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Community Social Service: Students Away from the Classroom, Building Knowledge in Their Communities

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Abstract

The objective of this intervention was to strengthen the Social Service program through an active participation model between students and their communities, promoting a cohesive education and a sense of social responsibility in students. This was a mixed quantitative-qualitative study, transversal-descriptive including pre-post test measures in social service students related to information regarding family violence and the cultural consensus around the purpose, barriers and benefits of social service. Through the experience of community social service, students widen their understanding of family violence and its manifestations, enriching their comprehension of the phenomenon. During the post-test evaluation, the development of social abilities as a part of the cultural consensus on the benefits of carrying out their social service was accentuated. Furthermore, the consensus on the lack of disadvantages of carrying out their social service was increased, while the perception of the need to increase expenditure of time and abandoning other activities was reduced. The experience of community social service allowed students to link academic knowledge to community knowledge, while at the same time their opinion of social service itself was modified in a positive way. Students were able to insert themselves in their community and establish horizontal relationships. Social service represents a means to exercise citizenship and social responsibility. However, it is primordial to involve all other characters in the university universe to guarantee the continuity of projects and actions to benefit communities.

1. Introduction

University education constitutes an instrument of social transformation that promotes not only academic content in students, but also those of an ethic and citizen[1] nature [1] [2]. Citizenship is related to a common life that is structured around democratic principles and practices, in other words, a shared living founded on the pursuit of justice and better conditions for all, amongst other things [3].

The university invests on a cohesive education, which refers to the strengthening of a critical, participative, supportive and ethical personality, which should be capable of interacting with the environment [4]. Related to this, the World Declaration on Higher Level Education in the 21st century recognizes that:

"Higher education should reinforce its role of service to society, especially its activities aimed at eliminating poverty, intolerance, violence, illiteracy, hunger, environmental degradation and disease, mainly through an inter-disciplinary and transdisciplinary approach in the analysis of problems and issues." [5]

In this context, being a socially responsible institution, the Morelos State Autonomous University (UAEM) executes a conscience-creating[2] model of extension that aims to directly impact the diverse communities of the State of Morelos, which in turn has an effect on its problems and needs. According to Aguado [7], social service is defined as "all social action that is organized and positively contributes to the development of a determined group, in a way that said action is inscribed un a practice that is structured and that also creates structure"; which is about useful actions that act in favor of others.

The compulsory nature of social service in México surges in the frame of the Mexican Revolution, when the Constitution written in 1910 included in its article 5 that social service must be compulsory and that "the law determines in each State, which professionals that need a degree to exercise, the conditions that must be met to obtain it and the authorities by whom it must be issued" [8]. In said light, the body of ruling that regulates the exercise of professions states in its article 55 that "the planning of professional preparation, according to the nature of each profession and the social needs that it tries to satisfy, will require that the students of the professions that are referred to in this Law, as a prerequisite in obtaining a degree, must exercise their social service during a period no less than six months nor more than two years" [8].

The UAEM regulation for Social Service, in its article number 3 stipulates that "social service is understood as the professional service that is mandatory and temporal through which the student is integrated into society, is able to identify its problems and collaborates in the resolution of these, so as to have him or her

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[1]Academic contents contribute to understanding and giving sense to reality, whilst civic abilities (sense of injustice, listening abilities, etc.) allow us to navigate through social life [3].
[2]Ortiz & Morales [6] refers to, while the XXIst century began, four models of extention were identified: altruistic, informational, conscience-creating and business-vinculating.

participate in the development of his or her country". According to this regulation, the main objective of the service is to "generate in the student and increase of conscience, solidarity, and commitment to the community; and in particular, connect him or her with the environment and social setting where professional practice takes place, resulting in a social service that is an act of reciprocity and commitment with social sectors that allow the integration of students" [9].

Unfortunately, "liberating"[3] one's social service is a prerequisite to obtaining one's degree, and is usually perceived—and lived—as an administrative requisite, both by students and by the institutions themselves. This perception has an impact in their performance, allocating the condition of "prerequisite" higher than "retributing to society", which may be one of the reasons of having, in many settings, students that do not engage their setting in a positive way; in fact, students that have yet to begin their service manifest negative attitudes towards it based on the experience of other fellow students, whose experienced consisted in Xeroxing documents or fetching lunches. Cano [7] refers to social service as having a future whilst being framed in the body or ruling as "mandatory", however, if the vision of the service itself is not modified, the commitment to society it is supposed to generate remains vastly ignored.

