

Social capital in service-learning: Bridging gaps or reinforcing bonds in Latin American elite schools

Ignacio Barrenechea^{a,1}, Ezequiel Gomez Caride^{b,*}

^a Universidad de San Andres, Vito Dumas 284 (1644) Victoria, Buenos Aires, Argentina

^b Universidad de San Andres, Vito Dumas 284, (1644), Victoria, Buenos Aires, Argentina

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Service-learning
Social capital
Bridging
Bonding
Elite schools
Community-based interventions

ABSTRACT

Currently, all around the world societies tend to become more polarized and fragmented. In the educational landscape Service-learning programs (SLP) have been traditionally seen as an instrument to bring together people whose lives are different. In this study, we are interested in exploring to what extent SLP helps link the life experiences of elite students from those of the marginalized communities that are 'served.' The research question that guides this qualitative study is: to what extent do SL programs promote social capital—bridging and bonding? While bridging had to do with the idea of connecting with the other, bonding had to do with the emotional and social ties between the members of a 'similar' group. Data were collected in two different phases. At first, 16 service-learning coordinators from 13 different Latin American countries were interviewed; then, 48 students' reflections were analyzed. The findings of this study reveal that Service-Learning Programs (SLP) in Latin American elite schools primarily develop social cohesion focus on their students' needs and interests, with community voices seldom being heard. To foster more equitable service-learning experiences, a specific understanding of social capital based on the notion of reciprocity is proposed.

The purpose of the article is to critically assess the efficacy and implications of service-learning programs (SLPs) in elite Latin American schools for fostering social capital, with a particular focus on how these programs might enhance social cohesion through bridging the divide between students and marginalized communities. An examination of service-learning programs (SLP) is timely in this era since these types of approaches to experiential education have gained considerable support in different places of the world (Furco, 2002; Kahne et al., 2000; Bringle et al., 2022). Service-learning (SL) effectively brings alive theoretical and conceptual topics covered in classrooms (Kahne and Westheimer, 1996; Kandel Veghazi, 2015). In addition, proponents of SLP argue that students can enhance personal and interpersonal skills very effectively (Furco, 2002). Service-Learning is thought to be an instrument to reduce social fragmentation and instill in both students and local communities that the distinction between 'us' and 'them' was harmful to society (Moiseyenko, 2005). In effect, service-learning is thought to be an instrument to bring together people whose lives are different (McMurray and Niens, 2012; Leeman and Pels, 2006). Several authors have also argued that SLP students can better understand their capacity to make a meaningful contribution to their community and society (Blanca et al.,

2013; Eyler and Giles, 1999; Henderson et al., 2007). In sum, in times of growing populism SL seems a key pedagogy to foster social cohesion (Geier and Hasager, 2020).

The topic of elite schooling has received much attention in the literature. One of the strongest consensus is that the idea of elitism is subjected to specific contexts; elite education is spatially and historically determined (Kenway and Koh, 2015; Rizvi, 2014). Another essential agreement in the literature is that elite schools can choose what audience they want to serve (Kenway and Koh, 2015; Maxwell and Aggleton, 2013; Van Zanten, 2010).

According to Bourdieu, elitist institutions legitimize belongingness to the dominant or ruling class. As Kenway and Koh (2013) explained: "Bourdieu exposes the central role of elite schools (universities) in consecrating France's social hierarchies through what he calls the 'operation of social alchemy'" (p. 274). Twine and Gardener (2013) explained that students who go to elite schools enjoy power privilege. The authors argued that privileged conferred elitist students an invisible power, even to those who benefit from it. Even though this privileged position exists, research has shown that the elite's educators rarely make their students reflect upon their power position. Kennedy and Power

* Correspondant author.

E-mail address: egomezcaride@udesa.edu.ar (E. Gomez Caride).

¹ First Author.

