

# Building Upon Service-Learning in Higher Education: Lessons Learned and Future Recommendations

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## Abstract

Service-learning is an educational approach that has been proven to cultivate public conscience by combining the learning objectives of curriculum content with student involvement in community service. The current study explores the various impacts of a service-learning project directed toward psychology students tutoring children with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results are taken from the perspective of 114 Kosovar students and 20 parents of children with disabilities involved in the project. The results show that the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the challenges that families of children with disabilities already faced. The tutoring sessions had a positive effect on family well-being and children's academic achievements. The students reported improved attitudes toward children with disabilities and increased self-efficacy and motivation for community engagement. Service-learning is promoted as a teaching method that attends to societal needs, helps students reflect on their experiences and competency, facilitates a better understanding of the consequences of public policy, and contributes to responsible citizens and compassionate professionals. This study adds to the literature by highlighting the substantial results and potential benefits of service-learning and individualized support for children with disabilities and their parents by discussing the implications for practice and future research.

*Keywords: Service-Learning, Student development, Disability, Family support, COVID-19, Social sustainability*

## 1. Introduction

Sustainability concerns not only the physical environment but also equity, social justice, peaceful relationships, and action for change. In other words, it can address and respond to pressing issues through its relation to ethics and personal agency. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed how fragile our systems can be, especially for vulnerable communities. During this time, families with children with disabilities were faced with uncertainty, heightened stress, a lack of services, and non-inclusive online learning (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2020). The current study presents a service-learning project implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic and details its impact on both the community and psychology students who participated in it. The paper upholds service-learning as a pedagogy that appears to enable the realization of the principles and values of sustainability. Responding to the greater good (i.e., the needs of local and global communities) is seen as a way to create sustainable societies and communities. Banathy (1991) wrote that we need to manage complexity, cope with ambiguity and uncertainty, and grasp the connectedness and interdependence of systems that we are part of. Thus, he argued, learning needs to be

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designed such that it enhances critical thinking and the understanding of the self, the environments we live in, and the situations we experience (Banathy, 1991).

The power of education to enable change, deliver a sustainable future in terms of environmental and economic integrity, and bring about a just society for present and future generations has long been emphasized and debated. It was the goal of the United Nations (UN) Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD; UNESCO, 2005; United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2002) to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning—and thus into society—to encourage behavioral change. Consequently, the UN DESD has taken a holistic and interdisciplinary approach that integrates the concepts of human, social, and economic development (Hopkins, 2008). In this sense, education is considered able to foster respect and responsiveness in the community by enabling an understanding of the wider natural and social environment and our interdependence with one another. More recently, the UN devised 17 goals for its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that included healthy life, well-being, and inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNGA, 2015).

To optimize health, well-being, and education for all, it is necessary to optimize the conditions that enable the active participation of people with disabilities in the public sphere. The areas in which people with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged include education and social life (World Health Organization Europe, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the perpetual challenges children with disabilities and their families face. Lockdown, social distancing, lack of services, and emergency online learning have contributed to heightened stress levels and serious concerns about lost ground in learning that may contribute to long-term educational and socioeconomic disparities (e.g., Alhuizimi, 2021; Asbury et al., 2021; Hyseni Duraku & Nagavci, 2020; Lund et al., 2020; Manning et al., 2020; Umucu & Lee, 2021).

### **1.1 The service-learning project and the current study**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was reported in Kosovo that the majority of children with disabilities in the education system did not participate in remote and online learning. Even when some of these children did participate, they did not benefit from this modality of learning (Hyseni Duraku & Nagavci, 2020). This was mostly due to a sudden shift to this learning format and, thus, its inadequate implementation, such as by not ensuring adequate access for the entire target group (Hyseni-Duraku & Nagavci, 2020). Parents took on the role of the teacher, and not all parents had the required time and competency to fulfill this task (*ibid*, 2020).