Nowadays we are faced with diverse shifts (ideological, legitimate, etc.), even when the linking of the university with its context generates a social and ideological commitment—particularly in Latin America—in returning to society a part of the benefits that the privileged minority has acquired, and redirected this commitment towards students, fencing campus services and creating policy out of its action [10]. Regardless of the mandatory nature of social service, it is essential to extract its true essence, so as to contribute in a wholesome education for students. To this end, it is necessary to understand the ethical duty acquired by professionals—with or without a degree—towards society. As a fact, half of the population in Mexico is of 26 years of age or less, which creates a country bursting with youth, yet only 15.5%[4] of the individuals between the ages of 15 and 29 have some level of college education or higher (which is reduced to a mere 0.4% of the entire Mexican population) [12]. Studies carried out in Mexico and Latin America agree on the low percentages are a result of the conditions of social inequality prevalent in this zone of the continent. In said contexts, those that have a professional education belong to a select group of members—not to demerit their personal effort—that have had a series of favorable conditions in comparison to others. Having a professional education implies an advantage in diverse areas that others do not have; said advantage is accompanied by a social responsibility inherent in the provision of education through taxes and the flow of resources through an institutional organism, in lieu of the individuals that could not acquire a spot in the selection process and/or the lack of resources to

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[3]If it is true that reality is built through language, we may see that the constant use of the verb "to liberate" while referring to the act of concluding one's social service, it may be that it is then framed in a state of "imprisonment" or "shackling" to which students are subjected (while they also have to endure it).

[4]This is one of the lowest percentages amongst the countries that belong to the OECD [11].

face the hardships of studying. This is where one must retribute a service to society transforms from a requisite—or charity, if you will—to an act of justice where one gives back some of the benefit he or she has obtained from others.

In this way, the objective of inserting students into community intervention projects through their social service does not only respond to a specific issue—in this case, family violence—but also generates a setting where social service is really practiced through participation [13] and not only as assistance, so that the student may experience what he or she has learned in classrooms, so as to evaluate the benefit of working for other and verify his or her transcendence in the social setting in a satisfactory manner [7]. In Martinez's [1] words, there are three ways to learn that which is ethical: through practice, through observation, and through autonomous construction. In this sense, the exercise of social service—a community social service—corresponds to at least one of these.

The experience of social service as it is described as follows, regardless of being focused on family violence, was executed as a wholesome boarding where each student was allowed to, from his or her own particular perspective and area of education, to sum knowledge while being receptive of beliefs in each community. This is how, as a more collateral effect, the exercise was erected as an opportunity to grow and strengthen what was learned in front of a blackboard.

2. Method

2.1. Study Design

This study is of a qualitative-quantitative nature, descriptive and transversal with pre- and post-test measurements to 100 social service students that participated in the project titled "Community intervention to prevent family violence" which was related to knowledge regarding family violence and cultural consensus that gives purpose, barriers and benefits to social service, during all of the year 2015. Sampling was carried out through a non-probabilistic technique [14], choosing students from Schools and Faculties throughout the eastern region of the State of Morelos. For the pre- and post-evaluation, a short questionnaire (**Appendix 1**) regarding knowledge concerning family violence was applied[5], and a set of free listing (**Appendix 2**) that had the purpose of recollecting information about the cultural consensus participants manifested on the purpose, benefits, disadvantages, beneficiaries and expectations of social service. It was also necessary to inquire on demographic information required to profile the sample (**Appendix 1**). After the project was finalized, filmed testimonies were collected from the experience of the students. The change perceived in the skills developed by the students regarding team-work, communication, inter-personal relationships, and positive attitude was evaluated in percentages obtained every three months using the "Program Evaluation Questionnaire" (Spanish version), designed by Garaigordobil [15].

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[5]It should be clarified that this questionnaire was designed just for this intervention and does not have criteria of validity and statistical reliability.