(2014) looked at elite education in Ireland and found that students that attended elite institutions then occupied critical positions of power when becoming adults. Some of these students were at the center of political power, while others became vital stakeholders in the business world, accumulating different capital forms. Kennedy and Power concluded that these elite institutions exacerbated the reproduction of class privilege. They stated that the current configuration of the education system is to condition and institutionalize the expectation concerning the reproduction of class privilege.

Other scholars understood that elite schools were the instruments parents chose to allow their children to belong to particular networks; elite schools became the means to uphold certain social capital types. Kenway and Koh (2013) explained that many Singaporean parents chose schools that were "racially and socially stratified" (p., 279). This stratification meant that specific networks were exclusive only for students who had attended *particular* types of elite schools. However, this choice is reciprocal; schools also choose those families that belong to these privileged groups. Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) explained that "no one arrives in the admissions office of an elite boarding school by accident" (p. 43). In the case of elite schools, sometimes only families with a prior presence in the school can apply to enroll their children.

Waters and Brooks (2015) looked at 30 elite schools in England. One of the most striking conclusions the authors draw from their qualitative study was that "the relationships built within the elite school environment are, somehow, much deeper than normal friendships" (p. 12). The websites of one of the elite boarding schools that Water and Brooks visited explicitly stated as a selling point the 'massive' amount of time that students had to form friendships (i.e., social capital).

There is also a growing body of literature on the intersection between social capital and educational issues (Bernstein, 2000; Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Coleman, 1992; Grenfell and James, 2003, 2000; D'Agostino, 2010). The social capital theory gained popularity in the education field due to authors such as Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1989) in the late 1980s. Then, Putnam (1995) also stimulated interest with his conceptualization of social capital theory in the 1990s.

Even when interest in the concepts of social capital and SL has increased over the years (Campbell, 2000; Tapia, 2007) and), there is no empirical study exploring the relationship between SL and social cohesion through the stimulation of different forms of social capital within elite schools. This inquiry is guided by exploring the extent to which these programs facilitate social cohesion through both bridging—connecting individuals from different social backgrounds—and bonding—strengthening ties within existing groups.

This study is significant for several reasons, most notably due to the empirical gap in the Latin American context. In the current context of polarized societies there is a pressing need for empirical research exploring the relationship between service-learning, social capital, and social cohesion within regions characterized by pronounced economic disparities like Latin America. The region's unique socio-economic landscape offers a critical backdrop for examining how elite educational practices can impact social cohesion and equity, either by reinforcing societal divides or providing pathways for social integration.

Furthermore, the article contributes to a critical examination of elite schooling and its role in relation to social cohesion. By focusing on elite schools, the research delves into how these institutions, through SLPs, may perpetuate class privileges or alternatively, serve as mechanisms for fostering social mobility and cohesion. This nuanced exploration offers insights into the complex dynamics between elite education, social capital, and social cohesion. Additionally, by evaluating service-learning's potential for social integration, the study enriches the discourse on the effectiveness of educational interventions in promoting genuine social engagement. This examination is pivotal in understanding the broader impacts of SLPs on bridging socio-economic divides, thus contributing to the theoretical discussions around social capital in the educational sphere. Lastly, the findings of this research have profound implications for educational policy and practice, especially in terms of

designing SLPs that truly benefit and engage with marginalized communities. By moving beyond the simplistic "us-them" dynamic, this paper aims to inform the creation of more inclusive and community-centered educational programs, thereby providing valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and practitioners interested in leveraging education as a tool for social equity. In sum, this research is set to make a substantial contribution to the fields of education, sociology, and public policy by offering a nuanced analysis of service-learning in elite schooling contexts within Latin America, highlighting its potential as a force for social cohesion and change.

