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The Benefits of Undertaking Christian Service-Learning: Student Perspectives

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Abstract

This research explores the benefits of undertaking Christian service-learning (CSL) from the perspective of Year 11 students from four Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia. In doing so, the research attempts to address a gap in the literature by including student voice in the narrative. The methodological design was an instrumental case study of four Catholic secondary schools. Instrumental case studies focus on a specific issue rather than the case itself, which in this study was students' perceptions of the benefits of CSL. First, data were collected through an online survey that contained both qualitative and quantitative questions, with 261 students from all schools completing the survey. Second, four focus group interviews were conducted, one per school. Students nominated themselves to participate in a focus group within the online survey, and a total of 26 students participated in the focus groups. The results indicated that the Year 11 students perceived numerous benefits of CSL, which were organized into four areas: positive attributes, personal growth, learning opportunities, and civic responsibility.

Keywords: *Christian service-learning, benefits, student perceptions, personal growth, civic responsibility*

Los beneficios de la aplicación del aprendizaje y servicio cristiano: Perspectivas de los estudiantes

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Resumen

Esta investigación explora los beneficios de realizar aprendizaje y servicio cristiano (ASC) desde la perspectiva de estudiantes de año 11 de cuatro colegios católicos en Australia Occidental. Al hacerlo, la investigación intenta abordar una brecha en la literatura al incluir la voz de los estudiantes en la narrativa. El diseño metodológico fue un estudio de caso instrumental de cuatro colegios católicos. Los estudios de caso instrumentales se centran en un tema específico en lugar del caso en sí, que en este estudio fueron las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre los beneficios del ASC. Primero, los datos se recopilaron a través de una encuesta en línea que contenía preguntas cualitativas y cuantitativas y se obtuvo la respuesta de 261 estudiantes de todos los colegios que completaron la encuesta. Segundo, se realizaron cuatro grupos focales, uno por colegio. Los estudiantes se nominaron a sí mismos para participar en un grupo focal dentro de la encuesta en línea, y un total de 26 estudiantes participaron en los grupos focales. Los resultados indicaron que los estudiantes de año 11 percibieron varios beneficios del ASC, que se organizaron en cuatro áreas: atributos positivos, crecimiento personal, oportunidades de aprendizaje y responsabilidad cívica.

Palabras clave: *Aprendizaje y servicio cristiano, beneficios, percepciones de estudiantes, crecimiento personal, responsabilidad cívica*

Editors' Note: Translation provided by the Author.

Introduction

Service-learning (SL) is a teaching method (Miller, 2012) by which students address community needs through acts of service that are linked to the curriculum being studied (Brail, 2016; Roso, 2013). The concept of SL is derived from a work completed in 1967 by Sigmon and Ramsey of the Southern Regional Education Board in the United States of America. Sigmon and Ramsey sponsored an internship program for college students to work on community projects (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Kenny & Gallagher, 2002). Participation in SL requires that it is mutually beneficial for both the students completing the action of service and those receiving the service (Kaye, 2010a; Moak, 2020).

SL focusses on both the service and the learning being undertaken, with both components being equally important (Kaye, 2010a). For an activity to be classified as SL, it must therefore have components of both elements (Price, 2021). The hyphen in service-learning illustrates the link between the two elements (Jacoby, 2014; Price, 2021). Several common characteristics can be extrapolated from the definitions of SL found in the literature. These characteristics include the following: SL is a pedagogical method linked to academic outcomes (Chambers & Lavery, 2018; Helms et al., 2015), SL involves experience-based learning (Brail, 2016; Norhafezah et al., 2020), SL involves reflection activities (Lin, 2021; Lynch, 2018), students meet the needs of the community (Chambers & Lavery, 2018; Furco & Norvell, 2019), and reciprocity is evident when the students who complete the service and the recipients of the service benefit equally (Kaye & Connolly, 2018; Petri, 2015).

Christian service-learning (CSL) is a form of SL. CSL is therefore based on the same theoretical and practical principles that underpin SL in general; however, it is additionally inspired by the gospel value of love for others (Engebretson, 2014). The Christian aspect implies that it is the gospel that underscores the service and the learning (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2021; Lavery & Hackett, 2008). In CSL, the purpose is not only to have civic responsibility but also to act in solidarity with others, espousing Christ-like values such as love, charity, justice, service, kindness, and compassion (Kaak & LaPorte, 2022; Lavery & Hackett, 2008). In CSL, this civic responsibility is extended to encompass discipleship, which in the Christian faith means to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ (Lavery & Hackett, 2008). CSL can “be conducted in or out of school time, both on or off school premises” (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2021). CSL in Catholic schools is different from SL in other schools because the service is “explicitly tied to our identity as members of the Catholic faith” (Walsh & Spells, 2020, p. 5). The conceptual framework that informed the research included Catholic social teaching as a foundation for CSL in the Catholic context, the benefits of CSL, and reflection in CSL.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of the research project was to explore the benefits of undertaking CSL from the perspective of Year 11 students from four Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia. Considering the purpose, the research question was: What do Year 11 students identify as the benefits of undertaking a CSL program?