2.2. Description of Participation with the Community by Students

As part of the "Social Service Interdisciplinary Brigades" the project titled "Community Intervention to prevent family violence" was executed through funding from the Professional Formation Support Program, which provided economic resources for transportation and lodging for students. Students from Faculties and Schools such as Psychology, Public Relations, IT and education participated. The selection of students was established through representatives in each academic unit, and then interested individuals were informed and screened. Once selected, the pre-test measurement was carried out.

From the beginning, both lines of the project were emphasized: on the one side, participation with the community to attend a social problem such as family violence, and on the other, strengthening citizenship and social responsibility in students. Hence, the project had as a main objective strengthening the social service program as a model of active participation between students and their communities, promoting a wholesome education and social responsibility in students. For this purpose, it was proposed to intervene in selected communities in the eastern region of the State of Morelos to face the problem of family violence through prevention workshops designed and carried out by the students. The problem itself was selected considering several factors, such as the relevance to the region, social factibility and available time to carry out the project, amongst others. Regardless of the a priori selection of the problem, a diagnostic was carried out to have data that allowed to strengthen the contents of the intervention and an evaluation at the end of operations.

The project was divided in five phases: training of the students, community diagnostics, design of the intervention, execution of the intervention itself, and evaluation of the intervention.

2.2.1. Training of Students

To carry out the training, twelve groups of students were formed according to available schedules, which ended up generating mixed groups regarding professional preparation, which in turn enriched the quality of discussions in each session and promoted the contact amongst fellow students from different areas. Training was centered in three objectives that are presented in separate form for didactic purposes, but in practice were connected as a whole: a) strengthening theoretical knowledge regarding family violence, b) providing methodological tools for each phase of the project, and c) generating reflections regarding community tasks and social responsibility that a university student has with his surroundings. For the first objective, the founding arguments for family violence were discussed [16]; whilst for the second and third objective theoretical elements of community diagnostics were considered [17] [18], community psychology [19], Action-Participation Research [20], the echological model of family violence [21] and participative dynamics [22]; and additionally, the capturing of information through Excel matrixes and the use of Visual Anthropac 1.0 was taught.

Almost at the ending of this stage, work brigades were conformed. Groups of students that would hence work together were arranged, so to speak. Twenty brigades were formed, each of which managed in or around their communities and with the support of project supervisors, a group of individuals that were interested and susceptible to intervention (as an experimental group), and another, with similar characteristics was arranged as a control group. For this end, a non-probabilistic sampling method was carried out, in other words, those individuals that were most available to the students only if they complied with study prerequisites [14]. This allowed to achieve the objectives stated in this paper with the resources available to the project, which also served as a strategy to enhance the probability of adherence to the program and availability of participants during the intervention and during the evaluation phase.

2.2.2. Community Diagnostic
After training, each brigade carried out a diagnostic of their communities under the principles of community diagnostic [17]. For these types of procedures having the community's participation in all of the stages is crucial, because the phenomenon under study is being experienced by the community itself, and its members have most of the information regarding necessities and their solutions. For the purpose of this diagnostic social participation was considered as "…the action carried out by social actors with capability, skill, and opportunity to identify problems, needs, define priorities, and formulate and negotiate its proposals in the perspective of health" [underlined by authors of this paper] [23]. Some limitations were present, which hindered the capacity to adhere to the conceptual frame proposed, such as limited time and resources that were available for the intervention. This was an obstacle to the participation of community members in all stages of the process. However, for educational ends of the students it constituted an important exercise, underlining always that limitations must be explained.

The methodology applied for the diagnostic was qualitative-quantitative. In this manner, observation techniques, field diaries, group consensus and open questions about family dynamics and knowledge regarding family violence (included in the questionnaire) were used. A questionnaire was also used to collect sociodemographic data and knowledge regarding conflict solution. Free listings (included in the questionnaire) were used to inquire the cultural consensus of the group regarding causes, manifestations, and consequences of family violence, as well as preventive actions and usefulness in conflicts.

The sample was comprised of 976 individuals (482 belonged to the experimental group, and 494 to the control group), which were all submitted to the intervention and the evaluation itself.

2.2.3. Design of the Intervention
The results from the diagnostic allowed each brigade to adjust issues in their intervention workshops to emphasize on group requirements, or even, adding issues solicited by the community members.