The In Your Shoes project was an initiative by youngsters to help children with disabilities during this pandemic. It was supported by a group of organizations<sup>1</sup> and implemented by the Department of Psychology at the University of Prishtina in collaboration with HANDIKOS<sup>2</sup> Kosovo. The initiative was conceptualized and realized as a service-learning project involving tutoring sessions to offer academic and socioemotional support to children with disabilities.

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Seventy undergraduate students of psychology were selected and trained for engagement as tutors as part of a university-run, semester-long internship program. The actors involved in the project conducted the training, and the students gained knowledge and skills on the inclusiveness of children with disabilities in the education system before and during the pandemic, techniques of communication with children with disabilities, methods of compiling individual educational plans, and the technicalities of the project. The trained students began their service-learning by contacting families, establishing collaboration, and discussing their children's needs. Based on this information, the students compiled working and individual plans and then continued the tutoring sessions. The service-learning project lasted 2 months, and the students were engaged in the tutoring program for 50 h on average, 30 of which comprised sessions with a child.

The students worked in pairs, and each pair had one child. The third-year students were engaged as head tutors, and their primary responsibility was conducting tutoring with the child, whereas first- and second-year students were engaged as support tutors. They observed sessions and conducted the desk research necessary for planning the sessions. Both levels of tutor evaluated each session after it ended and prepared a daily plan for the following session. University professors from the Department of Psychology and one external mentor with expertise in pedagogy and inclusion continuously supervised the students. The children who participated were aged between 5 and 14 years and had autism, hypophrenia, delays in language and communication development, cerebral palsy, and physical and intellectual disabilities.

At its core, service-learning concerns academic learning that encourages community action and civic responsibility. In turn, community needs are addressed (Anderson et al., 2001). Down (2010) wrote about the complementation of implementing the UN DESD through service-learning and described service-learning as a pedagogy that is “*focused on real world tasks, is community-oriented, values-centred and has a strong future perspective*” (p. 60). Such education involves universities that are socially, environmentally, and economically relevant, respond to the public good, and nurture students as agents of sustainable development.

Service-learning also allows for interaction with the *other*. Many researchers have reported that people may hold biased beliefs toward people with disabilities that are a major barrier to inclusiveness (Armstrong et al., 2016; Carrier, 2007; Koller et al., 2018; Mann et al., 2018). Such attitudes are said to be influenced by different motivations and emotions, such as fear of the unknown and uncertainty about what to expect of people with disabilities and how to behave around them, fear of one's own vulnerability, the perceived threat to one's beliefs about a just world, guilt about one's lack of disability, tragic views toward disability, and general aversion to weakness (Gething, 1984, in Gething & Wheeler, 1992). Nevertheless, another body of research has reported that contact and experience with people with disabilities may improve such attitudes. For example, in their analyses of various types of intervention, including opportunities for contact, information and awareness campaigns, education and training about disability, and legislation providing equal access and opportunities, Fisher and Purcal (2017) concluded that such interventions may be effective for fostering an accepting environment that allows for the active participation of people with disabilities.

In addition to an improvement of attitudes, opportunities that allow students to exercise their agency by providing them with the opportunity to develop experience in working

with persons with disabilities may improve their efficacy in terms of inclusivity (Leyser et al., 2011; Sharma et al., 2015). Service-learning is also reported to reduce stereotypical thinking, develop students' appreciation for diversity, and encourage civic engagement (e.g., Celio et al., 2011; Jones & Hill, 2001; Lester et al., 2005; Lockeman & Pelco, 2013; Papamarcos, 2005; Yorio & Ye, 2012).

Service-learning appears to have gained interest amongst policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers in the United States, and Europe is striving to encourage service-learning through its promotion (e.g., Sotelino-Losada et al., 2021). While it has been consolidated in some countries, service-learning implementation and dissemination varies greatly across regions. In Southeast Europe especially, where Kosovo is located, service-learning is considered under-researched (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019, in Sotelino-Losada et al., 2021).