Catholic Social Teaching as a Foundation for Christian Service-Learning in the Catholic Context

Catholic social teaching is based on scripture, Church documents, statements, and declarations by popes and bishops (Fourré, 2006b). Catholic social teaching can be considered as “a lens, or a way of looking at the world [which]... shapes how [Catholics] behave” (Fourré, 2006b, p. 48). Since Catholic social teaching outlines how the followers of Jesus can follow and live out the gospel values, CSL provides opportunities for students to enact Catholic social teaching in practical ways (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2021). Engebretson (2014) argued that while most Catholic high schools have CSL programs linked with the Catholic identity of the school, the link is strongest when the CSL program is based on Catholic social teaching and scripture. Similarly, Price (2021) noted that when SL is connected to “the broader Jesus story” (p. 9), the Catholic identity of the school is strengthened. Engebretson (2014) also emphasized that students need to differentiate CSL with charitable works, wherein CSL students live out “Christ’s vision of the

Kingdom of God, spelled out for our times in Catholic social teaching” (p. 89). Wodon (2022) suggested that because SL does not require that students be adherents of the Catholic faith, this may also strengthen the Catholic identity of the institution, while at the same time respecting the differing religious views within the student cohort.

Benefits of Christian Service-Learning

The benefits attained by students in SL and CSL are much the same (Lavery & Hackett, 2008), for example, leadership development (Lavery & Hackett, 2008) and awareness of social justice issues (Stewart, 2009). The literature on CSL highlights various benefits for students such as an understanding that the Christian life is one of service and justice (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2021). Engagement in CSL can also lead to a deeper understanding of the Catholic social teachings and how these teachings can be lived out, including promoting the dignity of each human being and the common good for the environment and wider community (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2021). Another benefit of CSL participation is that students can hear the voice of God in their lives (Feenstra, 2011). Faith development is also a benefit of participation in CSL (Roso, 2013).

Reflection in Christian Service-Learning

As in SL, reflection is a crucial element in a CSL program (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2021). Reflection provides students with an opportunity to think about the service activity being undertaken through a Christian lens (Rieger, 2014). Students are encouraged to reflect on Genesis 1:27 within the CSL reflection activities, exhibiting the notion that everyone is created in the image and likeness of God (Rieger, 2014). Reflection also enables students to learn about the presence of God within the world (Fourré, 2006a). Thus, reflective activities need to be intentionally linked to the gospel and to Catholic social teachings and must occur before, during, and after the service activity (Engebretson, 2009). Through reflection, students can develop their faith perspective and response to world issues (Schaffer, 2010).

A guided reflection, linked to the gospel values, provides students with the opportunity to connect with others, following Jesus’s call to serve others (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2021). Further, a guided reflection allows students to think about the meaning of what they are doing and to question the injustices in the world around them (Engebretson, 2014). DiGiacomo (2007) argued that if students in a Catholic school do not participate in guided reflection they engage in “secular humanism without any faith dimension” (p. 15).

Significance of the Research

This research is significant in three ways. First, it attempts to address the gap in the literature regarding Western Australian Catholic secondary school students’ perceptions of CSL. As early as 2007, Lavery identified student perceptions as a crucial missing element that would provide a deeper and more well-rounded understanding of CSL. This paper will contribute the valuable, yet often missing component, of student voice to the existing literature and therefore add to the knowledge in the field. The second significance is linked to the first. It is anticipated that the results of this research will help inform decision-making, program creation, and delivery by those practitioners involved in secondary CSL in Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA) by taking into consideration student perceptions. Third, practitioners nationally and internationally can consider the potential of student voice in the development of their own CSL programs.

Research Design

The research design underpinning this study was a qualitative instrumental case study augmented by descriptive statistics. In an instrumental case study, the focus is on a specific issue rather than the case (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The specific issue in this research is student perceptions of CSL, and the

instrumental case study of the four Catholic secondary schools is the means to explore the issue. Instrumental case study is considered an important form of evidence-based research for use by program creators (Patton, 2015). The conclusions drawn from this instrumental case study on Year 11 students' perceptions about CSL have the potential to strengthen the understanding of CSL from a student's perspective informing the delivery of CSL programs in, but not limited to, Catholic secondary schools within Western Australia. Two methods of data collection were used in this research with the Year 11 students: a structured online questionnaire and focus group interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Notre Dame Australia (Reference number: 2022-086F). Following approval, school principals, key informants, parents and guardians, and the student participants were provided with specific information sheets that outlined the purpose of the research, the processes involved, and the right to withdraw at any time. The participants were informed of the data collection methods, and they provided their written consent to participate in the research.