With the objective of obtaining homogenous interventions, all brigades were instructed to carry out the same model, which was Bronfenbrenner's and Heise's [21] ecological model. Grossomodo, this model has the following characteristics: it recognizes the cultural and institutional roots that underlie the phenomenon, it projects a holistic view of the problem and of the solutions that must be carried out, and lives through the assumption that each person is immersed in a multiplicity of relational levels—individual, familiar, community and social—on a daily basis, where different expressions and dynamics of violence can be produced, and it is held on the analysis of the determinants and risk factors. For the structure of each workshop session, students elaborated ten descriptive cards (one for each session) in which the objectives and specific activities that were to be carried out were detailed. Special care was taken in using participative activity so that reflection of participants was favored.

2.2.4. Intervention Execution

Each brigade initiated its workshops according to the schedule of community members. Every brigade was welcomed and even though some scheduling had to be modified, students were always flexible and willing to reprogram their activities. During the length of the process, a constant supervision of activities was carried out, as well as providing extra assistance if needed. Those brigades that had to work with non-captive audiences had to face the challenge of keeping the assistance of their participants.

2.2.5. Evaluation of the Intervention

While concluding intervention workshops, each brigade applied the questionnaires to the members of their communities (both groups) and information was analyzed with the results of the diagnostic, which allowed to construct a final report. Written and video-recorded testimonies on the experience of the family violence prevention workshop were also collected. It is not the objective of this paper to underline the results of the intervention, but the results that were presented only by the information collected on the students.

2.3. Statistical Methods

For the processing of instruments, Excel matrixes were elaborated where all the information was collected. Percentages and descriptive graphics of the questionnaire on family violence were elaborated. The free listings collected individual opinions that are later analyzed and categorized (calculating Smith's index of relevance) and so, the cultural consensus of the group was known. Even though they are applied in an individual manner, the results express a "group consensus", "cultural agreement" or "cultural domain". This technique is based on the relationship between the order of occurrence of the answers and their frequency [24] [25]. Visual Antrhopac 1.0 was used to calculate Smith's index (in those cases in which the answer was not presented in an occasion, Smith's index of relevance was assumed as zero). Comparative percentages were also generated with the results of Garaigordobil's evaluation questionnaire.

3. Results

During the evaluation diagnostic, surveyed students referred only to the types of physical and psychological violence that were included in their definition of violence; only a few made explicit mention of sexual violence. Afterwards, in the post-test evaluation, students mentioned, additionally to the types of violence already mentioned, economical, sexual, and patrimonial violence, while other conceptions such as violence as an exercise of power were added.

Relative to the causes that provoke family violence, during the pre-test evaluation, the most frequent responses were: lack of information, lack of communication, "machismo", culture and lack of values. During the final evaluation, responses before mentioned were also present, but others were added such as repetition of patterns, low self-esteem, influence of mass media and education (both inside families as well as outside).

Regarding the actions that were useful to diminish family violence within the State, students manifested that intervention projects that inform and raise awareness in society as a whole and don't only focus on individuals that exercise or are victims of violence are needed. Referring to who must assume the responsibility of reducing this type of violence in the State, there was an 11% increase in including every character in society to share responsibility (**Figure 1**), which represented a 3% reduction of the perception that only the government or institutions are responsible.

Figure 2 shows the results of pre- and post-evaluations in relationship to the consensus that gathers around the group of students regarding family violence. Considering the reasons why students must carry out their social services (question 1), important differences were not observed, except for a slight increase in obtaining experience and personal benefits, against a decrease in the category "contribute to the common good". Regarding the benefits of carrying out one's
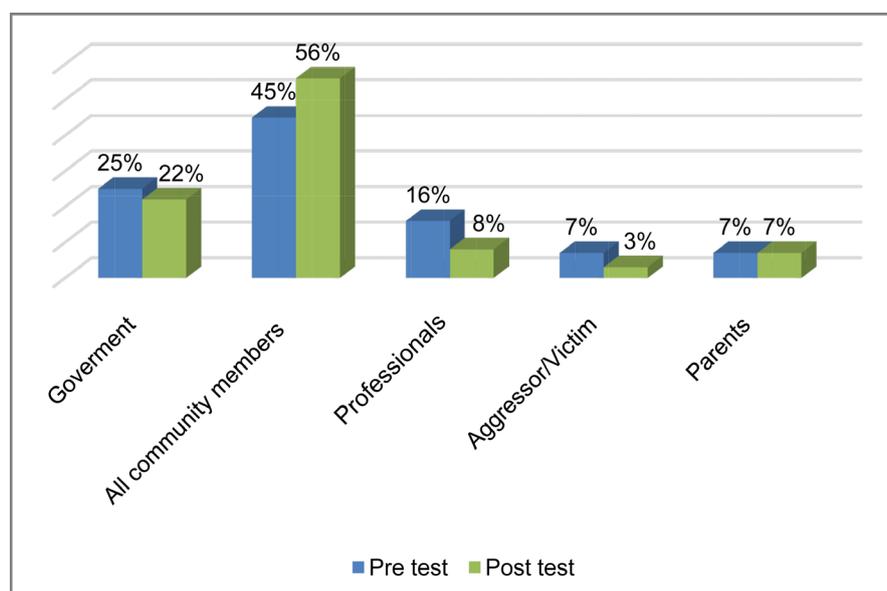

