Lessons Learned From the Critical and Feminist Approaches of Service-Learning: A Scoping Review

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Aprendizajes adquiridos desde las perspectivas críticas y feministas del aprendizaje-servicio: una revisión panorámica

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Abstract

In an evolving educational landscape with a growing emphasis on equity and social justice, Feminist Service-Learning and Critical Feminist Service-Learning have emerged as transformative pedagogical models that challenge power dynamics and promote reciprocal university–community partnerships. Although promising, systematic research on integrating feminist approaches into service-learning remains limited—particularly regarding their implementation, sustainability, and measurable impact. Using Arksey and O'Malley's scoping review framework, we analyzed 44 studies across six international databases to provide a theoretical and empirical foundation for equity- and feminist-driven educational practices. Our findings, organized into three thematic areas—mapping the field, fostering participant growth and connections, and identifying core components—highlight contributions of Feminist Service-Learning and Critical Feminist Service-Learning to student development, community agency, and educator reflection. However, institutional barriers and underexplored community outcomes persist. This review underscores the need for participatory evaluations and sustained research to advance feminist, justice-oriented service-learning that empowers all participants and transforms both educational settings and community engagement.

Keywords: *critical feminist pedagogy, equity-oriented education, feminist service-learning, scoping review, university–community partnerships*

Resumen

En un panorama educativo en constante evolución, con un énfasis creciente en la equidad y la justicia social, el Aprendizaje-Servicio Feminista y el Aprendizaje-Servicio Crítico Feminista (FSL y CFSL, por sus siglas en inglés) han surgido como modelos pedagógicos transformadores que cuestionan las dinámicas de poder y promueven vínculos recíprocos entre universidad y comunidad. Si bien la investigación sistemática sobre la integración de enfoques feministas en el aprendizaje-servicio es prometedora, sigue siendo limitada, especialmente en la implementación, sostenibilidad y medición de impacto. A partir del marco metodológico de revisión panorámica de Arksey y O'Malley, analizamos 44 estudios extraídos de seis bases de datos internacionales con el objetivo de ofrecer una base teórica y empírica que sustente prácticas educativas guiadas por la equidad y el feminismo. Nuestros hallazgos, organizados en tres áreas temáticas (mapeo del campo de estudio, crecimiento y vínculos entre participantes y conexiones e identificación de componentes centrales) muestran cómo el FSL y el CFSL contribuyen al desarrollo del alumnado, fortalecen la agencia comunitaria y favorecen procesos de reflexión en el profesorado. Sin embargo, persisten barreras institucionales y una limitada atención a los resultados sobre las comunidades. Esta revisión pone de relieve la necesidad de incorporar evaluaciones participativas y de fomentar una investigación sostenida en el tiempo que permita avanzar hacia un modelo de FSL y orientado a la justicia social, que empodere a todas las personas implicadas y transforme tanto los espacios educativos como el compromiso comunitario.

Palabras clave: *Pedagogía feminista crítica, educación orientada a la equidad, aprendizaje-servicio feminista, revisión panorámica, colaboraciones universidad-comunidad*

Introduction

In a rapidly changing and increasingly globalized world, educational approaches must equip learners with critical thinking abilities and interpersonal skills—sometimes referred to as transversal skills—such as empathy, teamwork, and effective communication, to meaningfully engage with diverse environments and achieve personal and professional success (Griffin & Care, 2014). In response to this need, Service-Learning (SL) has emerged as a pedagogical model that combines theory with community-based practice, allowing students, educators, and community members to learn from one another while jointly addressing pressing social challenges (Mitchell, 2008).

The scope of traditional SL provides valuable insights into how the SL model can be successfully implemented across diverse contexts. A growing body of recent theoretical and systematic reviews supports its effectiveness, underscoring numerous positive outcomes (Compare & Albanesi, 2023). Overall, SL has the potential to transform pedagogical approaches in higher education by bridging theory and practice in real-world settings (Marullo et al., 2009). Yet, traditional SL has also been criticized for perpetuating unequal power dynamics, often positioning students as knowledge providers and communities as passive recipients. Detractors argue that this charity- and volunteerism-focused approach can overshadow SL's capacity to foster active citizenship and promote social justice (Mobley, 2007). Additionally, some studies warn that integrating SL into curricula can lead to superficial practices—or "McService"—where meeting academic requirements takes precedence over meaningful social transformation (Fletcher & Piemonte, 2017).

To address these critiques, transformative perspectives like Critical Service-Learning (CSL; Dholakia & Hartman, 2023; Mitchell, 2017), Feminist Service-Learning (FSL), and Critical Feminist Service-Learning (CFSL) have gained prominence (Costa & Leong, 2012). FSL and CFSL challenge conventional hierarchies by emphasizing equity, social justice, and reciprocity between academia and the community. In particular, FSL and CFSL integrate critical feminist pedagogies, fostering inclusive learning environments (Hauver & Iverson, 2018). Within these pedagogies, students develop essential interpersonal skills—such as mentorship and social conflict resolution—build collaborative, sustainable relationships, and prioritize the needs of equity-seeking communities.

CSL encourages students to critically examine the systemic causes of social issues, placing social justice at the center of its approach. This commitment to equity and change requires rethinking and transforming the power dynamics that initially give rise to the need for what is commonly referred to as services, but which might be better understood as collaborative engagements or community-driven initiatives (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2022). However, achieving truly social justice within SL or CSL is far from straightforward. As Patel (2016) warns, these pedagogies can inadvertently replicate colonial and heteropatriarchal structures, constraining their transformative potential. This risk becomes evident when university–community relationships mirror patterns of control and domination, instead of fostering the collaborative spirit and shared learning essential for authentic social change.

Overcoming these barriers demands approaches that challenge dominant narratives, adopt critical pedagogies rejecting individualistic frameworks, and advance sustainable, equitable social change. Central to this process is the integration of critical feminist perspectives—cultivating environments that value every voice and actively dismantle power imbalances to achieve meaningful, lasting outcomes (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

FSL and CFSL address these challenges by drawing on feminist frameworks to confront and dismantle structural inequities (Iverson & Hauver, 2021). FSL applies feminist theories and practices to establish authentic and equitable community engagement. At the core of feminist pedagogy is an emphasis on mutual connection and reciprocal support, challenging hierarchical norms by cultivating collaborative and respectful relationships between students and communities, grounded in interdependence and care (hooks, 1994). Through ongoing social critique and reflection, it encourages questioning and resisting norms that perpetuate inequality, thereby promoting personal agency and community empowerment. This approach ultimately fosters a learning environment that values and amplifies the voices of underrepresented groups (Clark-Taylor, 2017).