Sampling

Sampling for this research was conducted in two ways: first, in the selection of the four schools and, second, in the selection of the student year level for the study. Purposeful sampling involves the selection of a sample group of participants who "can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 148). Each of the four schools was purposefully selected because they are currently facilitating a CSL program and include a wide range of school types: different Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) scores, co-educational and single gender schools, and pre-kindergarten-12 and 7–12 schools. Year 11 students were purposefully selected as the participants for this study. Most students in Year 11 in these Catholic schools have had up to 5 years of CSL experience from Year 7 to Year 11 and are in a strong position to share their perceptions about their CSL experiences. All students in the Year 11 cohort at each school were invited to participate in the anonymous, structured online questionnaire. Through the structured online questionnaire, students were able to nominate their participation in a focus group interview.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected in two stages. Stage one involved a structured online questionnaire for all Year 11 students at the four participating schools. The purpose of the questionnaire was to reach as many Year 11 students as possible within each school and gain an understanding of student perceptions about CSL. A total of 261 Year 11 students (72 female, 181 male, and 8 nonbinary/third gender) completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained three sets of items:

- (a) Demographic questions on gender, academic pathway, years of CSL participation, and whether students liked participating in CSL: "Do you like undertaking Christian Service-Learning?"
- (b) A multi-select question on the benefits of CSL: "Which of these do you feel are benefits of Christian Service-learning? Select all that apply."
- (c) Open-ended qualitative questions on the benefits and the impact of CSL: "Is Christian Service-Learning valuable? Please explain your reasons for your response."

The questionnaire items were developed in the light of literature on SL in general and CSL in particular. To enhance methodological rigor, the questionnaire was piloted with four Year 11 students from a school not involved in the research. The pilot questionnaire provided information on the appropriate timing for administration as well as identification of any issues the students could experience when completing the questionnaire. Several questions were adjusted based on their feedback, allowing for easier completion of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was then re-piloted with a different group of Year 11 students not involved in the study.

Stage two involved four focus group interviews, one per school, in which 26 Year 11 students (14 female and 12 male) participated. The purpose of the focus group interviews was to build on the understanding of student perceptions about CSL gained from the structured online questionnaire. The interviews were conducted on site at each school in a classroom, office space, or boardroom and held for a duration of 40–65 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Each focus group interview commenced with the researcher outlining the purpose of the interview and ensuring that the students understood the importance of privacy and confidentiality. The interviewees were encouraged to share their thoughts openly and honestly and were reminded that no judgments would be made about any of the comments they made.

The questions for the focus group interviews were based on the responses to the questionnaire. To enhance methodological rigor, the questions were piloted with three Year 11 students from a school not involved in the study. The purpose was to ensure clarity and appropriateness of the questions. In light of responses, it was possible to refine the wording and ensure the appropriateness of the questions before re-piloting with a different group of Year 11 students not involved in the study.

The strategy for the inductive thematic analysis of the qualitative data in this research followed the iterative process outlined by Miles et al. (2020) involving “three concurrent flows of activity” (p. 8): data condensation, data display, and the drawing and verifying of conclusions. The researchers used inductive thematic analysis to interrogate the raw data. The analysis process then set out to convert the data into results and conclusions (Patton, 2015).

In this research, the data from the qualitative responses from the online questionnaire and the focus group interviews were coded and arranged in themes. The data analysis involved continuous coding, in which the initial coding was refined throughout the process. From this process of coding, themes emerged, and the results were established. An audit trail was kept during the focus group interviews, including the piloting of the interview questions, the actual facilitation of the interviews, transcriptions of the interviews, and then the coding process. Quantitative responses from the structured online questionnaire were reported using descriptive statistics as percentages.

Results

The Results section presents data from the focus group interviews and structured online questionnaire to answer the research question: What do Year 11 students identify as the benefits of undertaking a CSL program? These benefits are organized into four subsections: positive attributes of CSL, personal growth, learning opportunities, and civic responsibility.

Positive Attributes of Christian Service-Learning

Students responded positively to questions about the value and worth of CSL. Five sub-themes emerged from the data: the value of CSL, connection with others, the importance of reflection activities within CSL, personal enjoyment, and development of a positive attitude toward CSL. Most responses to the qualitative question in the questionnaire yielded a positive response about the value of CSL. Students linked the value of CSL with characteristics such as stepping out of their comfort zone, building leadership capacity, personal growth, awareness of world issues, self-fulfillment, and job readiness. In the final question of the questionnaire, students were asked to describe their CSL experience in three words. Most students used positive words to describe their experience. Examples include “valuable, rewarding, uplifting, powerful, worthwhile, exhilarating, eye-opening, educative, and enlightening.”