1. Literature review on service-learning programs

Service-learning programs (SLP) as a pedagogical method are "meant to serve a real need of the community, improve the quality of academic learning, and spur the formation of personal values and responsible citizenship" (Nieves Tapia, 2010). SLP is one of the several types of experiential learning strategies that have been increasingly incorporated in K-12 schools worldwide (Hume and Mondal, 2023). Although there are some standard components, each SLP has its desired outcome. Riedel (2002) explained that the SL programs he looked at wanted to promote democratic citizenship by increasing a feeling of civic obligation political. Henderson et al. (2007) evaluated whether mandatory service-learning promoted civic and political engagement. Some SLP are interested in promoting specific relational skills in students. For instance, Westrick (2004) narrated that the SL was intended to promote intercultural sensitivity. Cambridge and Simandiraki (2006) described that SL programs helped students develop positive intergenerational relationships with older people. Lastly, in the study of Wright and Lee (2014), the service-learning program pretended to foster inter-cultural understanding between students and other communities within Chinese society.

Most SLP seems to pursue individual-level outcomes; some programs are interested in organizational outcomes. Organizational outcomes have to do with discovering spaces for cooperation, which would lead to mutual benefit and support. For organizational outcomes to be achieved, there have to be shared responsibilities and benefits between the partnerships' members. For example, Dunne and Edwards (2010) explained that upper-class Filipino students who attended international schools understood their social responsibility better. However, in addition to that, they could develop meaningful community connections. Through these connections, students and community members partnered to improve the living conditions in the marginalized communities. Similarly, Belal (2017) also explained how upper-class students in Egyptian schools also interacted with marginalized communities, which allowed them to reflect on the importance of helping others collectively. Community members and students reflected on social problems and collaborated to design different ways to improve the local community's living conditions.

Lastly, some of the SLPs also seek to promote collective-level outcomes. Nelson et al. (2001) described community outcomes as promoting social change. The empirical studies' service-learning programs implied that high-school students conducted specific activities to impact local communities. Hatziconstantis and Kolympari (2016), Dunne and Edwards (2010), and Belal (2017) explicitly addressed the importance of students' engagement with local communities. Through this engagement, students collaborated in different advocacy campaigns or assisted oppressed groups such as the homeless. Therefore, students could impact the communities they work with through their actions. Similarly, Riedel (2002) also described the role of students in food shelves. Therefore, through the service-learning program, high-school students impacted communities.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for analyzing the impact of service-

learning programs (SLPs) in elite schools on social capital formation integrates the concepts advanced by Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam, providing a comprehensive perspective on how social capital functions and evolves within educational contexts. This framework aims to elucidate the mechanisms through which SLPs can influence social capital among elite students and between these students and marginalized communities.

2.1. Theoretical framework components

Bourdieu's Concept of Social Capital: Bourdieu (1998) defines social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. In this framework, Bourdieu's notion highlights how elite students might leverage SLPs to access or expand their networks, reinforcing their social advantages.

Coleman's Approach to Social Capital: Coleman (1988) broadens the concept by including both individual and community-level outcomes of social capital. He emphasizes the importance of social structures or networks in facilitating certain actions of individuals within the structure. Coleman's perspective is crucial for understanding how SLPs can contribute to or detract from the creation of human capital by promoting pro-social behaviors and reinforcing community norms among students and the communities they serve. One key variable in Coleman's theory is reciprocity, which suggests that a benefit granted today creates an expectation of future repayment. This concept implies an obligation on the part of the recipient, who is expected to reciprocate the favor or support at a later time.

Putnam's distinction between Bridging and Binding in Social Capital: Putnam (1995) introduces a critical differentiation between bridging (inclusive) and bonding (exclusive) social capital. Bridging social capital refers to social networks that connect individuals across diverse social cleavages, fostering wider identity and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital strengthens ties within a homogeneous group. This distinction is crucial for analyzing the dual potential of SLPs in elite schools—either to bridge gaps with marginalized communities or to reinforce existing social boundaries. That said, Leonard, (2004) studied the social capital dynamic in West Belfast through the lens of Putnam classification—bridging/bonding, and problematized Putnam's distinction stating that the moving from bonding to bridging is beset since economic capital plays a key role in the alchemy of the three capitals (economic, social, cultural). A similar critique could arise from Latin America's critical tradition, which emphasizes the primacy of economic capital in driving structural social changes. However, perspectives differ regarding the power of schooling to transform the societal status quo. For instance, Piuggrós (2019) interprets Freire's legacy as affirming the potential of schooling as a political endeavor to reshape society.