CFSL builds on this foundation and expands it by explicitly integrating critical feminist theories (Hauver & Iverson, 2018). Specifically, it incorporates intersectional feminism to facilitate nuanced analyses of how multiple and interconnected identities (e.g., gender, race, class, sexual orientation) shape individual experiences. CFSL also critiques the notion of neutrality, working proactively to transform inequities and prioritize the knowledge and resilience of historically underresourced communities.

While traditional SL and CSL benefit from substantial theoretical and empirical support (Culcasi & Fontana Venegas, 2023), there is a notable lack of research on how feminist approaches can be integrated into SL. FSL and CFSL offer significant advantages for both communities and institutions. These models foster critical consciousness and empower individuals and groups (Iverson & James, 2014), strengthen interpersonal skills (Hauver & Iverson, 2018), reinforce university–community partnerships, enrich academic learning by bridging feminist theory with real-world practice (Costa & Leong, 2012), and drive sustained social engagement by challenging biases and advancing equity (Garoutte, 2018). Despite these potential benefits, their implementation and systematic evaluation remain largely underexplored.

Our study seeks to address this gap by examining FSL and CFSL models in educational contexts, pinpointing areas yet to be explored, and outlining opportunities for future research. The goal is to establish a solid theoretical and empirical framework that informs and enhances both educational and community practices. In pursuit of this aim, we also offer practical guidance for the development of SL projects rooted in feminist and critical principles, thereby fostering equitable, justice-focused educational environments that amplify the voices and agency of all participants.

Methodology

In this study, we adopted a scoping review methodology to systematically explore existing research on FSL and CFSL. Scoping reviews offer a valuable way to gain a comprehensive understanding of a particular body of literature, especially in complex and emerging fields (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al., 2020). Guided by Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework, we conducted the review in five key phases: (1) identifying the research question(s); (2) identifying relevant studies; (3) study selection; (4) charting the data; and (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the findings.

Identifying the Research Questions

The primary aim of our study is to examine and synthesize the existing literature on FSL and CFSL within educational contexts. While reviewing the literature, we identified three key research gaps—particularly regarding (1) the ways in which FSL and CFSL are implemented, (2) their impact on different stakeholders, and (3) the core elements that structure them. Motivated by these findings, we formulated the following objectives and research questions to guide our inquiry:

- Explore existing research on FSL and CFSL: What is currently understood about SL projects developed from feminist and critical feminist perspectives?
- Understand the potential impact on students, educators, and communities: How do FSL and CFSL projects shape students' educational, personal, and professional development? In what ways, if any, do these projects affect community partners and educators' pedagogical practices?
- Identify the core components of FSL and CFSL: What are the structural and methodological elements that define FSL and CFSL? How are FSL and CFSL pedagogical models operationalized in practice, and what principles guide their implementation?

Identifying Relevant Studies

We conducted a systematic search across six electronic databases—ScienceDirect, Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, ERIC, and PubMed—between December 2023 and April 2024 to locate studies relevant to our research. By combining Boolean operators ("AND/OR") with keywords such as "Service-Learning," "Critical," and "Feminis*," as well as the Spanish equivalents "Aprendizaje-Servicio,"

"Crítico," and "Feminis*," we ensured comprehensive coverage of the literature. Our team carefully designed and refined these search strategies through multiple discussions to capture as many pertinent studies as possible.

All identified references were then imported into Mendeley, where we organized the data and removed duplicates. This thorough approach allowed us to include studies irrespective of their design or methodological orientation, ultimately providing an extensive review of the existing literature.

Study Selection

Our research team established and applied inclusion criteria to ensure a transparent and replicable selection process (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). To classify the SL projects in this review as feminist or critical feminist, we referenced definitions of FSL and CFSL outlined by Hauver and Iverson (2018), Iverson and James (2014), Deeley (2022), and Clark-Taylor (2017).

We specified the criteria for both inclusion and exclusion within our review protocol, as well as the methods for identifying relevant data and extracting and presenting our findings (Peters et al., 2020). This protocol follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Protocol (PRISMA-P). Table 1 provides a summary of these criteria.

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria
1. Open-access, online-published documents
2. Written in English or Spanish
3. No restrictions on publication date
4. Context: Studies from any setting, with a focus on gender issues and feminist perspectives
5. Concept: Empirical research on FSL or CFSL in educational contexts
6. Evidence types: Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies, including systematic reviews, case studies, ethnographies, autoethnographies, experiential studies, book chapters, or books
7. Participants: Studies assessing impacts on students (all educational levels), educators, or communities (e.g., migrants, incarcerated individuals, people experiencing homelessness, at-risk children, etc.)
Exclusion criteria
1. Studies focused only on traditional or CSL without feminist perspectives
2. Written in languages other than English or Spanish
3. Inaccessible or not available online
4. Experiences or projects that did not include their impact on participants (students, communities/coparticipants, and/or educators)
5. Nonempirical documents, such as theoretical works
6. Undergraduate, master's, or doctoral theses

Note. FSL = Feminist Service-Learning; CFSL = Critical Feminist Service-Learning; CSL = Critical Service-Learning

Figure 1 depicts our search and selection process. We initially retrieved 1,345 records from electronic database searches. After removing duplicates, we screened 534 records and excluded 337 that did not meet our inclusion criteria. We then assessed 157 documents for eligibility and ultimately included 44 studies in the final review. For clarity, we briefly outline the main reasons for exclusion: nonempirical studies ($n = 42$), insufficient data or methodological detail ($n = 36$), theoretical works ($n = 21$), and studies unrelated to FSL or CFSL ($n = 14$). These criteria helped ensure the rigor of our review and confirm that all included studies met the defined inclusion criteria.