Thus the current study aims to explore the effects of a service-learning project directed toward psychology students tutoring children with disabilities in Kosovo, during the COVID-19 pandemic, formulate a response to the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, and research its potential long-lasting adverse effects. As service-learning is considered transformational for students and the community, the current research reports on both of these groups. Specifically, it aims to measure how engaging with children with disabilities affects students' attitudes toward this social group, the impact of service-learning on student self-efficacy when working with children with disabilities, and their motivation for future community involvement. In addition, it explores families' experiences of the service-learning project during the COVID-19 pandemic and shares their continuing needs.

## 2. Methodology

The current study explores the multiple effects of a service-learning project directed toward psychology students who tutored children with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study used a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative methods. However, the methodological standpoint of the study remains an imbibed qualitative paradigm, but the research has triangulated quantitative and qualitative perspectives at the level of data and methods.

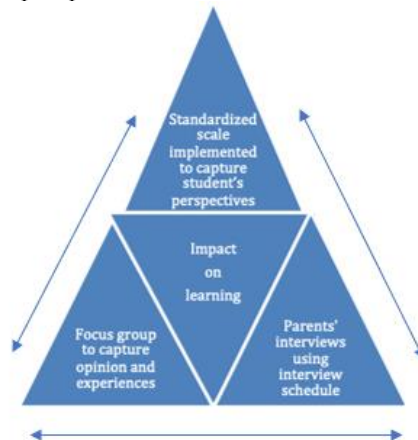


Fig. 1. The research has triangulated both the method and data

The research has two broad segments:

First, it documents the experiences of parents of children with disabilities who participated in tutoring sessions and received socioemotional support conducted during online schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. We applied a descriptive phenomenological research approach to explore the challenges faced by children with disabilities and their parents, the impact of tutoring sessions, and the socioemotional support for children with disabilities during this period. We collected data through semistructured interviews conducted via Google Meet with 20 parents of children with disabilities who benefited from the tutoring sessions and socioemotional support. Of the total, 18 were mothers and 10 had regular jobs outside the home. The participants were selected randomly from a list of parents of children who participated in the tutoring sessions. Each interview lasted up to 35 min.

The second segment of the research involves 114 undergraduate students from the Department of Psychology at the University of Prishtina. From the overall student sample, 101 (94%) were female, 35 (33%) had previous internship experience working with children with disabilities, and 29 (27%) were reported to have a family member with disability. The students' data were analyzed from three perspectives: attitudes toward children with disabilities, self-efficacy, and motivation for community engagement. A Google Forms questionnaire based on a standardized scale was circulated by email.<sup>3</sup> Further, to substantiate the quantitative findings, a focus group discussion was conducted involving eight randomly selected students who participated in tutoring sessions and provided socioemotional support through the service-learning project.<sup>4</sup> The focus group lasted approximately 90 min.

## 2.1 Procedure

This research received approval from the Ethical Committee at the University of Prishtina, Faculty of Philosophy. All participants were informed about the data collection procedures and methods of analysis. Their identities were kept confidential, and the data were only used to serve the study purpose. The respondents' participation remained voluntary.

## 2.2 Statistical analysis and data processing

The reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient. Further, absolute numbers and respective percentages were used to describe categorical variables. The measures of central tendency (mean and standard deviation) were derived to describe scale variables. Then, the general linear model (GLM)

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<sup>3</sup> We implemented the Interaction with Disabled Persons (IDP) scale to measure students' attitudes toward people with disabilities to assess the dimensions underlying discomfort in social interaction (Gething & Wheeler, 1992). Higher scores indicated higher discomfort. We measured self-efficacy based on Bandura's (1977, 1982) theory to measure the self-perceived competency of students. The scale consists of five items (1 = *I strongly disagree* to 5 = *I strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated higher self-perceived efficacy. Observed reliability for the current sample was in a good range (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.89$ ). We measured motivation for community engagement using two subscales: the Benefits subscale (Shiarella et al., 2000) and Feel-Good Factor subscale (Bales, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> The data were collected in January 2020.

was used to assess the association of dependent variables (scale variables) with independent predictors. Lastly, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was run to assess the direction and strength of the association among scales used in this study. All analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, v.23 for quantitative data.