Figure 1. Who should take responsibility to reduce family violence in Morelos?
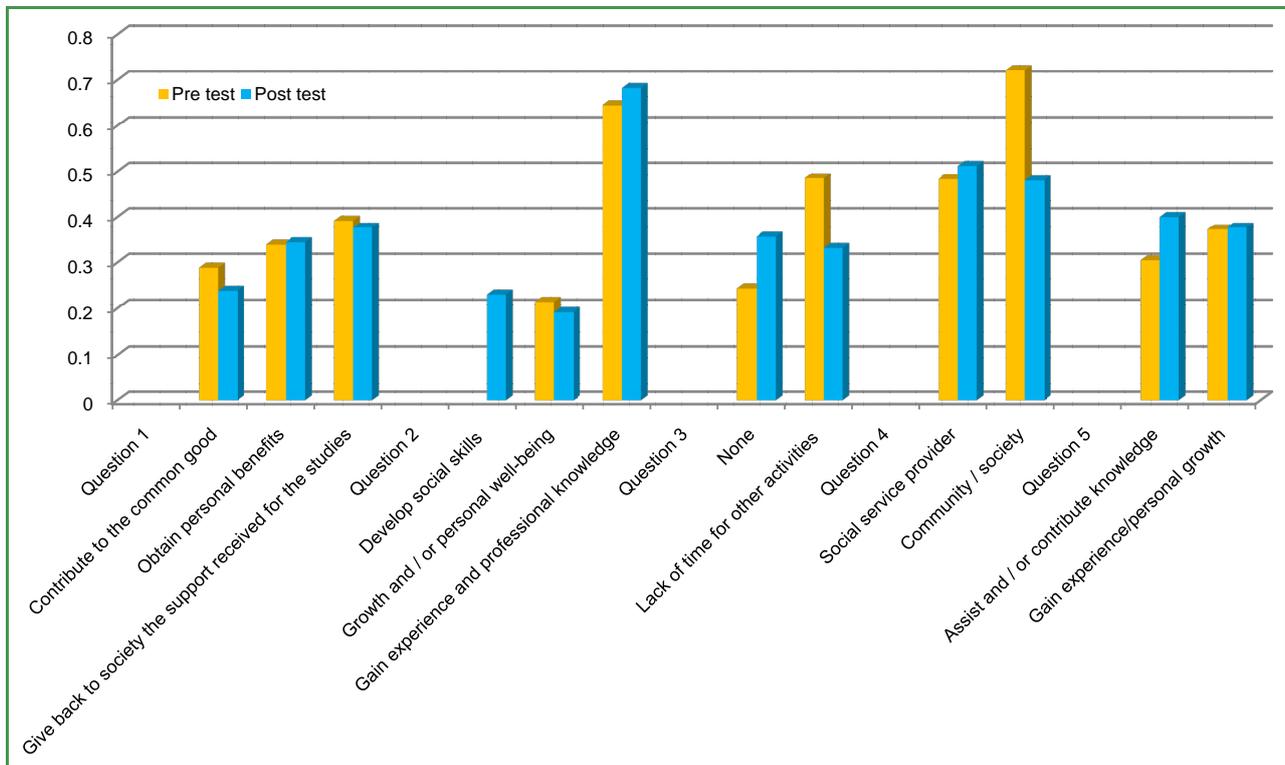
Figure 2. Cultural consensus on family violence: pre-post comparison test.

social service (question 2), a new category referring to developing social skills appeared. Furthermore, the fact of obtaining professional experience as a group consensus referring to the benefits of social service also appeared. Item 3 observed the disadvantages, where an increase in not perceiving any disadvantages appeared, while the perception of wasting time and overlooking other responsibilities were also reduced. The perception of the main beneficiaries (question 4) of the service included the students themselves, as main actors of the service. Item 5 referred to expectations from the service, and there was an important increase in helping and providing knowledge, and the two categories that obtained higher frequencies were related to positive expectations.