Figure 1

PRISMA-P Flow Diagram for the Scoping Review Process
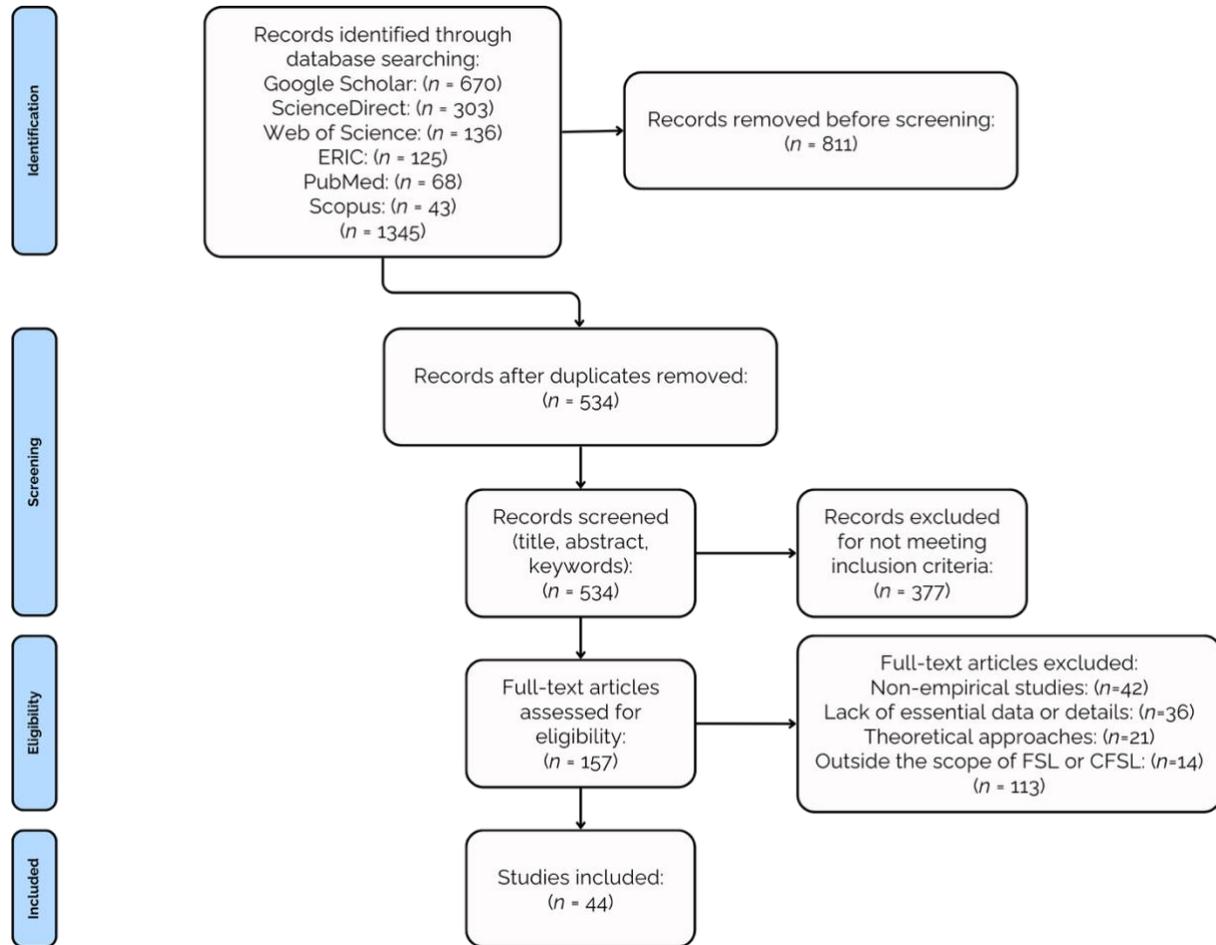
Note. FSL = Feminist Service-Learning; CFSL = Critical Feminist Service-Learning.

Charting the Data

We organized the data following Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) recommendations, documenting for each study the authorship, year, country, purpose, methodology and methods, academic field or course, type of intervention, participants, and main findings (see Appendix 1).

This organization was supported and systematized using MAXQDA software, which we used to code and analyze the full set of studies through a combined inductive–deductive approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016). We began with a shared codebook developed from the literature and our research questions, which two team members systematically applied to the 44 included studies. This initial round helped identify key patterns and ensured alignment with the review's objectives.

To deepen the analysis, we used MAXQDA's synthesis and visualization tools—such as summary tables and the Code Matrix Browser—to compare coded content across studies. These tools allowed us to identify overlaps, gaps, and newly emerging nuances. Based on these outputs, we engaged in a series of team discussions to refine the coding system, clarify definitions, and incorporate additional insights. This

process enabled us to organize the findings into three overarching themes, which are presented in the next stage: collating, summarizing, and reporting the findings.

Throughout this phase, we maintained an iterative and collaborative approach to ensure consistency and analytical depth. The two coders independently applied the codebook and then compared and discussed their coding to resolve discrepancies and strengthen inter-coder reliability. Following this, the broader team participated in review sessions to refine the coding structure, validate the emerging categories, and ensure shared interpretation. All final decisions were made collectively and validated by the full team. This process allowed us to preserve the richness of the data while enhancing both the reliability and transparency of our findings.

Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting the Findings

Through a systematic coding and thematic analysis, we identified three overarching themes that structure our findings on FSL and CFSL: (1) mapping the field, (2) fostering participants' growth and connections, and (3) core components—the foundations of FSL and CFSL.

Theme 1. Mapping the Field

The 44 studies included in this review provide various characteristics—such as country, academic discipline or course, research design, participants, and duration of interventions (see Table 2 below and Table 1 in Appendix 2). Understanding the scope and context of FSL and CFSL requires examining where, how, and with whom these projects are carried out, as this helps situate their relevance and transferability across educational settings.

Geographically and across disciplines, most studies were conducted in the United States (72.7%; Boppre et al., 2022; Coles-Ritchie et al., 2022; Santana-Rogers, 2022),[1] followed by Spain (20.5%; Chiva-Bartoll et al., 2021; Cuenca-Soto et al., 2024; Vergés Bosch, Freude, Camps Calvet, et al., 2021), Canada (4.5%; Davis & Wayne White, 2012; Johnston Hurst, 2014), and the United Kingdom (2.3%; Deeley, 2022). The most common academic fields were Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies (GWS; 43.2%; Clark-Taylor, 2017; Martin & Beese, 2016; Seethaler, 2015), Physical Activity and Sports Sciences (PASS; 9.1%; Cuenca-Soto et al., 2024; Hinojosa-Alcalde & Soler, 2021), and Sociology (9.1%; Berkey et al., 2000; Vergés Bosch et al., 2019). Additional areas included Teacher Training (4.55%; Arriaga, 2021; Hauver & Iverson, 2018) and Latin American Studies (4.55%; Fouts, 2020; Williams & McKenna, 2002), reflecting the broad adaptability and disciplinary reach of FSL and CFSL initiatives.