Student responses in the focus groups also highlighted the value of CSL. In one focus group, a student commented that CSL is “really important, it’s something that everyone should do at least once in their life.” Another student in the same focus group commented, “I think it should be encouraged in more schools. It teaches them a lot about themselves and a lot about others, the world they live in, the world they’re growing up to be adults in.” Several students in various focus groups identified a link between the value of CSL and the benefits for themselves and for others. One student asserted:

I think it is really valuable because everyone gets something out of it. Like the person you're helping or the place you're helping, they obviously get something out of it because you're helping them. And then you get to learn about certain issues and things that is (sic) involved with what you're doing, and you get to feel good about what you're actually doing.

In three focus groups, students perceived that the value of a CSL activity is derived from the activity being undertaken. Several other students commented that the CSL program is valuable “depending on what you do.” However, one student suggested that the actual service being undertaken is valuable, but “the reflection possibly not as valuable.”

Students in three focus groups identified a positive perception of CSL because it gave them the opportunity to connect with others. These connections were with the people the students were serving, the organization providing the service, and their peers. One student remarked that they held a positive view of CSL “because I [get to] connect with [the] community more.” Another student in the same focus group recalled a connection with a homeless person during a service activity: “I remember just serving food to someone and them having that thankfulness and gratitude for us doing it, and that connection makes you feel satisfied with yourself.” Some participants identified a positive connection with the organization where their service was undertaken. For example, one student suggested that “you're able to connect with those organisations and people who do these things, and sometimes you get to see first-hand how problems impact the modern world.”

A few students spoke positively about the importance of reflection activities within the CSL program. One student in a focus group commented that “during the reflection you kind of realise how rewarding it was doing what you did.” A student in another focus group asserted:

It's also there for the person's benefit ... the reflecting on what you've done in your time in this school in the Christian Service-Learning program ... [you] realise, 'oh there's so much here that we've done, but there's also so much more that I could have done'.

Several student responses revealed a feeling of resignation toward the requirement of reflection. One student in a focus group asserted: “I've heard most people complaining, but it honestly isn't that bad.” A second student in the same focus group added, “What is it, like 600–800 words? It's not that bad.” The same student continued, “You have to write 800 words over the space of three years in the senior school. It's just, get it done. It's not that hard.”

The quantitative student responses in the questionnaire indicated that many students enjoyed CSL. Forty-one percent (41%, $n = 107$) of Year 11 students responded that they do like undertaking CSL. Only 18% ($n = 48$) did not like undertaking CSL, while 40.61% ($n = 106$) were undecided. The Year 11 students also described the enjoyment they derived from participating in CSL in the qualitative responses of the questionnaire, using words such as inspiring, fun, enjoyable, fulfilling, awesome, and satisfying.

Students within the focus groups also commented on the enjoyment derived from CSL. The student responses indicated that this sense of enjoyment came from the knowledge that they were helping others as well as completing CSL with their friends. For example, one student reasoned that the enjoyment came from “knowing that you're helping people, and you can make it easier for someone else.” A student in a different focus group remarked, “I really enjoy it because it makes you ... view things differently, and it ... impacts yourself as a person, but also the community.” Several students in different focus groups commented on how some students continued to complete CSL even after achieving the minimum requirement of tasks because of the sense of enjoyment and satisfaction they gained from doing so. As an example, one student noted that even though some students have completed so many hours:

they still continue to do it because they actually enjoyed doing it and being out there helping the community because they realise that even though there's a compulsory thing to do for the school for our grade and graduating, it just meant something more to them.

Students in two focus groups discussed how their attitude toward CSL had changed from when they were in Year 7 and had developed into a positive attitude. Students commented that in their early

involvement in CSL they felt that “it was a bit of a drag,” “a chore,” “a hindrance,” and were “slightly irritated.” As one student observed, “I was quite opposed to it in the beginning, I thought, ‘this is a waste of time,’ ... I thought, ‘I don’t have time to do this.’” Several students, however, highlighted that over time their responses had changed and were now positive. For example, one student identified that “I think in the end you feel satisfied with yourself once you’ve completed it. It’s an experience that I think people need to have.” A student in another focus group reflected, “I think as I’ve matured and grown up a little bit more, I’ve seen the benefits of it, not just for myself but for community.” A third student commented that their initial response toward CSL in Year 7 was “ten hours a year, that’s such a pain.” The student then described how this initial response had positively developed over time:

As I just started doing it, because it just felt like depending on what I did I would get so much out of it, and helping people just made me feel so much better about myself ... and I do service all the time now, I’m just always helping people.