Qualitative data were analyzed using Atlas.ti software. In vivo coding was used for subcodes. Data were analyzed through classical content analysis, where the existence and frequency of the same concepts in the text were analyzed according to the purpose and areas of research. The interoperability of concepts within the data between the two groups of data was also investigated. Two coders with expertise in the field conducted the data analysis and coding.

### **3. Results**

The results initially report on the families' challenges regarding the homeschooling and online learning of children with disabilities and their experiences with the service-learning project. The second part reports on the students' perceptions about their self-perceived efficacy and motivation for community engagement. The third part reports on the effects of the tutoring sessions and providing socioemotional support on the students who were engaged in the service-learning project during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **3.1 The impact of service-learning on the community (children with disabilities and their parents)**

From the analysis of primary data (parents' interviews), six themes were derived:

1. The impact of COVID-19 on children with disabilities, particularly the challenges they faced with remote and online learning
2. The impact of the children's challenges with online learning on their parents
3. The overall effectiveness of tutoring sessions for children with disabilities
4. The impact of tutoring sessions on academic achievement
5. The impact of tutoring sessions on parents
6. Parents' needs and recommendations concerning supporting children with disabilities with their learning activities

#### **3.2 The impact of COVID-19 on children with disabilities, particularly the challenges they faced with remote and online learning**

All participants reported several challenges with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common challenges were irregular attendance because of economic hardship and lack of access to technology, insufficient benefits derived from online learning, trouble getting used to the online format, and fear of online learning. Parents reported that such challenges affected their children's mood, increased their stress level, and made them feel overwhelmed.

#### **3.3 Impact of children's challenges with online learning on parents**

A total of 15 parents reported feeling stressed, tired, or overwhelmed because of the challenges their children faced with participating and engaging in online learning.

Parents struggled to manage their time and support their children with homework during the pandemic and were dissatisfied about their academic performance through online learning, which they considered a consequence of inadequacies in its implementation.

### **3.4 Overall effectiveness of tutoring sessions for children with disabilities**

All participants ( $n = 20$ ) considered that the tutoring sessions were helpful for their children, in whom they noted positive impacts such as increased learning motivation, concentration, attention, self-confidence, self-initiative, security, and independence. The children were less anxious about exams and had less difficulty with the completion of homework. Further, the parents observed positive and satisfactory attitudes toward learning and fun-based activities. Ten parents reported positive impacts on their children's mood. The sessions made them feel more enthusiastic, calm, and happy. Eight parents reported that the sessions had positive impacts on the children's behavior and social relationships, which reduced their fear of social communication and attending online classes.

Further illustrations from the narratives:

"Before the sessions began, the child was very excited. During the sessions, he tried to be attentive, and after the sessions, he was very relaxed." (Parent #3).

### **3.5 Effectiveness of the tutoring sessions on academic achievement**

Most parents ( $n = 19$ ) reported specific learning achievements in literacy, Albanian and English language, math, and art. Also, most interestingly, four of them reported children's positive outcomes in more than one subject.

As illustrated in the narratives:

". . . writing words, forming sentences, linking sentences to various situations, reading short texts, communicating, and willingness to express have been some of the achievements." (Parent #4)

### **3.6 Tutoring sessions' impact on parents**

Parents reported that the sessions had a positive effect on themselves, too. The sessions decreased their stress level and relieved their sense of feeling overwhelmed. The sessions made them feel supported and helped create a more positive family atmosphere. Their children's achievements left them satisfied.