In terms of research design, case studies (27.3%; Fouts, 2020; Guzmán, 2019; Weiner et al., 2020) and experiential projects (27.3%; Kouri, 2007; RedHawk Love, 2008; Eretzian Smirles, 2011) predominated, followed by essays (18.2%; Bowdon et al., 2014; Rojas, 2014; Seher, 2014). This distribution reveals a clear preference for qualitative and exploratory approaches—81.8% of the studies used qualitative methods, while 13.64% employed mixed methods (Hinojosa-Alcalde & Soler, 2021; Vergés Bosch, Freude, Camps

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[1] Due to word count limitations, only some studies are explicitly mentioned in the text. The numbers corresponding to these studies are listed and can be cross-referenced with the detailed table in Appendix 1: **By Country:** the United States (U.S.) [1–16, 18–20, 22–29, 31, 32, 39, 40, 41], Spain [30, 33–35, 36–38, 43, 44], Canada [17, 21], and the United Kingdom (U.K.) [42]. **By Field:** Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies (GWS) [4, 6, 14, 17, 19, 21–24, 27, 30, 31, 33, 37, 38, 40, 41–43], Physical Activity and Sports Sciences (PASS) [36, 37, 43, 44], Sociology [1, 30, 34, 38], Teacher Training [27, 35], and Latin American Studies [6, 32]. **By Research Design:** Case Studies [6, 11, 23, 25–27, 29, 31, 32, 40, 43, 44], Experiential Projects [5, 8, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 21, 28, 33, 35, 41], and Essays [2, 4, 7–9, 19, 20, 22]. **By Participant Groups:** Studies involving multiple communities [2–9, 15, 19, 20, 22–24, 26–28, 37, 42], primary and secondary education (K–12) [12, 25, 30, 33–35, 38], women and girls [10, 11, 13, 14, 18–29, 31, 36, 40, 43, 44], and Latin American and African American communities [9, 29, 32]. For additional information on these studies, please refer to Appendix 1.

Calvet, et al., 2021; Washington, 2000a). Such methods were particularly suited to capturing the rich, contextual, and subjective dimensions emphasized in many of these studies, especially those exploring participants' lived experiences and transformations, which are difficult to reduce to numerical indicators.

With respect to participants—namely, community partners, students, and educators—most of the initiatives (43.2%; Hauver & Iverson, 2018; Rizzo, 2018) involved multiple community groups, often bringing together diverse coparticipants within a single course. A smaller proportion (22.7%) took place in primary and secondary (K–12) settings (Kouri, 2007; Oberhauser & Daniels, 2017). Other projects focused on women and girls (27.3%; Webb et al., 2007; Williams & Ferber, 2008), including doctoral students, women in prison, and women experiencing homelessness, while 6.8% engaged with Latin American and African American communities (Evans et al., 2005; Fouts, 2020; Guzmán, 2019). All 44 projects were led at the university level, with only one involving a secondary school while still being initiated from a university-led framework. Therefore, most student participants collaborating with associations or organizations were undergraduates (84.1%) or graduate students (6.8%).

Regarding the duration of interventions, 54.5% of the studies measured participants' engagement in hours, although the exact amount varied considerably, highlighting the flexibility of these projects and the diverse ways in which time commitment is structured. These characteristics are summarized in Table 2 to offer a clear snapshot of the field and facilitate comparison across contexts.

Table 2

Summary of Study Characteristics (n = 44)

Country		Academic field/course		Types of research design	
United States	32 (72.7%)	GWS	19 (43.2%)	Case study	12 (27.3%)
Spain	9 (20.5%)	Sociology	4 (9.1%)	Experiential	12 (27.3%)
Canada	2 (4.5%)	PASS	4 (9.1%)	Essay	8 (18.2%)
United Kingdom	1 (2.3%)	Teacher Training (1, 2, PE)	2 (4.5%)	Empirical research	4 (9.1%)
		Psychology	2 (4.5%)	Ethnography/Autoethnography	4 (9.1%)
Year		Latin American Studies	2 (4.5%)	Action research	3 (6.8%)
2021	6 (13.6%)	Social Sciences	1 (2.3%)	Research-based	1 (2.3%)
2000, 2014	5 (11.4%)	Rhetoric and Composition	1 (2.3%)	Hermeneutic phenomenology	1 (2.3%)
2022	4 (9.1%)	Chicana Latina Literature	1 (2.3%)	**Methodological approach**	
2007	3 (6.8%)	Modern Languages	1 (2.3%)	Qualitative	36 (81.8%)
2002, 2011, 2012, 2017, 2019, 2020	2 (4.5%)	Nutrition and Dietetics	1 (2.3%)	Mixed methods	8 (18.2%)
		African American Studies	1 (2.3%)		
		Philosophy	1 (2.3%)		
2003, 2006, 2008, 2016, 2023, 2024	1 (2.3%)	Fine Arts	1 (2.3%)		
		Law and Criminal Justice	1 (2.3%)		
		No specification	2 (4.5%)		

Note. Some studies report their time frame in weeks (e.g., 9 weeks, 4 weeks) but do not provide details on hours, sessions, or interventions. The complete version of this table can be found in Appendix 2, Table 1. GWS = Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies; PASS = Physical Activity and Sports Sciences; Teacher Training = Primary, Secondary, Physical Education; PE = Physical Education.

Theme 2. Fostering Participants' Growth and Connections

Understanding the transformative potential of FSL and CFSL requires a closer look at how these projects impact the individuals and communities involved. Guided by our research objectives and questions, this theme delves into the experiences of participants—students, educators, and community members—to uncover the nuanced ways in which these pedagogies shape personal growth, professional development, and social transformation.

The evaluation of these impacts relied heavily on qualitative methods—such as interviews, guided reflections, journaling, focus groups, and open or mixed questionnaires. Most of the studies focused on students' outcomes, although 28 (63.6%) explicitly examined effects on communities using participatory observations and questionnaires and 16 (36.4%) explored educators' experiences often through autoethnographies (see Appendix 1, Table 1). We summarize the most significant findings below, with further details available in Appendix 2 (Tables 2, 3, and 4).

