicate that both objectives were successfully achieved. By integrating community service with spirituality, compassion, and justice, service learning promoted participants' spiritual and personal growth. Key factors influencing this growth included mandatory participation, student-led roles, supportive mentors, and inspiration from the resilience and gratitude of the communities served. Despite challenges, these experiences enhanced participants' awareness, reduced

biases, built resilience, strengthened teamwork, and inspired continued service beyond academic requirements.

In accordance with the definitions provided by Meyers and Roosevelt University (2009) and the (UConn Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning 2021), participants clearly understood service learning as a process of applying academic knowledge through practical community engagement that not only benefits society but also fosters reflection and personal development. Jesuit education and the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP) place a strong emphasis on faith, compassion, and justice, which is reflected in the unique way that Catholic institutions like St. Xavier's College incorporate service learning into their educational programs and institutional culture (Garanzini & Baur, 2022). Participants said that this value-driven environment was essential to their service learning journey because it fostered empathy, compassion, and a strong sense of moral duty, as well as reflection on real-world experiences, all of which contribute to spiritual growth. Through service learning, participants experienced spiritual growth and reported feeling more grateful, empathetic, at peace, and connected to their beliefs and values. According to (Dhungana and Neupane, 2021) and (Eskandari et al., 2020), spirituality in education is defined as involving compassion and moral awareness that go beyond religious rites. Their improved joy, forgiveness, humility, and kindness are reflective of global traditions such as mindfulness and meditation, suggesting that service learning is a powerful spiritual practice. The study's emphasis on supportive peer and mentor connections is consistent with (Dhungana and Neupane's, 2021) eco-spiritual pedagogical approach, which emphasizes the role that interpersonal relationships and spiritual awareness play in promoting empathy and ecological consciousness. According to the findings, reflective service learning fosters personal development by lowering biases and enhancing resilience, which is consistent with (Celio et al., 2011). Through their reflections, participants were able to question assumptions and grow in emotional resilience, empathy, and self-awareness. This emphasizes how important reflection is to turning service experiences into significant personal growth.

The findings of this study closely reflect Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). The participants of the study engaged in real-world service activities (concrete experience) and reflected on their emotional and moral responses (reflective observation). They connected these experiences to deeper spiritual values like compassion and responsibility (abstract conceptualization), which then informed their future actions and personal growth (active experimentation). This cycle fostered empathy, purpose, and spiritual development, demonstrating how service learning effectively facilitates holistic learning as described by Kolb.

The limitation of this study is its confinement to a single Catholic institution, St. Xavier's College, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts.

Conclusion

Service learning plays a vital role in fostering students' spiritual growth alongside academic growth. Through the integration of community engagement with academic learning, it offers transformative experiences that nurture holistic personal and moral development. The findings reveal that service learning enabled participants to learn by actively engaging in real community work, fostering reflection, responsibility, and the joy of giving without expectation. The study highlights that service learning significantly fostered participants' spiritual growth by nurturing qualities like responsibility, kindness, empathy, humility, forgiveness, gratitude, and a deeper connection to faith and values. This growth was driven by active participation, community engagement, reflection, supportive mentors, motivation, and a positive, value-centered environment that encouraged spiritual growth and personal development. Despite challenges such as stepping out of comfort zones, adapting to new settings, and confronting poverty or value conflicts, participants developed greater confidence, discipline, teamwork skills,

and reduced biases. The study recommends that educational institutions integrate service learning into their academic programs with meaningful community engagement to support students' overall development and connection to their communities. This approach can inspire lasting values, deepen social awareness, and prepare students to engage compassionately and responsibly with the world around them.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this study.

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