For the change perceived in the skills developed by the students, as may be observed in Table 1, six items presented an increase in the post-test evaluation, eleven remained stable and the rest presented a small decrease. Both the second and the third evaluation present higher percentages than the first, which shows that during the service and after ending it, the experience of social service itself generates a more active and positive perception of the skills developed, such as teamwork, communication, work relationships and attitudes.

The development and strengthening of skills in students was presented in each workshop. Those that worked with schoolchildren were presented with the need to heighten their group control and management abilities because of the difficulty of captivating their group's attention and maintain a necessary order among children (at the beginning teacher's support was needed). However, while the workshop was carried on, students were able to earn the trust and cooperation

Table 1. Percentages of perceived change in relation to teamwork, communication, relationship with peers and positive attitude.

Asseveration	Percentage according		
	1st evaluation	2nd evaluation	3rd evaluation
He conocido otras formas de pensar diferentes, otros puntos de vista diferentes al mío en el trascurso del servicio social	8.5	9.5	9.7
He aprendido a debatir sobre problemas o conflictos que se dan entre seres humanos	8.5	9.4	9.4
Coopero más con los demás	9.1	9.4	9.4
He aprendido a reflexionar sobre las causas o situaciones que crean sentimientos (tristeza, rabia, miedo, envidia...)	8.8	9.5	9.5
Reflexiono más sobre las ideas u opiniones que tengo sobre las personas y sobre la realidad que me rodea en general	9.1	9.5	9.5
Escucho más atentamente cuando mis compañeros/as están hablando	9.2	9.5	9.4
Estoy más atento a los sentimientos de los demás	8.6	9.2	9.1
Respeto más las opiniones de otros compañeros/as	9.3	9.6	9.7
Tengo más conductas de ayuda hacia los demás	8.9	9.4	9.3
Expreso más mis opiniones a los demás, me comunico más abiertamente	8.7	9.3	8.9
He hablado con compañeros/as de clase con los que antes casi no hablaba	8.2	9.0	8.9
He aprendido a reconocer actitudes discriminatorias hacia otros seres humanos	8.7	9.3	9.3
Tengo en cuenta otras cosas de las personas además de su apariencia física o su imagen externa	9.2	9.5	9.6
Me atrevo a decir mis opiniones aunque no sean compartidas por el resto de mis compañeros/as de clase	8.6	9.1	9.1
Veo más positivamente a mis compañeros/as	9.0	9.3	9.3
Rechazo menos a los demás	8.9	9.6	9.5
Intervengo más activamente y más positivamente con intención de ayudar cuando otros compañeros/as de clase tienen un problema o conflicto	8.7	9.3	9.1
Participo más en actividades de grupo	8.8	9.3	9.2
Hablo más con los compañeros/as de clase	8.8	9.3	9.2
Me llevo mejor, tengo una relación más positiva con el profesor/a con el que he realizado esta experiencia	8.7	9.2	9.2
Me siento más respetado y escuchado por mis compañeros/as de clase	8.6	9.2	9.2
Me veo más positivamente a mí mismo	9.2	9.7	9.7
He aprendido formas adecuadas de expresar sentimientos como la tristeza, la rabia, el miedo...	8.6	9.3	9.4
Me ofrezco más como voluntario para tareas de responsabilidad del grupo (por ejemplo, hacer de secretario, u otras tareas que necesite el grupo...)	8.2	8.8	8.8
Tengo menos conductas agresivas con mis compañeros/as	8.7	9.3	9.5
Expreso más mis sentimientos en clase	8.2	8.8	8.7
Tengo más amigos/as en clase	8.7	9.0	9.3

from their groups. In fact, some schools have solicited that the workshops carry on for an indefinite time frame.