Based on our findings, we organized student impacts into four broad categories. Each category is organized into subcategories that reflect a wide and nuanced range of outcomes, highlighting the depth and complexity of students' learning experiences. These dimensions are further detailed in Appendix 2, Table 2.

1. The first category highlights the impact on personal and social development, including subcategories such as emotional intelligence, self-esteem, interpersonal skills, intergenerational relationships, and self-discovery. One notable finding was that students participating in these projects developed a profound sense of empathy and the capacity to build authentic, horizontal relationships with community partners—outcomes rarely linked to academic projects, which often prioritize individual accomplishments or theoretical knowledge over mutual understanding and equitable collaboration (Martin & Beese, 2016). However, FSL and CFSL go beyond, fostering a deeper understanding of others, enhanced interpersonal skills, and significant personal growth. These developments strengthened students' capacity to build social skills, strengthened their sense of identity and self-awareness, and motivated them to actively engage in the teaching and learning process (Kesler Gilbert, 2000; Rizzo, 2018).

2. The second category focuses on academic, professional, and practical skills. Subcategories here include technical and professional competencies, interpersonal skills, and pedagogical techniques. FSL and CFSL enhanced students' abilities in teamwork, leadership, mentorship, and problem solving (Berkey et al., 2000; Rojas, 2014). These skills closely connect to the social and interpersonal skills discussed above, further supporting students' effectiveness in academic and professional settings. They also are the skills that truly help individuals navigate not just their careers but life itself and are crucial no matter the path they pursue.

3. The third category relates to students' civic and global awareness, fostering greater community engagement, social justice advocacy, and activism while broadening their global and intersectional perspectives. These projects exposed students to diverse viewpoints and real-world social justice issues, pushing them to connect theory with practice in meaningful ways. This hands-on experience helped them become active, engaged citizens (Davis & Wayne White, 2012). The studies highlighted how these projects cultivated a critical awareness of social justice, motivating students to participate in social transformation. In some cases, this led to sustained engagement in volunteering and activism, with students expressing a desire to continue these activities beyond the classroom (Seher, 2014).

4. The fourth category emphasizes critical thinking and empowerment, focusing on challenging norms and stereotypes as well as fostering agency. This is where the "critical feminist" in CFSL comes alive. These projects pushed students to question gender roles, power hierarchies, and societal stereotypes, encouraging them to analyze power structures through the lens of intersectionality (Seethaler, 2015). Rather than simply accepting the status quo, students developed the skills to critically examine and challenge systems of inequality, often doing so in dialogue with others and from an informed, feminist perspective (Clark-Taylor, 2017). The initiatives also increased their

knowledge and sensitivity toward gender and feminist perspectives while enhancing critical skills for addressing power dynamics, questioning androcentrism in certain fields, and promoting both personal and collective empowerment (Bowdon et al., 2014).

In the communities (e.g., primary and secondary school groups or linguistic communities), we organized our findings into three key areas of impact, each with multiple subcategories that reflect the breadth and depth of these projects' outcomes (see Appendix 2, Table 3).

1. Studies that included the voices of community members revealed growth in skills, capacities, and learning outcomes. Outcomes reported by these communities demonstrated mutual benefits. For instance, in projects where university students collaborated with schools, the community observed improvements in students' academic performance (Kouri, 2007), while language-focused initiatives increased community members' language proficiency (Guzmán, 2019). This mutual exchange highlights that the learning process is not a one-way street; instead, everyone involved—students and community members alike—learned and grew together. Beyond skills-based outcomes, many communities also experienced a heightened awareness of gender issues and feminist perspectives. This awareness fostered critical reflection on gender roles and social norms, inspiring community-driven initiatives focused on social change and increasing the visibility of their history and professions (Civit López, 2021).

2. The projects fostered personal, emotional, and social growth within communities, enhancing social skills, boosting self-esteem, and amplifying the representation of diverse voices. Participants built authentic, equitable relationships and engaged in colearning, which strengthened mental health, emotional intelligence, and overall well-being (Davis & Wayne White, 2012). One GWS course in the United States, for example, partnered with a local organization to create a digital storytelling initiative (Johnston Hurst, 2014). This collaboration empowered girls to share their experiences and perspectives on gender identity and social justice, fostering greater confidence, self-worth, and a strong sense of empowerment. The projects also challenged and transformed preexisting biases, fostering greater satisfaction and motivation among community members throughout the process.

3. These findings lead us to the third category, illustrating how these initiatives had a significant impact on fostering critical thinking, empowerment, and equity within communities. Participants enhanced their ability to critically analyze power dynamics, privilege, gender roles, and societal norms. These pedagogies catalyzed community activism and strengthened participants' sense of agency and empowerment. Often, the projects culminated in the cocreation of tangible resources with community members, further advancing social justice objectives (Byrd, 2011).

Educators (faculty and teachers) identified a combination of opportunities and institutional barriers that shape the implementation of FSL and CFSL. Through our analysis, we uncovered four key categories that offer a nuanced understanding of these experiences, capturing both the challenges faced and the potential for growth within these pedagogical models (see Appendix 2, Table 4).

1. FSL and CFSL have a transformative impact on the personal and professional development of educators. These approaches actively shape teaching identities, fostering deeper professional satisfaction and meaningful personal growth. They also build stronger professional, teaching, and research skills, demonstrating the value of this pedagogical model in advancing academic careers (Cuenca-Soto et al., 2024).

2. The FSL and CFSL pedagogical models encourage educational and methodological innovation by integrating and refining critical feminist methodologies and pedagogies within educational frameworks. Their emphasis on flexibility and adaptability enhances teaching practices, enabling faculty and teachers to design more effective curricula and programs that are responsive to feminist perspectives and applicable across diverse courses and contexts (Eretzian Smirles, 2011).

3. Educators emphasized that incorporating these perspectives into their teaching practices fosters continuous and critical reflection on their praxis. This process helps them uncover and apply feminist pedagogical principles, encouraging a more intentional and reflective approach to

teaching. One of the most significant takeaways across studies was the importance of critical reflection, as faculty were consistently encouraged to examine their biases, assumptions, and roles within these projects. They also noted that these educational approaches strengthen community engagement and connection, promoting authentic, equitable relationships between universities and communities. Furthermore, they facilitate the creation of collaborative networks with community organizations and align course objectives with community needs (Washington, 2000b).