The theoretical framework exploring the contributions of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam towards understanding social capital within the context of service-learning programs (SLPs) can be dynamically represented through a layered circular diagram. This visual representation underscores the foundational theories of social capital as proposed by these scholars and their relevance in assessing the impacts of SLPs. Central to this diagram is the inner circle, which encapsulates Bourdieu's perspective on individual-level outcomes, particularly focusing on the significance of networks and resources. Encircling this core, the middle layer draws attention to Coleman's insights, emphasizing the role of pro-social behaviors and community norms in transitioning from individual benefits to community-level outcomes. The outermost layer of the diagram broadens the scope to include Putnam's examination of bridging and bonding social capital, illustrating the capacity of SLPs to generate wider societal impacts. The diagram is further enriched with arrows emanating from the center towards the periphery and interconnecting the layers, symbolizing the interplay and cumulative influence of these concepts in fostering social capital through SLPs. Through this layered approach, the diagram accentuates the evolution of social

capital from the microlevel of individual engagement to the macro level of societal integration, offering a comprehensive view of the theoretical underpinnings that guide the analysis of service-learning's effects on social capital formation.

2.2. Integration of theories and Latin American context

Latin America with the Sub/Saharan Africa remains the most unequal region in the world having significantly higher income inequality than its degree of development would predict (Gasparini and Cruces, 2022). That said, Latin America also has unique pedagogical traditions. Paulo Freire developed an institutional critique of the educational system—banking model—but most importantly he made an epistemological redefinition of the pedagogical subject. The previous knowledge of the student was recognized as relevant, redefining the traditional relationship between teacher and student (Piuggrós, 2005). In line with this "new" role of the student, SLP emphasizes active student involvement in every stage of the educational project (Tapia, 2016). Hence, in the unique educational and social environment of Latin American elite schools, SLPs present a pivotal opportunity for engaging students from high socio-economic backgrounds with marginalized communities. This engagement, as framed by Bourdieu's theory, suggests that elite students might initially participate in SLPs to fulfill academic requirements, yet the potential for genuine social cohesion through these programs is significant. These interactions, if they evolve into sustained relationships and mutual recognition, can extend the students' social networks beyond their immediate socio-economic class, reflecting Bourdieu's emphasis on the power of durable networks. Coleman's approach, focusing on the impact of social structures and norms, further deepens our understanding by suggesting that the success of SLPs in fostering a sense of community and pro-social behaviors among students and across communities hinges on these programs' design and implementation. Moreover, the application of Putnam's differentiation between bridging and bonding social capital is especially pertinent in examining whether SLPs facilitate meaningful connections that transcend cultural and socio-economic divides or, conversely, solidify existing social boundaries.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study's methodology and analysis are intrinsically informed by this theoretical backdrop. By selecting service-learning coordinators for interviews and analyzing students' reflections on their SLP experiences, the research design is poised to capture the multifaceted process of social capital formation. The interviews with coordinators aim to shed light on the intended structural dynamics of SLPs, while the students' reflections offer a window into the actualized social impacts of these interactions. This approach not only aligns with Coleman's and Bourdieu's theories by emphasizing the importance of social structures and individual networks in the formation of social capital but also allows for an in-depth exploration of Putnam's bridging and bonding social capital through the lived experiences of participants.

This qualitative research design consisted of two main phases. In the first phase of the research project, we interviewed 16 service-learning coordinators in Latin American elite schools. This first phase aimed to learn about the SLP, knowing the intended outcomes and their experience coordinating groups of elite students. Secondly, we wanted to include students' voices in this research design. Therefore, we asked service-learning coordinators to share with me students' reflections. In total, we analyzed 48 student reflections.