As illustrated in the narratives:

"You've taken a great burden off of me. You've taken away almost all the responsibility that fell on me." (Parent #14)

### **3.7 Parents' needs and recommendations toward supporting children in their learning activities**

A total of 17 parents reported that their children received neither additional support from teachers nor assistance with learning. Thirteen parents considered such needs as crucial to be addressed. Thus, the provision of additional activities in the form of tutoring plays a critical role, as regular teachers cannot fill the gaps.

"I think having a support teacher would help him a great deal because he would be more engaged, and it would help him with the subjects that he needs assistance with." (Parent

#9)

“... the child really needs to have an assistant at school. An assistant would help us a great deal.” (Parent #10)

The next section reports on the students’ perceptions about their self-perceived efficacy and motivation for community engagement.

To address whether contact and experience between students and children with disabilities influenced the measures of the study, a general linear model (GLM) for each dependent variable has been derived. Table 1 depicts the descriptive results of all of the measuring instruments used in the study. GLM analysis for each dependent variable revealed some significant group differences. Its analysis of the Interaction with Disabled Persons (IDP) scale revealed significantly higher results, meaning higher discomfort among participants with no previous internship experience and no previous experience with people with disabilities (Table 2). The hours of experience with people with disabilities was also a significant predictor of group differences for student comfort/discomfort.

**Table 1. Descriptive results of all of the measuring instruments used in the study**

Instrument	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum value	Maximum value
1. Interaction with Disabled Persons scale (20 items)	52.1	5.6	19	95
2. Self-Perceived Efficacy scale (6 items)	27.0	3.3	6	30
3. Benefits subscale (5 items)	23.7	1.8	5	25
4. Feel-Good Factor subscale (4 items)	14.1	1.7	4	20

**Table 2. Association of the independent variables and IDP scale — Mean values of the IDP scale according to the GLM**

Variables	Mean value	95% CI for the mean value		P-value
		Lower limit	Upper limit	
<b>Year of study</b>				<i>0.407 (2)*</i>
1st year	53.0	21.1	54.9	0.182
2nd year	52.1	50.5	53.6	0.410
3rd year	50.9	48.4	53.4	Reference
<b>Previous internship experience</b>				<b>0.013</b>
No	54.6	52.4	56.7	
Yes	51.4	50.2	52.6	
<b>Previous contact with disabled children</b>				0.877
No	52.3	50.3	54.2	
Yes	52.1	50.8	53.4	
<b>Family member with disability</b>				0.397
No	52.4	51.2	53.7	
Yes	51.4	49.3	53.5	
<b>Previous internship experience working with children with disabilities</b>				<b>0.048</b>
No	52.9	51.6	54.2	
Yes	50.6	48.7	52.5	
<b>Number of hours of internship experience with children with disabilities (continuous variable)</b>	-0.01 (B coefficient)	0.02 (standard error)	-0.21 (t)	<b>0.045</b>

\* Overall P-values and degrees of freedom (in parentheses)



Further, Table 3 depicts the scores of the Self-Perceived Efficacy scale. The finding shows significant group differences depending on both contact and experience with children with disabilities. Participants who have had contact and experience with people with disabilities showed higher scores. However, no other significant differences were found.

**Table 3. Association of Self-Perceived Efficacy scale with the study's independent variables — Mean values of Self-Perceived Efficacy scale according to the GLM**

Variable	Mean value	95% CI for the mean value		P-value
		Lower limit	Upper limit	
<b>Year of study</b>				<i>0.526 (2)*</i>
1st year	27.5	26.3	28.6	0.282
2nd year	26.9	25.8	27.8	0.636
3rd year	26.5	25.0	27.9	Reference
<b>Previous internship experience</b>				
No	27.0	25.6	28.3	0.971
Yes	27.0	26.3	27.7	
<b>Previous contact with children with disabilities</b>				
No	25.7	24.6	26.8	<b>0.006</b>
Yes	27.6	26.8	28.3	
<b>Family member with disability</b>				
No	26.7	25.9	27.5	0.178
Yes	27.7	26.5	28.9	
<b>Previous internship experience working with children with disabilities</b>				
No	26.4	25.7	27.2	<b>0.009</b>
Yes	28.2	27.1	29.3	
<b>Number of hours of internship experience with children with disabilities (continuous variable)</b>	0.01 (B coefficient)	0.01 (standard error)	1.46 (t)	0.154

\* Overall P-values and degrees of freedom (in parentheses)

Table 4, regarding the Benefits subscale, reflects the fact that significantly higher mean scores were common among participants who have had contact with children with disabilities and a family member with a disability.