4. Studies also highlighted significant institutional barriers and limitations that challenge the implementation of these projects. Bureaucratic obstacles, including red tape, lack of funding, and limited resources, emerged as key issues. Additionally, the perception of these approaches as merely charitable or volunteer activities often limits their scope and effectiveness. Educators emphasized that overcoming these challenges is critical to fully realizing the transformative potential of FSL and CFSL, ensuring their impact extends beyond the classroom and fosters lasting change in both academic and community contexts (Agha-Jaffar, 2000).

Theme 3. Core Components—The Foundations of FSL and CFSL

Our review underscores that FSL and CFSL are pedagogical models that bridge classroom learning with community collaboration, grounded in feminist and critical theories. Their core objective is to promote social justice and empowerment by valuing diverse perspectives and nurturing equitable relationships among participants. Rooted in feminist pedagogy and critical feminist theories, these models draw from intersectionality, ecofeminism, ecopedagogy, feminist economics, and critical theory, among others (Civit López, 2021; Santana-Rogers, 2022).

To implement FSL and CFSL projects, some authors have outlined key structural and methodological elements that highlight the importance of these approaches in education. Figure 2 summarizes the core components organized into four phases, each grounded in the empirical data and aligned with the transformative impacts described in Themes 1 and 2.

In the first phase, "community identification, analysis, and preparation," it is essential to establish a strong foundation in feminist theories and critical pedagogies that challenge existing power structures and promote equitable education (Boppre et al., 2022; Coles-Ritchie et al., 2022).[2] This phase goes beyond superficial compliance with syllabus requirements; it calls for authentic connections based on mutual respect and a shared desire to learn and grow. Central to this process is equipping students with critical reflection skills and offering training in critical, feminist, and intersectional theories, helping them recognize the power structures and privileges they might encounter. To strengthen this work, this phase often involves workshops and meetings to identify community needs and collaborations, with experts in gender studies and local activists contributing to keep the training community driven.

In the second phase, "project codesign and planning," the authors emphasize identifying community needs through a lens that accounts for diversity and social equity (Cuenca-Soto et al., 2023; Johnston Hurst, 2014). This ensures that planned activities are both relevant and sensitive to the community's unique realities. Students and educators collaboratively design interventions that challenge oppressive norms, dismantle power hierarchies, and promote equity. The community remains central, as participants work together to articulate priorities and build an informed, effective plan.

In the third phase, "implementation and knowledge cocreation," the plan comes to life. Participants engage in cocreated activities, such as facilitating community workshops on gender equity, collaboratively developing educational materials to address systemic inequalities, or designing inclusive physical activity

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[2] As before, only some studies are mentioned in the text. The corresponding study numbers for each phase can be cross-referenced with the detailed table in Appendix 1 for further context and information: **phase 1**: community identification, analysis and preparation: (4, 5, 9, 12, 13, 16, 18, 21, 23, 29, 32, 39, 40); **phase 2**: project codesign and planning: (13, 21, 40, 43, 44); **phase 3**: implementation and knowledge cocreation: (13, 16, 18, 21, 29, 43, 44); **phase 4**: evaluation, celebration, and dissemination: (3, 13, 18, 21, 22, 29, 43, 44).

programs with women in prison to promote mutual growth and empowerment (Davis & Wayne White, 2012; Guzmán, 2019; Hinojosa-Alcalde & Soler, 2021). Relationships during this phase emphasize horizontality and reciprocity, fostering meaningful collaboration between students, educators, and community members while avoiding traditional hierarchies. Everyone contributes to cocreating knowledge, ensuring mutual benefit, and valuing individual expertise and experiences. Clear agreements outline roles and responsibilities for both the community and students, establishing a framework for shared accountability and success.

In the fourth phase, "evaluation, celebration, and dissemination," the project's impact is assessed not only in academic terms or on students but also in its ability to advance social justice and equity within the community. Evaluations focus on participants' agency and empowerment (RedHawk Love, 2008; Rojas, 2014). Projects often conclude with events that celebrate successes and reflect on lessons learned, highlighting the reciprocal contributions and reinforcing the value of the work accomplished. Equally important is disseminating outcomes through accessible means—blogs, newsletters, and presentations—as well as by participating in seminars and conferences to convey the project's broader influence.

Finally, two recurring and cross-cutting components emerge from the literature across all phases: (1) self-evaluation and critical reflection—participants consistently question their assumptions and practices throughout the project, and (2) adaptability and responsiveness to community feedback—flexibility in design and implementation ensures continuous improvement. By weaving these principles through every stage, FSL and CFSL projects maintain relevance, amplify community voices, and harness the transformative potential of feminist and critical pedagogies, reshaping both educational experiences and community relationships.

Figure 2.

Core Components of Feminist and Critical Feminist Service-Learning

FSL AND CFSL CORE COMPONENTS

Phase 2: Project codesign and planning
- Power redistribution and shared leadership.
- Collaborative and horizontal dynamics—reciprocity over service.
- Defining collective goals—rooted in social transformation.

Phase 4: Evaluation, celebration and dissemination
- Assessing impact beyond the classroom—evaluation focuses on social justice outcomes.
- Celebration of growth and transformation.
- Inclusive knowledge sharing—results return to the community.

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Phase 1: Community identification, analysis and preparation
- Critical needs analysis and intersectional—coresearchers.
- Training and reflexivity—foundational knowledge in feminist and critical theories.
- Reflection on power and privileges—participants examine their positionality.

Phase 3: Implementation and knowledge cocreation
- Active and inclusive engagement—reflective activities (e.g., role-playing, collective storytelling).
- Horizontal learning spaces—knowledge is coconstructed.
- Empowerment through action—activities center on agency and critical consciousness.

Cross-cutting components:
- **Self-Evaluation and Critical Reflection**—ongoing reflexivity challenges assumptions, biases, and structures of power.
- **Adaptability and Responsiveness**—continuous dialogue with the community shapes the project.

Discussion

With this research, we set out to map existing empirical knowledge on FSL and CFSL projects in education, examine their impacts on participants, and analyze core components that guide their development. Our findings reinforce the transformative value of these pedagogical models while also revealing key research gaps that open new avenues for research and practice.