3.2. Sampling, biases and limitations

This study employed convenience and snowball sampling methods to

select service-learning coordinators, starting with two coordinators met at an academic conference in 2017. While practical given the geographical dispersion across Latin America, this approach introduced potential selection bias, as it may not fully represent the diversity of service-learning experiences. The indirect collection of students' reflections, facilitated by coordinators, also posed a bias risk, as coordinators might have selected more positive reflections.

Despite these limitations, the study included participants from 13 countries, mitigating homogeneity risks. Additionally, flexible interview guides and rigorous coding strategies helped to ensure depth in data analysis, compensating for the non-random sampling methods and enhancing the credibility of the findings. Although biases are acknowledged, the study's qualitative approach provides meaningful insights into service-learning experiences across Latin American elite schools.

3.3. Participants

The participants in the Service-Learning Programs (SLP) came from 11 countries in South and Central America, with two participants each working in Argentina, Brazil, and Ecuador, and one participant from each of the following countries: Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Puerto Rico, and Uruguay. All coordinators worked in Latin American schools; they described the population they served as middle but primarily upper class. They all identified themselves as middle-class. In the Appendix, [Table 1](#) indicates the fictional name of all 16 interviewees, the country where they work, and the main characteristics of the SLP they chose to discuss with us. Regarding the students who wrote the reflections that we analyzed, they were all middle to upper-class year 11 and year 12 students. They completed a service-learning project in an elite school in Latin America.

3.4. Interview guide

We carried out 16 interviews. All interviews were carried out virtually as participants were distributed in 13 different countries in Latin America. We used an interview guide. Nonetheless, we treated this interview guide as a flexible tool that could be revised as the different interviews progressed ([Charmaz, 2014](#)). Even though we left some room for spontaneity, the interview guide prevented us from derailing from the study's focus ([Charmaz, 2014](#), p. 64). The question guide consisted of broad, open-ended, and non-judgmental questions.

3.5. Students' reflections

All students were asked to write a 1–2 reflection at the end of their SLP. In these reflections, students described what they did, but most importantly, they reflected on the things they learned throughout their projects. Students were asked to express freely how they have felt during the different activities they carried out. Due to anonymity issues, we asked coordinators not to share reflections that had photographs on them.

3.6. Analysis

To analyze the data from the interviews, we borrowed the approach to coding developed by [Strauss and Corbin \(1997\)](#). We found the authors' coding approach helpful and systematic. According to these authors, there are three main stages in the coding process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The process moved from (a) assignment of individual codes to chunks of data that carried discrete meaning, too (b) grouping of these codes into "axial" codes, and then (c) to statements of thematic convergence across the studies (thematic coding). The coding process resulted in 174 open codes that were then grouped into 12 families; lastly, five clear thematic categories were created during the thematic coding phase. [Fig. 2](#) describes the progression of open codes to the thematic categories.

Table 1
Service-learning coordinators.