**Table 4. Association of Benefits–Community Service Attitude scale with independent study variables — Mean values of Benefits–Community Service Attitude scale according to the GLM**

Variable	Mean value	95% CI for the mean value		P-value
		Lower limit	Upper limit	
<b>Year of study</b>				<i>0.979 (2)*</i>
1st year	23.7	23.1	24.3	0.899
2nd year	23.7	23.2	24.1	0.839
3rd year	23.8	22.9	24.5	Reference
<b>Previous internship experience</b>				0.994
No	23.7	23.0	24.4	
Yes	23.7	23.3	24.1	

Variable	Mean value	95% CI for the mean value		P-value
		Lower limit	Upper limit	
<b>Previous contact with disabled children</b>				<b>0.044</b>
No	23.2	22.6	23.8	
Yes	23.9	23.5	24.3	
<b>Family member with disability</b>				<b>0.047</b>
No	23.5	23.1	23.9	
Yes	24.2	23.6	24.9	
<b>Previous internship experience with children with disabilities</b>				0.161
No	23.5	23.1	23.9	
Yes	24.0	23.4	24.6	
<b>Number of hours of internship experience with children with disabilities</b> (continuous variable)	-0.01 (B coefficient)	0.01 (standard error)	0.15 (t)	0.883

\* Overall P-values and degrees of freedom (in parentheses)

Regarding the results of the Feel-Good Factor subscale, Table 5 reveals significantly higher scores among participants who have had contact with children with disabilities, yet we found differences dependent on other factors to be insignificant.

**Table 5. Association of the Feel-Good Factor subscale with independent study variables — Mean values of Feel-Good Factor subscale according to the GLM**

Variable	Mean value	95% CI for the mean value		P-value
		Lower limit	Upper limit	
<b>Year of study</b>				<i>0.317 (2)*</i>
1st year	13.7	13.2	14.3	
2nd year	14.3	13.8	14.8	
3rd year	14.1	13.3	14.8	Reference
<b>Previous internship experience</b>				0.617
No	13.9	13.2	14.6	
Yes	14.1	13.7	14.5	
<b>Previous contact with disabled children.</b>				<b>0.029</b>
No	13.5	13.0	14.1	
Yes	14.3	13.9	14.7	
<b>Family member with disability</b>				0.881
No	14.1	13.7	14.4	
Yes	14.1	13.5	14.7	
<b>Previous internship experience with children with disabilities</b>				0.650
No	14.0	13.6	14.4	
Yes	14.2	13.6	14.7	
<b>Number of hours of internship experience with children with disabilities</b> (continuous variable)	0.01 (B coefficient)	0.01 (standard error)	1.15 (t)	259

Table 6 assesses the correlation coefficients among the scales used in the study. The results show a significant negative correlation between the IDP scale and the Self-Perceived Efficacy scale (weak–moderate association), whereas the latter has a positive significant

correlation with the Benefits subscale (moderate association). The other associations were weak and not statistically significant.