The experience reported by the students themselves was of a satisfactory quality for everyone, because of the communication and group management skills acquired, and the problems that were solved as they presented themselves (such as restructuring activities to the liking of participants). Most conflicts inside the brigade were resolved also in a satisfactory manner, and most of them by the students without the need of supervisor intervention. Students reported horizontal learning experiences, generating introspection and reflection about the reality and what results from community interaction.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

One of the most important results from this experience was that students made the project their own, while the intervention was carried out. It was not easy to transform their opinion regarding social service, but their attitude towards it changed when they realized that the task was not related to solving hypothetical cases nor carrying out menial office labor. Their attitudes changed in the same measure their commitment increased, their interest was spiked and the enjoyment was increased, regardless of their professional background. Through this experience, some arguments were corroborated [3], that pedagogic conditions linked to learning through experience are created, regardless of the content of said experience. Especially considering carrying out actions that create cooperation experience through reciprocity of equals and the reflection about action to avoid disordered activism or money based activism. The process of reflection started when students were asked to question their own status as "knowledge holders" in the face of others. In this sense, the execution of the diagnostic allowed students to recognize, from the beginning, that other persons had information regarding the issue in discussion, especially if it is part of his or her own reality, and that interpretations made from it vary in function to space, time and individuals.

On the other hand, the gathering of knowledge on family violence was provided at a conceptual level, but also at a shared experience level as well, because students had direct contact with population that had been affected by said problematic issue, which contributed to awareness of it and demythifying some preconceived ideas.

The benefits of carrying out one's social service are: the increase in group consensus regarding the development of social skills was caused by the assignment of students to management tasks regarding spaces and groups, requiring social resources such as socializing, negotiating, and communication. Moreover, even though all brigades were in constant supervision, students were pressed to self-organize and solve their own problems.

One of the most important limitations this study had was the timeframe in which the project was carried out, which caused activities to have a shorter impact across time, nor was it possible to supervise each workshop to its very end.

However, the results are self-evident regarding the increases of knowledge and awareness, and the project regarding student participation was successfully finished.

The challenge is still there: extending the notion of social responsibility and ethics that the University and all of its elements (students, professors, administrative staff, directors, etc.) must walk hand in hand to put these efforts in practice. The will from every actor involved is required to articulate strategies necessary to exercise a social service that is directed towards the community, and is capable of following up on its activities and proposing new challenges. Social service as an activity, guarantees the participation of students in public life [3], and serves as a primordial tool that the University has to give back to society. It also serves as a specific setting that generates learning from other individuals, legitimizing knowledge that every actor in society possesses.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire regarding demographic information and knowledge concerning family violence

I. Ficha de identificación

1. Nombre _____

2. Edad_____años

3. Lugar de nacimiento_____

4. Lugar de residencia_____

5. Carrera_____

6. Sede:

    a. Escuela de Estudios Superiores de Xalostoc

    b. Escuela de Estudios Superiores de Jonacatepec

    c. Escuela de Estudios Superiores de Totolapan

    d. Facultad de Estudios Superiores de Cuautla

e. Otra:_____

7. Semestre_____

5. Además de tus estudios, ¿tienes alguna actividad laboral?

    a. Sí

      ¿Cuál?_____

    b. No

II. Conocimiento sobre el tema de violencia intrafamiliar

9. De acuerdo a lo que sabes, ¿en qué consiste la violencia intrafamiliar?
_____

10. ¿A qué crees que se deba que exista este tipo de violencia?_____
_____

11. ¿Qué crees que hace falta para que disminuir la violencia intrafamiliar en Morelos?_____

12. ¿Quién crees que debería asumir la responsabilidad de llevar a cabo esa(s) acción(es)?_____

Appendix 2. Free listing: cultural consensus about purpose, benefits, disadvantages, beneficiaries and expectations of social service

¿Por qué los universitarios deben hacer el servicio social?
¿Cuáles son los beneficios/ganancias de hacer el servicio social para el universitario?

¿Cuáles son las desventajas de hacer el servicio social para el universitario?
¿Quiénes se benefician con el servicio social que prestan los universitarios?
¿Qué expectativas crees que tienen los universitarios, respecto a hacer el servicio social?