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Beyond the Stage: the Impact of an Intergenerational Theatre Service-learning Project

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a Service-Learning (S-L) project in which 6 university students participated in a three-month theatre workshop, culminating in the performance of a play at a nursing home. The objective was to evaluate the experience's impact on the development of transversal skills and on the students' perceptions of old age. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining pre/post-activity questionnaires with qualitative focus groups. The quantitative results reveal an exceptional impact: self-perceived ability to work effectively in a team (rated 4-5) soared from 0% to 84%. Comfort in interacting with older adults (rated 4-5) increased from 50% to 83%, with initial feelings of discomfort being completely eliminated. The qualitative analysis corroborates these findings. Students verbalized a notable increase in their public speaking confidence and highlighted the creation of "more intimate" group bonds than in a normal class, thanks to "shared vulnerability". Furthermore, they claimed to have broken down negative stereotypes about nursing homes, moving towards a more realistic and humane view of the residents, whom they perceived as "normal people" beyond the adjective "elderly". In conclusion, combining performing arts with S-L proves to be a high-impact tool for students' integral development, enhancing key skills as well as social awareness and intergenerational empathy.

Keywords: Empathy; Intergenerational; Performing Arts; Servicelearning-learning; Skills Development