A similar comment was made in a qualitative response in the questionnaire, with a student writing that CSL is “important in developing a strong sense of compassion and empathy however it became more relevant to me as I became older and more mature.”

Personal Growth

Student responses revealed that personal growth was a key benefit of CSL participation. The students described personal growth benefits in terms of personal development, development of values, and leadership development. Student responses in the questionnaire and focus groups included various elements of personal development because of their CSL participation, which included confidence, self-esteem, self-improvement, and motivation. Several students wrote that feeling good and the sense of self-fulfillment were personal development benefits of their involvement in CSL. Similar comments were raised in the focus groups. As an example, one student commented that CSL can be “a very personal experience” and remarked that “no matter what, you’re always going to get some sort of development out of it.” Another student in the same focus group added, “I think it’s a lot of personal growth. Since you do it for such a long time, I guess 50 hours is time spent doing something for someone else, but then you also get to learn something about yourself.”

Students in a different focus group discussed the perception and confidence gained from their involvement in CSL. As one student commented, “It’s like a reality check on yourself, and you’re able to explore yourself, maybe become more confident.” Confidence and self-esteem also arose in another focus group with several students identifying a link between an increase in self-esteem and motivation, thus leading to personal growth and the acquisition of new skills. For example, one student highlighted that through CSL participation, they gained an “improvement of self-esteem and motivation ... you’re doing something without receiving anything back, but it’s sort of emotionally you’re receiving something back.” Another student in the same focus group described how their confidence had increased after completing a school-based peer mentoring CSL activity with younger peers. This student commented, “I’ve seen those girls grow over the year, and I feel like it makes you feel good about yourself when you can actually see what’s happened, and I think I got some confidence out of that.”

The data from the questionnaire and the focus groups indicated that Year 11 students perceived the development of personal values as a significant benefit of CSL participation. Seventy percent (70%, $n = 183$) of the respondents identified the development of personal values as a benefit of CSL participation. In the focus groups, students described that they had gained values such as empathy, compassion, understanding, and other centeredness because of their involvement in CSL. For example, a student commented that good values were developed because:

you see a lot of different people, people that have different lifestyle paths, stuff that’s happened to them or stuff they may have done, and it makes you think a lot and it just builds a lot of values and it helps to develop empathy.

Another student noted that through service, students can build values and become better people “because you’ve learnt new things from helping people, seen how people can have it hard.” Students also referred to the development of values in their qualitative responses in the questionnaire. As an example, one student wrote that CSL “helps you develop your values to become a better person.” Another student wrote that “the development of [values] will shape [students’] understanding and perception of future dilemmas and situations.”

Students identified leadership development as a benefit of CSL participation in both the questionnaire and the focus groups. This leadership development was related to learning leadership skills, development as leaders, and positive role modeling. In the questionnaire, 55% (n = 143) of the students indicated that leadership development was a benefit of participation in CSL. Several students also referred to leadership development in the qualitative response section of the questionnaire. For instance, one student responded that CSL “teachers (sic) leadership skills.” Another student wrote that CSL “helps us develop as leaders.” A third student asserted that CSL “develops your leadership skills.”

In both the focus groups and the questionnaire, students identified their responsibility to act as positive role models to their younger peers by participating in CSL. For example, one student identified that they should “pass on our experiences that we went through down to the younger, the junior ranks.” The notion of Year 11 students acting as role models for their younger peers was also raised within the questionnaire. One student wrote that as a result of their participation in CSL, they were “becoming a role model for the younger kids.” Another student indicated that participation in CSL was a “good experience to be a role model for younger [students] and help them.”

Learning Opportunities

Students highlighted learning opportunities as a benefit of participation in CSL. They identified two specific learning opportunities: life lessons and skills for the future and preparation for future careers. For example, one student remarked, “You learn life skills when you do [CSL] and you ... experience stuff.” A second student in the focus group added, “The life skills that I get from it are really what makes me love it so much.” In another focus group, students specified the life skills they had learnt from participating in CSL. As one student stated, “It’s also given us life skills of how to correctly time manage, organise all of our stuff, prioritise.” Another student also differentiated classroom learning and CSL, stating, “You’re learning lessons and skills that you don’t in the classroom.”