The majority of the 44 studies analyzed were conducted in the United States (72.7%; Culcasi & Fontana Venegas, 2023), with a notable focus on areas such as GWS Studies (31.8%). The predominance of U.S.-based research suggests significant potential to extend FSL and CFSL approaches globally, particularly in non-Western and underrepresented regions, where implementing and studying FSL and CFSL could yield new insights into their adaptability across diverse sociocultural and political landscapes. This trend also highlights the prevalent use of feminist frameworks in disciplines where GWS studies take center stage (Johnston Hurst, 2014). Expanding the application of these approaches to other fields, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) or PASS, remains underexplored and presents a crucial opportunity for interdisciplinary expansion (Seethaler, 2015; Williams & Ferber, 2008). Broadening this scope would diversify the impact of these projects, enhance their transformative potential, and strengthen connections between education and communities (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Guzmán, 2019). Building on this, expanding FSL and CFSL into less traditional fields not only challenges entrenched power structures but also fosters a deeper comprehension of social justice across diverse communities (Clark-Taylor, 2017). This research suggests that FSL and CFSL projects provide meaningful benefits not only for students but also for the communities they engage with (Coles-Ritchie et al., 2022).

Our findings underscore the critical role of developing interpersonal and transversal skills through FSL and CFSL—skills that are often gendered and undervalued in educational systems yet essential for both personal growth and democratic engagement (Plaza-Angulo & López-Toro, 2024; Seethaler, 2015). These pedagogical models not only foster technical and professional competencies but also cultivate empathy, teamwork, and care for others and their communities (Seethaler, 2015). FSL and CFSL promote deep personal development, especially by strengthening emotional intelligence, thereby laying the foundation for more meaningful participation and collaboration (García Romero & Lalueza, 2019; Plaza-Angulo & López-Toro, 2024).

Moreover, FSL and CFSL models excel in fostering critical and global awareness, encouraging students to challenge established norms and actively engage in social transformation through an intersectional and justice-focused lens (Coles-Ritchie, 2022; Washington, 2000a). The ability to question stereotypes and gender roles, align with feminist perspectives, and develop critical skills to analyze power dynamics enables FSL and CFSL to offer a more holistic and critical education. Such pedagogical models integrate principles of equity and personal and collective empowerment (Vergés Bosch, Freude, Camps Calvet, et al., 2021), thereby shaping not only competent professionals but also empathetic, socially responsible individuals. In this sense, FSL and CFSL transcend the impact typically linked to traditional SL (Furco, 1996; Plaza-Angulo & López-Toro, 2024).

In terms of community impact, the success of FSL and CFSL depends heavily on meaningful collaboration with community members. By working with—not for—the communities, these projects ensure that community needs and voices are prioritized. Such an approach leads to outcomes that are both relevant and mutually beneficial (Benschop & Brouns, 2003). A defining feature of FSL and CFSL is their deliberate avoidance of treating the community as an extension of academic pursuits. Instead, they integrate collaborative and inclusive activities that draw on the community's expertise and knowledge, ultimately strengthening the roles of both academia and the community as equal partners in the teaching and learning process.

Despite these strengths, our analysis reveals a significant gap: Many of the studies did not assess the direct impact of FSL and CFSL on community participants. This shortfall aligns with existing critiques of SL, which note the limited attention to community impact in evaluations (Oberhauser & Daniels, 2017; Vergés Bosch, Freude, Camps Calvet, 2021). Without robust evaluations, it remains challenging to fully

understand the transformative potential and reciprocal value of these projects, potentially underestimating their real contributions (Markaki et al., 2021; Vergés Bosch et al., 2019).

Likewise, only 16 studies (36.4%) examined educators' experiences, calling attention to the need for more in-depth exploration of how these projects shape pedagogical practices, faculty engagement, and professional development trajectories. Implementing FSL and CFSL inspires educators to embrace innovative, participatory teaching methods that embed critical and feminist perspectives (Hauver & Iverson, 2018). FSL and CFSL projects also provide opportunities for critical reflection and ongoing improvement in teaching approaches, helping educators develop a professional identity that is both responsive to and aligned with transformative practices (Clark-Taylor, 2017; Mitchell, 2008).

Moreover, there is a notable lack of quantitative methodologies in the reviewed literature. Only 18.2% of the studies employed mixed-methods approaches, further limiting the scope of evidence regarding the impact and sustainability of FSL and CFSL. Integrating rigorous quantitative assessments—such as pre- and postintervention surveys, longitudinal tracking of community engagement, and comparative outcome analysis—would significantly enhance future research. Clearly defined quantitative measures could track long-term effects systematically, offering compelling evidence of sustained community involvement and deeper insights into the effectiveness of FSL and CFSL.

Another critical point concerns potential research biases: Many of the reviewed studies were conducted by scholars directly involved in both the design and implementation of the interventions. While this offers valuable insider perspectives, it also could introduce potential bias. Future research would greatly benefit from involving external evaluators or researchers who have no direct stake in project implementation or mixed-methods designs to enhance objectivity, mitigate bias, and strengthen the reliability of findings.

FSL and CFSL draw on a broad spectrum of feminist and critical theories, notably feminist pedagogy, intersectionality, critical race theory, ecofeminism, and critical theory (Rizzo, 2018; Williams & McKenna, 2002). Expanding on Freire's (1996) vision of education as a tool for liberation, they embed critical pedagogy to empower students to confront and address social inequities through real-world engagement. This synergy with critical pedagogy further amplifies their potential to drive social justice outcomes in educational settings.

At the heart of both FSL and CFSL models lies an emphasis on intersectionality, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991), which offers a comprehensive lens for understanding and tackling overlapping systems of oppression. CFSL, in particular, applies intersectional pedagogies that emphasize both critical analysis of inequitable structures and active steps to dismantle them, thereby creating pathways for transformative learning and equity (Boppre et al., 2022; RedHawk Love, 2008).

FSL initiatives often focus on addressing community needs related to gender, fostering equitable relationships through feminist pedagogies such as the pedagogy of care (Arriaga, 2021; Byrd, 2011; Kesler Gilbert, 2000). CFSL, in turn, builds on this foundation by incorporating a deeper critical analysis of power structures through the lens of intersectionality. For instance, while FSL projects might include activities or workshops on gender equity, CFSL projects take it a step further by conducting explicit analyses of power dynamics and privilege in tandem with the community (Iverson & James, 2014). CFSL builds on CSL and FSL but very explicitly adds intersectionality: Acknowledging how different aspects of a person's identity, such as gender, race, sexuality, and other intersecting identities, overlap to shape unique experiences of privilege and oppression, CFSL actively strives to dismantle systemic inequalities.