Name	Country where they worked	Characteristics of SLP
Eva	Argentina	She works with year 11 and year 12 students. Her upper-class students visit homeless shelters once a week. The SLP begins in March and ends in November.
Matias	Argentina	He works with year 11 and 12 students. His upper-class students work in 'kitchen-groups' that distribute hot meals for two local communities. The SLP lasts for two years.
Keira	Brazil	She works with year 12 students. Her upper-class students volunteer at grassroots organizations once a week. The SLP lasts one school year.
Mariana	Brazil	She works with year 11 students. Her students are upper-class. Most of her students work with local childcare facilities in shanty towns in Sao Paulo. Her students cooperate in teaching the children in these facilities different lessons, usually involving arts and crafts. The SLP lasted one academic year.
Sandra	Chile	She works with year 12 students. Her upper-middle-class students organized fundraising activities for rural communities struck by an earthquake. The SLP lasted six months.
Graciela	Colombia	She works with year 11 and year 12 students. Her middle-class students visit older people's shelters once a week. The SLP is two years long.
Janet	Costa Rica	She works with year 11. Her upper/middle-class students visit places where marginalized communities are fed. The students volunteer in these places twice a week. The SLP is nine months long.
Carlos	Ecuador	He works with year 11 and year 12 students. His students are middle-class and work in the promotion of environmental education. Most raising awareness campaigns take place in marginalized areas. The SLP lasts two school years.
Patricia	Ecuador	She works with year 12 students. Her students are upper-class and cooperate with environmentalist organizations in Quito. The students are usually asked to create videos and other media-related materials distributed in local communities, raising consciousness about the importance of recycling. The SLP lasted two academic years.
Pablo	Guatemala	He works with year 12 students. His students are mostly upper class and work in animal rights advocacy projects. The SLP lasts one school year.
Rachel	Honduras	She works with year 11 and year 12 students. Her upper-class students visit orphanages once a week. The SLP is nine months long.
Erica	Mexico	She works with year 11 and year 12 students. Her upper-class volunteer in local food banks. The SLP lasts two school years.
Tobias	Panamá	He works with year 12 students. His students are upper-class and work in cancer centers. The SLP lasts one school year.
Ruben	Paraguay	He works with year 11 and year 12 students. His students are upper-class and work with local indigenous communities. The SLP lasts two school years.
Celia	Puerto Rico	She works with year 11 and year 12 students. Her upper-class students organized a campaign to help those families severely affected by flooding. The SLP lasted nine months.
Marta	Uruguay	She works with year 11 and year 12 students. Her middle-class students visit kindergartens, where poor children attend. The SLP is two years long.

3.7. Findings

To focus on our research goal, we grouped the different categories of findings under the two main components of the author's conceptualization of social capital: bridging and bonding.

Theoretical Framework of Social Capital in SLPs



Fig. 1. Theoretical Framework.

3.8. Service-learning and the promotion of bridging

According to Putnam (1995), bridging connects or links people whose life experiences are very different. Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010) stated that bridging 'is a basic requirement of a respectful and inclusive society' (p. 119). Some interviewees commented that service-learning programs (SLP) allowed students and community members to develop relationships that endured after the service-learning program had ended. In other cases, other participants explained that while students and community members started having very distant relationships, by the end of the experience, they ended up having a much stronger personal bond.

This section will describe how SLP promoted bridging between students and community members. That is to say, to what extent was the us-them dichotomy blurred? Therefore, we will explore how service-learning programs promoted empathy and the destruction of stereotypes and how these programs also allowed participants to recognize valuable knowledge in the 'other.' After describing how the service-

learning programs fomented bridging, we also refer to some results that suggest possible threats for the construction of these bridges.

3.9. Breaking stereotypes

Some interviewees described that service-learning programs allowed students to break down stereotypes about 'others'. Three SL coordinators, Janet, Eva, and Tobias expressed that SL taught some students that people living in poverty were not blamed for being poor; they came to see poor people as victims of structural inequalities. For instance, Tobias shared that many of his students thought poor people were lazy before SL. Tobias affirmed that "most of my students were born in privilege, but rarely discuss with their parents how they came to enjoy that position... those are questions they never ask". Janet's students also expressed that they had also thought that poor people somehow chose to be like that and did nothing to 'improve.' As Janet further narrated: "Most of my students thought that poor children chose not to study... they thought these children freely preferred to work to have money for their 'vices'".

Eva shared that when she met with her students after visiting shelters for homeless people, some of her students broke into tears and somehow blamed themselves for enjoying a privileged position. For Eva, this meant that her students understood that marginalized individuals are oppressed by structural inequalities they cannot combat. According to her, "SL allowed them to open their eyes... these children have never experienced hunger... they do not know what it takes to sleep on the streets; they take most of the things for granted".

Graciela's students visited older people living in publicly administered shelters. As Graciela explained, most of these older people are poor and rarely visit friends or family. When Graciela proposed that her students visit these shelters as part of the SL program, most of them resisted. Graciela explained that most of the students felt that older adults were boring and had nothing in common. Nonetheless, Graciela affirmed that one of her students' most exciting lessons was realizing they shared common interests with the older adults in the intergenerational program. One of the students wrote in one of the reflections: "I realized I had so much to learn from some of the older people I visited. They taught me so many things in the kindest possible manner; sometimes, they were even funny!" Similarly, Graciela said that some of her students enjoyed sharing jokes with older people.