**Table 6. Correlations among the scales used in this study**

Scale	Interaction With Disabled Persons	Perceived Self-Efficacy	Benefits–Community Service Attitude	Feel-Good Factor/Volunteerism–Activism
Interaction With Disabled Persons	1.00			
Perceived Self-Efficacy	-0.25 * (0.008)	1.00		
Benefits–Community Service Attitude	-0.07 (0.495)	0.39 ( <b>&lt; 0.001</b> )	1.00	
Feel-Good Factor/Volunteerism–Activism	0.05 (0.614)	0.19 (0.058)	0.16 (0.113)	1.00

\*Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient and statistical significance (P-value) in parentheses

### 3.8 Students’ perspectives of service-learning impact

The following section is about the effects of the tutoring sessions and providing socioemotional support on the students who were engaged in the service-learning project during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students’ data were analyzed from three perspectives: attitudes toward children with disabilities, self-efficacy, and motivation for community engagement.

In general, the students reported various emotions, including discomfort, privilege, compassion, fear, and uncertainty, on how to behave and what to expect from this service-learning experience, underpinning their attitudes and interaction with children with disabilities. The students’ expectations, time spent with the children, and their relation with and cooperation of the family tended to influence their attitudes and interactions. The following narratives revealed these perceptions:

“I would recommend that every person . . . spends time with people with disabilities, to acknowledge their abilities, to be aware of their challenges, and to discard stereotypes . . . I spent lots of time with the child and created a strong emotional bond, as I saw the challenges these children faced . . . and I somehow felt guilty for my privilege.” (Student, Female #2)

Regarding self-efficacy, the students reported that the sessions became easier with time. Before the project, they mentioned feeling confused, stressed, doubtful, less competent, and confident but afraid. Factors influencing students’ self-efficacy included the experience they had gained, collaboration with the child and family, their feedback, knowing one’s own competencies and the child’s abilities, and self-motivation.

“Experience plays a role . . . It affected how I felt because I didn’t believe there was much difference in how I approached the child. But because of the experience I gained, my expectations became different, and so did my performance. The first time I had such an experience, I questioned my competency, and these feelings influenced the whole experience.” (Student, Female #2)

Regarding motivation for community engagement, the students illustrated various instances of motivation. From the findings, the most important motivations were the way they experienced the challenges of children with disabilities, the confidence they gained to support and make a difference in somebody's life, and, overall, the child's happiness.

"When we feel competent, we feel more comfortable with the work we do." (Student, Female #5)

"The more competent a person feels, the more he or she is motivated to engage in different activities." (Student, Female #6)

"The more a person sees that their help is producing results, the more they desire to continue doing this work." (Student, Female #3)

#### **4. Discussion and Practical Implications**

To educate for sustainable development is to educate with the community in mind, and service-learning appears to be one of the best ways to approach such education and development. The current study reports a service-learning project implemented with a twofold intention: (1) to respond to the needs of families with children with disabilities and (2) to enhance student learning and professional development. The study, which provides data collected from both groups, has produced two main findings that we believe contribute to the literature and practice. These are the particular needs of families with children with disabilities that were amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic and the opportunity to respond to the needs of the community and, through it, enhance student learning and improve attitudes toward a social group and community engagement.

The current study entails the impact of service-learning across various domains. According to Butin (2005), service-learning can be analyzed, in research and practice, through four distinct lenses: political, technical, cultural, and postmodern. In line with this conceptualization, when considered through a political lens, the current study first shares the voice of a marginalized group, advocating for equitable educational and social opportunities. The results of the study have shown that families with children with disabilities were subject to non-inclusive remote and online learning. They were seriously worried by long-lasting effects of lost educational ground due to the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic and overwhelmed by homeschooling on top of their other responsibilities. These findings echo those of other studies during COVID-19 period (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2020; Hyseni Duraku & Nagavci, 2020).

Amid this overwhelming situation, the parents were very appreciative of the tutoring sessions that the current study investigated, which they considered beneficial for their children and helpful for themselves. They reported that their children were experiencing better moods and empowerment towards life in general and learning in particular. The parents also reported specific academic improvements on their children, such as in math and literacy, confirming the effect that tutoring and individualized support are believed to have (e.g., Elbaum et al., 2000; Nickow et al., 2020). In the context of the situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the parents considered that the tutoring sessions were helpful in avoiding the expansion of an educational gap and that the skills gained would continue to serve their children beyond this pandemic period. Nevertheless, they also conveyed that the education system requires reinforcement in terms of providing support for teachers

and assistance for children with disabilities.