Reciprocity and authentic collaboration among stakeholders are central aspects of FSL and CFSL. Previous research highlights that such collaboration fosters mutual empowerment, the development of sustainable relationships, and the strengthening of social and educational networks (Mitchell, 2017). These partnerships create an environment where social hierarchies can be questioned and deconstructed, promoting more equitable educational experiences and leaving a positive, enduring impact on participants' lives (Clark-Taylor, 2017).

This collaborative approach empowers individuals to confront biases and entrenched power structures, driving social change from within the community itself (Freire, 1996). Community-based learning

initiatives not only enhance educational outcomes but also advance social justice and community empowerment. The focus shifts from "helping or saving" to "co-empowering," working alongside communities to identify needs and cocreate solutions (Iverson & James, 2014). Such equal partnerships strive to establish authentic, reciprocal relationships, recognizing that communities are experts in their own lived experiences (Mitchell, 2017).

FSL and CFSL derive much of their transformative potential from their capacity to promote agency and activism (Kouri, 2007; Martin & Beese, 2016). Students are encouraged to take initiative and actively contribute to social change, while community members play a central role in creating resources, tools, and the confidence necessary to advocate for themselves and their communities (Guzmán, 2019; Webb et al., 2007). Encouraging activism and advocacy is essential for developing the skill sets needed to advance feminist social change (Seher, 2014).

Ultimately, realizing these transformative learning outcomes and commitments demands an intentional embrace of diverse and experiential pedagogical strategies. Activities such as sharing lived testimonies; engaging with thought-provoking readings on gender, positionality, and identities; and incorporating reflective writing exercises (Fouts, 2020; Oberhauser & Daniels, 2017) serve not only as tools for understanding but also as catalysts for profound sensitivity and critical awareness within FSL and CFSL initiatives. These dynamic strategies help create educational experiences that transcend conventional boundaries, challenge ingrained norms, and inspire enduring change. By weaving these methods into practice, educators and communities can cocreate transformative spaces where learning becomes a force for equity, empowerment, and lasting social impact.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The findings of our scoping review underscore the importance of embedding FSL and CFSL principles into existing SL programs and broader educational curricula. Incorporating feminist and critical perspectives into SL deepens social engagement and strengthens essential interpersonal skills—such as empathy, teamwork, and leadership—while advancing social justice, equity, and feminist awareness. Ultimately, FSL and CFSL prepare students to become not only competent professionals but also socially conscious agents of change.

To fully realize the benefits of these models, educators, researchers, and institutions could implement evaluation mechanisms that transcend traditional academic metrics. Tracking the development of interpersonal skills and regularly assessing social contributions can reveal how FSL and CFSL drive genuine community impact while pinpointing areas for improvement. Institutional inertia, however, often slows the adoption of these transformative approaches, especially when they challenge the status quo. Yet, future research can play a crucial role by designing and testing comprehensive assessments that capture how these models influence educators, participants, and community partners. Such evaluations will shed light on the broader, reciprocal potential of FSL and CFSL and highlight promising pathways for strengthening teaching practices and advancing feminist-transformative education.

Integrating FSL and CFSL more deeply into institutional policies and curricula can ensure their sustainability and adaptability over time. Doing so also broadens collaborative opportunities between academia and communities, encourages mutual learning, and fosters innovative approaches to addressing social inequalities. At the same time, further investigation into how FSL and CFSL projects develop in disciplines beyond GWS—where these approaches currently predominate—could reveal fresh synergies and wider-reaching impacts.

Finally, research on the long-term outcomes of FSL and CFSL can illuminate how sustained relationships with communities evolve and whether students' newly acquired skills translate into lasting professional and civic engagement. By following up on both students and community partners beyond project completion, educators and scholars can capture the enduring contributions of these feminist and critical SL models, charting new directions for more equitable, dynamic, and socially committed education.

Conclusions

Our scoping review has synthesized a body of empirical knowledge on FSL and CFSL projects in education, offering a new perspective on a paradigm shift in community-engaged pedagogies. By integrating critical feminist principles with SL frameworks, FSL and CFSL complement and extend traditional SL and CSL models, highlighting the potential for deeper partnerships with communities and a more holistic engagement in feminist-transformative education. Our findings emphasize that while much of the existing literature has centered on student outcomes, there is an equally pressing need to examine the multifaceted impact on communities and educators, as well as the broader structural and institutional barriers shaping FSL and CFSL experiences.

Central to these insights is the recognition that feminist and critical forms of SL advance social responsibility, reflexivity, and solidarity. Rather than confining their scope to academic performance alone, FSL and CFSL serve as catalysts for addressing systemic inequalities and fostering collaborative relationships between educational institutions and community partners. This enriched perspective not only underscores the capacity of these pedagogies to empower diverse stakeholders—students, educators, and community members alike—but also challenges education to reimagine its role as an active agent of societal change.

Looking ahead, universities and other educational institutions are well positioned to amplify the transformative potential of FSL and CFSL by embedding these frameworks more widely across their curricula. In doing so, they can better equip students to tackle contemporary social challenges, promote inclusive and socially responsible learning environments, and further refine feminist-informed and community-engaged pedagogical practices. Ultimately, by placing critical feminist perspectives at the forefront, education and particularly higher education can expand its sphere of influence, cultivating more equitable and connected communities while reinforcing its commitment to effecting meaningful, lasting change.

Challenges and Limitations

A major challenge identified in this review is the limited evaluation of FSL and CFSL's long-term community impact and their effects on educators. Although student outcomes are well documented, the lack of comprehensive analysis of FSL and CFSL's community outcomes may overlook the full potential of these pedagogical approaches. The shortage of research on how FSL and CFSL affect educators likewise stands out as a gap, leaving their influence on teaching practices and professional growth largely unexplored. Additionally, the wide variability in project designs and research objectives complicated the synthesis of findings, making it difficult to draw consistent conclusions. Another limitation arises from focusing solely on studies published in English and Spanish, potentially excluding valuable insights from other languages and cultural contexts. This linguistic scope may have narrowed the review's perspective, omitting key viewpoints that could enhance our understanding of FSL and CFSL models.

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