Nonetheless, according to some of the interviewees SLP also posed threats to eliminating the us-them distinction. On the one hand, Pablo and Tobias expressed that the relationships generated through service-learning programs were sometimes too paternalistic. These two participants manifested a concern towards service-learning programs that were heavily based on charity, usually giving money to the poor -. Similarly, Ruben and Marta considered that SLP was sometimes

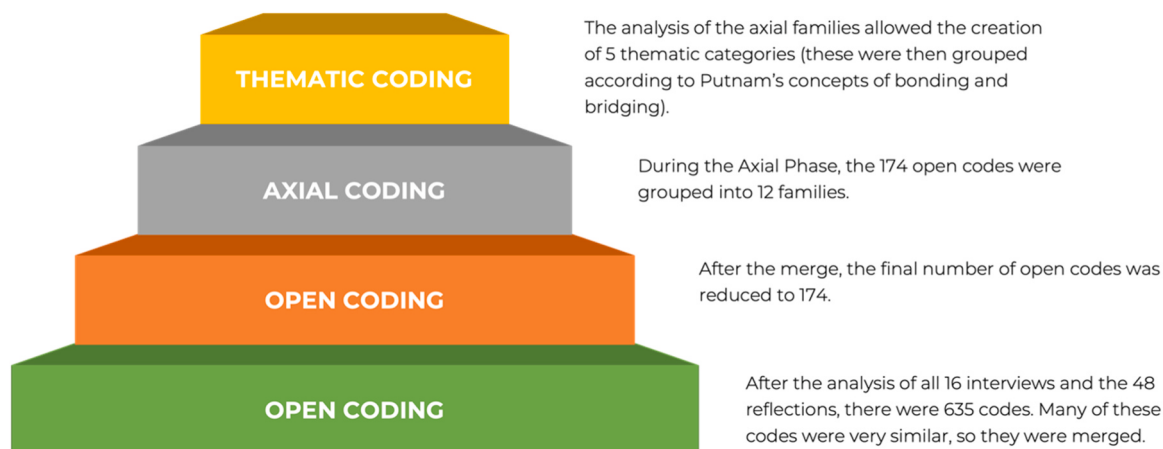


Fig. 2. Coding Pyramid.

problematic because, rather than genuinely engaging in a relationship of equals, students still perceived themselves as the saviors of the oppressed and marginalized community members. Ruben indicated, "Sure, their eyes were open... They realized they have more than others, but it also made them feel they had more power over 'them'". Marta also sustained that, leaving aside all good intentions, she worried that her students felt 'pity' for marginalized individuals yet failed to see the things they all had in common. Rachel claimed, "they learned that poor people were not bad, but they rarely see in them something valuable... my students feel they are different... perhaps they are, I do not know!". In fact, this is something that rose very clearly from students' reflections. For instance, one of the students that visited a kindergarten that served students from marginalized areas wrote: "I can't imagine what it might be like for them, once we leave. All the cakes and snacks we brought to them, must be something they only eat when we visit them!".

3.10. Empathy

The destruction of stereotypes allowed many of the students that took part in the service-learning programs to develop more empathy towards the community members with whom they worked. Some of the participants included in this study highlighted that one of the most relevant results of the SLP had to do with the promotion of civic values and a better understanding of the hardships that other people experience. Rachel, one of the SL coordinators, explained that the students understood that we all have a shared responsibility of protecting those in need through SL. As Rachel further explained, some of her students were first devastated when they visited orphanages; but, after the sadness disappeared, they sought ways of trying to make their voice heard. A group of six students wrote letters to members of congress, though they did not hear back from officials. In one of the reflections one of the students copied part of the letters they had sent: "These kids need us, and we are also responsible for all the things the suffer. You and me, everyone!". Nonetheless, even when the letters did not cause social change, Rachel felt that she had already accomplished something. She had raised awareness of social problems and had already motivated her students to make a difference.