Several students in the focus groups connected learning about future career paths as a benefit of CSL. One student asserted that service activities “can lead into further experiences or opportunities in your life.” In a different focus group, one student commented that without CSL, “I don’t think we’d be suited for when we graduate, when you go out to the real world. But this kind of gives us somewhat real-life experiences, doing these independently.” In the questionnaire, another student wrote that CSL “can help get you into the workforce” while 28% (n = 73) of Year 11 students identified preparation for potential career paths as a benefit. In another focus group, students discussed listing CSL on their resumes. As one student observed: “I know a lot of people say it’s good to have on your resume, apparently. Or good to have on your graduating certificate to get jobs.” In this same focus group, two other students agreed that prospective employers took into consideration the service hours: “They look at your community service hours, how many that you’ve done.”

Civic Responsibility

Students saw civic responsibility, or the feeling of responsibility for others, as a benefit of CSL participation. Sixty-one percent (61%, n = 158) of the respondents in the questionnaire identified an increased feeling of responsibility toward others as a benefit. In one focus group, a student recalled the experience gained in serving meals to those in need and how they have “continued to do it.” The same student highlighted that “the first time especially, I was shook (sic) like, how many people there were, and that there were all these people that we just wouldn’t even know about.” A second student added:

After doing learning experiences ... you go out and then you are able to see it in real life, and you're like, 'oh my God' ... It's like overwhelming, and you want to do something for it. So I guess it brings up that urge of wanting to do something to help them.

A student in another focus group shared that the people receiving the service were "really happy that there are people out there to do this." The same student added, "Happiness is just bouncing off each other from doing it, and I think that's the worthwhile contribution because you're both satisfied by what's happening, and you're helping the community, making it a better place."

Students in two focus groups described how graduates from their school continued to participate in CSL after their graduation, maintaining a sense of responsibility for others. One student described that CSL has an "impact on generations that graduate from the school, because they'll end up maybe continuing this kind of Christian volunteering, or just volunteering in general, to help the public and solve problems in the world." Another student detailed how they have seen ex-students from their school "volunteer at places all the time." Students in another focus group gave several examples of graduates from their school who were now working in charity, medicine, or philanthropy.

Discussion

The Year 11 students identified various personal growth benefits arising from participation in a CSL program. They highlighted the benefits relating to personal, values, and leadership development. The students provided diverse interpretations and explanations of the learning opportunities obtained through participation in CSL. Some referred to learning opportunities such as learning new skills and life lessons, while others referred to learning for the future. The data also revealed that students felt a sense of civic responsibility as a result of their CSL participation.

The students' positive attitudes toward CSL were attributed to its perceived value, connection with others, reflection activities, and personal enjoyment. Many students provided positive responses when asked about the value of CSL. The students connected the value of CSL with the benefits that can be achieved from CSL participation such as stepping out of one's comfort zone, development of leadership skills, awareness of world issues, and personal growth. The students did not, however, mention growth from a faith perspective. The student perspectives on the value of CSL appear to reflect what DiGiacomo (2007) identified as "secular humanism without any faith dimension" (p. 15). Prior to participating in CSL, students should have been informed about the potential outcomes of the activities such as growth from the faith perspective. It is possible that prior to their CSL experiences, the Year 11 students may not have received instructions about the potential for growth from the faith perspective. Alternatively, the reflection activities within the program may not have provided the students with the opportunity to assess their growth from a faith perspective.

A core value of CSL lies in students putting the Catholic faith and the gospel into action (Devlin & Warner, 2017; Price, 2021). The student responses about the value of CSL, however, were more reflective of the general value of SL. This value of SL for students lies within the achievement and receipt of the benefits (Caspersz & Olaru, 2017; Fourré, 2006a). Students indicated that the value of participation in CSL was related to learning about others, the world, and further opportunities for learning. Prior to participating in CSL, students should be informed about the potential outcomes of the activities such as growth from the faith perspective, to bring this to the forefront of their thinking. The reflection activities included within the CSL program could also support the students to create links between the activities undertaken and the faith perspective of CSL, with questions specifically asking students to identify and create links between the activities and their faith perspective.

The students identified three examples of connection with others: the people they were serving, the organization providing the service, and their peers. By participating in CSL, students interact with different people, including those who are marginalized in society, and learn how to get along with others (Chambers & Lavery, 2018). Many scholars have highlighted that through providing service, students can develop their concern and care for others (Miller, 2012; Pendergast et al., 2017; Winans-Solis, 2014). Lavery and Hackett (2008) emphasized that through participation in CSL, students can act in solidarity with others while

reflecting Christ-like values. Through such actions, students can learn more about themselves and others, by following the call of Jesus to serve (Lavery & Hackett, 2008). While the students did not verbalize the connection between Christ-like values and forming connections, the way they connected with others could be seen as living out Christ-like values such as love, justice, and compassion (Kaak & LaPorte, 2022).