In addition to the impact of service-learning on the families, the current study reported on the impact that it had on the students who tutored the children with disabilities. As many scholars have argued of a relation between being involved in service and gaining a greater critical consciousness and understanding of complex social issues (e.g. Deeley, 2010; Eyster & Giles, 1999; Jones & Abes, 2004; Jones & Hill, 2001), the data from the current study's focus group continuously showed the students' increased awareness of the challenges that children with disabilities face. Next, the results from the qualitative as well as quantitative body of data showed that interacting with children with disabilities, witnessing the challenges of the families, and experiencing the positive results of their work, as well as the children's potential, influenced the students' positive attitudes toward children with disabilities, increased their self-efficacy, and motivated them for further community and professional engagement.

These findings of student development in the sense of increased agency, more inclusive attitudes, perspective transformation, and motivation for civic engagement seem to support the technical, cultural, and postmodern conceptualization of service-learning by Butin (2005), wherein the technical dimension defines service-learning as a pedagogical strategy that focuses on pedagogical effectiveness: "*better teaching for better learning*" (p. 90), whereas the cultural one is focused on the meanings of the practice for the individual and institution as a means of addressing issues such as tolerance, respect for diversity, unity, and engaged citizenship. Lastly, the postmodern conceptualization according to Butin (2005) focuses on "*how the service-learning process creates, sustains, and/or disrupts the boundaries and norms by which we make sense of ourselves and the world*" (p. 91). Service-learning as a postmodern pedagogy is believed to disrupt the "commonsensical" or "it's just the way things are" way of thinking. It involves experiences through which students are "*constantly encountering the dilemmas and ambiguities of living with and through the complexity of how life works*" (p. 98).

Altogether, the theoretical conceptualization of service-learning and the empirical data from this study seem to support education for sustainable development. Service-learning opens up the world to students, encouraging them to learn beyond the classroom and regularly requiring them to engage with the truths of living individuals, families, and local communities. It requires students to revisit their worldviews, prejudices, and stereotypes about the *other* and relate theory and reality. Such were the reports of students from the current study, that exercising their agency and engaging with the challenges of families with children with disabilities made them see the whole situation from a different perspective and feel more competent and motivated for community action.

For such student experiences that also support sustainable development, the curriculum must be flexible in the sense that it is perceptive to the issues emerging at global and local level but also enriched as students interact with the local community. Instead of being merely a "product" served to students, the curriculum becomes an experience feeding real-world knowledge. Students, rather than being passive readers and learners, are active, real-world observers and learners. Furthermore, students can also contribute to designing service-learning programs. Research has shown that when students have voices and ownership of the service-learning experience, in terms of having responsibility and contributing to the planning and decision-making process, they developed self-esteem,

political engagement, and tolerance toward different groups of people (e.g., Morgan & Streb, 2001; Swaminathan, 2005). Experiencing such ownership themselves, they also give value from their ownership to community members.

Educational institutions with a high level of sustainability are reported to have integrated service-learning into their curricula, and provide infrastructure and resources to support participation in service-learning (Vogel et al. 2010). The present research can thus inform educationalists, administrators, and policymakers about the potential of service-learning as a pedagogical method and some of the elements it entails.

## 5. Acknowledgements

The authors of this study would like to thank those involved in the project and the study for their valuable contributions: stakeholders who supported the implementation of the project: tutoring program, namely the In Your Shoes group that initiated this project, the UNICEF Innovations Lab, the Japanese Embassy in Kosovo, the Peer Education Network, HANDIKOS Kosovo, the Department of Psychology at the University of Prishtina, Hasan Prishtina; the students who served as tutors and conducted the interviews; and all the families who participated.

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