There were a few students who were positive about the importance of reflection activities within CSL. These students commented that these activities allowed them to recognize the impact of their actions as well as what else they could have done during the experience. The studies on both CSL and SL strongly emphasize the importance of the inclusion of reflection activities within these programs (Billig, 2018; Catholic Education Western Australia, 2021; Kaye, 2010a; Moak, 2020). A point of difference between CSL and SL reflective activities is that CSL-based reflection should be linked to the gospel and to Catholic social teachings (Engebretson, 2009), whereas SL reflection activities are generally not. The students' positive perception of the reflection activities did not refer to the gospel or Catholic social teachings. The students' responses were more consistent with the literature on reflection in SL, whereby students understood the service they undertook and were able to learn from it (Moak, 2020; Nickels, 2018).

In the Christian context, reflection enables students to consider their service involvement from a Christian perspective (Rieger, 2014). This consideration is possible if the Christian perspective of CSL is emphasized to the students by highlighting the need for the students to be guided through their reflections; otherwise, the link to the Christian perspective of CSL may be missed. The literature on CSL has outlined that guided reflections, linked to the gospel values, should be implemented within CSL programs to enable the students to follow Jesus's call to serve (Catholic Education Western Australia, 2021). DiGiacomo (2007) asserted that, in a Catholic school, the absence of guided reflection removed the faith dimension from the activity. Most students highlighted the development of values as a benefit of CSL participation. These values included gospel values such as compassion, empathy, and understanding, which are examples of Christ-like or gospel values (Kaak & LaPorte, 2022). The development of Christ-like values (Lavery & Hackett, 2008) and the enactment of the Catholic social teachings that encompass gospel values (Fourré, 2006b; Catholic Education Western Australia, 2021) are the known benefits of CSL participation.

The Year 11 student responses indicated that many students enjoyed participating in CSL and found their experience to be fulfilling. Several students linked this enjoyment and fulfillment to the completion of service activities with their friends and the feeling of helping others. Nabors et al. (2018) also found that students felt rewarded by service participation because they liked helping others and the community. Several students gave examples of other students they knew who were still continuing the service activities long after reaching the minimum requirement of hours because of the sense of enjoyment they felt. There appears to be limited research about the enjoyment the students derive from participation in CSL. The opportunity to complete SL with friends (Chambers & Lavery, 2022; Liu, 2015) and providing help to others (Liu, 2015; Nabors et al., 2018) are both highlighted in the literature on SL. Liu (2015) asserted that completing service with friends could strengthen a student's willingness to participate in SL.

Several students identified that over their years of involvement in CSL, they had developed a positive attitude toward the program. The students indicated that this development was due to growing in age and maturity, appreciating the impact their service had, and finding a sense of fulfillment. These students shared that in the early stages of their CSL involvement, they held negative attitudes toward the requirement to complete CSL, in particular the time required for the activities. Over time, the students were able to appreciate the impact of CSL for themselves, others, and the community. There appears to be no mention of the development of a positive attitude toward CSL in the research. The research on SL does include the development of a positive attitude, whereby students' attitudes toward SL changed throughout their involvement in the program (Colvin, 2020; Price, 2018; Schneller et al., 2022). These scholars identified that over time, students recognized a change in their outlook and perceptions of SL based on their own learning and engagement with others and the community.

Many students identified personal growth as a benefit of participation in CSL. Several students identified personal development as a personal growth benefit of CSL participation. These students outlined the elements of personal development such as increased confidence, self-esteem, self-improvement, motivation, and a sense of fulfillment. Nabors et al. (2018) also found that students perceived a positive

sense of self-worth when they were leading younger students and helping others and in the community. Several students believed the CSL activities had led them to learn more about themselves and therefore experience personal growth. These students identified the elements of personal development that mirror the literature on SL, describing the benefits of character development (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010; Ocal & Altinok, 2016).

Over half of the Year 11 students recognized leadership development as a benefit of participation in CSL and referred to the development of leadership qualities. Several students identified their own responsibility to act as role models for future generations and share their own experiences with younger students. Schools may therefore explore the possibility of the current students speaking to their younger peers, or even alumni members visiting the school, to speak about CSL and the impact that it can have. This could also lead to the potential for mentoring, whereby older students, or alumni, can support younger students with their CSL engagement. Leadership development has been identified as a benefit of both CSL (Lavery, 2007) and SL participation (Moak, 2020; Ocal & Altinok, 2016). The number of students who identified leadership development as a benefit of CSL participation may suggest that CSL has the potential as a means to develop leadership in senior students. Alternatively, the students' identification of leadership development may indicate that leadership is emphasized as a benefit of CSL participation to the students before and after undertaking the service activities.

The Year 11 students identified learning opportunities as benefits of their participation in CSL. Several Year 11 students identified that CSL participation had enabled them to learn life lessons and develop skills for the future, enhancing their classroom learning. These skills included time management, organizational skills, and prioritization of tasks. It indicates that participation in CSL provides students with the opportunity to recognize their own skillset and how they can apply these skills to serve others (Devlin & Warner, 2017). Students can develop a variety of skills by engaging in service to others (Jones et al., 2008). These skills include job-related skills of time management, getting along with peers, and working with different people. Wang and Calvano (2018) also identified that SL was a fertile ground for the development of skills, which could then support students' career development. Both Kaye (2010b) and Miller (2012) argued that SL enhances classroom learning because in SL, students can apply life skills in practical situations, which complement their academic learning.

The combination of academic and real-life learning is considered the purpose of SL and CSL (Furco & Norvell, 2019; Kaye, 2013). There may therefore be potential for schools to utilize CSL as a vehicle for building job-related skills, to ensure that the students are ready for the workplace when they finish their schooling. Several Year 11 students in fact identified participating in CSL as a way of preparing for future careers. That is, they felt that CSL participation could lead to experiences and opportunities that prepared them for the real world. Numerous scholars have described this preparedness for future professions as a benefit of SL (Kaye, 2010a; Kuhn et al., 2017; Moak, 2020). Through involvement in SL, students can discover new career paths or more ambitious job selections (Miller, 2012). Additionally, participating in SL provides students with practical experiences where they can develop skills such as networking with community members, which could be beneficial for their career development (Wang & Calvano, 2018).

Many Year 11 students perceived a feeling of responsibility to others as a benefit of their CSL participation. Lavery and Hackett (2008) also identified this civic responsibility as a benefit of CSL participation. Lavery and Hackett referred to the term discipleship to relate civic responsibility to the teachings of Jesus Christ. The student responses did not specifically mention discipleship. The students did, however, include elements of civic responsibility which relate to discipleship such as the realization of the plight of those who are struggling, the desire to do more to help others, and the positive feelings derived from participating in service activities where they assisted those who may be struggling (Pendergast et al., 2017; Winans-Solis, 2014).

Limitations

There are however three potential limitations identified within this research. The first relates to the generalizability of the research. This research was limited to four Catholic secondary schools in Western

Australia out of a total of 54. The four schools, however, were purposely selected to provide variation. The study may have credibility within CEWA, but generalizing the results to other educational sectors within Australia or internationally may be more difficult. The second potential limitation is concerned with the range of participants in the research. The research included only Year 11 students. The perceptions of other students, staff, or parents were not included. The Year 11 students were purposefully selected to participate in this study because most Year 11 students in Catholic schools will have had up to 5 years of CSL experience, from Year 7 to Year 11. The third potential limitation relates to volunteer bias, also known as self-selection bias (Tripepi et al., 2010). Volunteer bias occurs when participants who are involved in a study differ from those who are not involved (Oswald et al., 2013). This article should be read keeping these limitations in mind.

Conclusion

This paper explored the benefits of undertaking CSL from the perspective of Year 11 students from four Catholic secondary schools in Western Australia. In doing so, the paper attempted to address the gap in the literature regarding Western Australian Catholic secondary school students' perceptions about CSL. There are both practical and theoretical implications of this research. In practical terms, the students identified the connection with fellow students and members of the wider community, personal enjoyment and growth, and development of a positive attitude toward CSL as benefits of the CSL. Theoretically, they identified civic responsibility, the positive attributes of CSL, and the importance of reflection activities as key beneficial components of CSL development.

Practical implications often reflected the personal and interpersonal experiences of the students during the CSL. For example, student responses revealed that personal growth was a significant benefit of participating in CSL. They described these benefits in terms of personal development, development of values, and leadership development. In addition to personal growth, students identified two specific learning opportunities as being a benefit of CSL participation: life lessons and skills and preparation for future careers. These benefits are directly related to the life of the students.

In contrast, the theoretical benefits identified components outside the life of the students, including civic responsibility, or the feeling of responsibility for others, and the identification of the positive attributes of the CSL program itself. The importance of reflecting on what the individual student was doing for others (outside of themselves) was also identified as a benefit of the CSL experience. These benefits have implications for the development of future programs and should be incorporated into developing CSL wherever possible.

Many of the benefits identified in this research are not unique to CSL but are common to SL programs in general. SL does not require a faith tradition to operate. However, CSL contextualizes the service and learning and the resultant benefits within a faith tradition. In the case of this research, it is the Catholic tradition. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits of SL within a faith tradition, it is suggested that further studies should be conducted on the outcomes of programs that emphasize faith within the context of CSL.

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