Pablo stated that some of his students launched campaigns to advocate for animal rights. As Pablo reflected, "through their service to animal shelters, I, as an adult, became aware of the importance of protecting our animals. Now, when I walk in the streets and see an abandoned dog, I remember my students' campaigns... I have learned from them". In essence, according to some of the participants, SL allowed students to become aware of social inequalities and helped raise consciousness about the importance of advocating for social justice.

Within the realm of promoting civic values, some participants expressed that the students' solidarity and social responsibility increased through SL. Erica remembered that one of her students expressed that after one of the visits to a local food bank, one of her students said, "I am changed." Erica admitted she was skeptical about whether the student had been truly changed. However, some weeks later, she learned that this student volunteered at the food bank during her spare time. For Erica, this was an indication that the SL had had a more significant impact on her student than she expected.

Interestingly, Sandra also affirmed that some of her students began having a more active role in local churches after their experience in SL. Nonetheless, Sandra indicated that only six or seven out of her 119 students did this. Pablo also said that even when SL may have long-term effects on students, he estimates this happens in nearly 10 % of the students.

3.11. Construction of knowledge about society

Service-Learning allowed students and community members to understand that to promote social change, they had to combine the different types of expert knowledge. Keira explained that when visiting

grassroots organizations, students understood that community members were better prepared to find solutions to the problems they experienced. At first, Keira explained, many of her students, when first visiting grassroots organizations, saw themselves as experts or saviors of marginalized communities: "Most of my students would come to me with a list of bullets with action steps to cure poor people's ills... Sometimes I simply smiled at them, but deep inside, it frightened me... they thought they knew best". Keira expressed that many of her students thought, before SL, that because they had more formal education than many of the community members they served, they simply knew better. Nonetheless, SL helped these students understand that although underprivileged and oppressed, community members had valuable knowledge essential for improving their own lives. In one of the reflections we read: "Why do we try to solve other people's problems, when we know nothing about them? Who do we think we are? This pisses me off!"

Erica and Marta also expressed that one of the most valuable outcomes of the SL experience was seeing how students and community members agreed on the structural inequities that disenfranchised communities faced through a dialogic approach. They also learned that solving these inequities was better addressed when a collective and reflective brainstorming process was carried out. In this process, Marta affirmed, "the artificial boundaries that initially separated students from community members were effaced."

3.12. Potential threats to bridging

According to some interviewees, SLP also posed threats to eliminating the us-them distinction. On the one hand, Pablo and Tobias expressed that the relationships generated through service-learning programs are sometimes too paternalistic. These two participants manifested a concern towards service-learning programs that were heavily based on charity – usually in the form of giving money to the poor -. Similarly, Ruben and Marta sometimes considered SLP problematic because students still conceived themselves as the saviors of the oppressed and marginalized community members rather than genuinely engaging in a relationship of equals.

Sandra and Janet warned about how students' engagement in service-learning programs affected the formation of enduring relationships between them and community members. According to them, although at the beginning, most students showed a willingness to connect and link their lived experiences to those of 'other' groups of people, this tended to decline as the program developed. Sandra expressed that this lack of 'sustained' engagement inhibited the elimination of the us-them distinction in the long run. However, it is essential to point out that none of the participants conducted follow-up interviews with their students once they graduated. Hence, whether relationships endured or not, in the long run, is something the participants did not know.

3.13. Service-learning and the promotion of bonding

Bonding had to do with the emotional and social ties between the members of a 'similar' group. Therefore, unlike bridging, bonding has to do with solidifying the bond between individuals belonging to one given group. The following categories describe how SL promoted different forms of bonding within elite students.

3.14. Collaboration skills and the formation of networks

According to several participants, SL allowed students to develop collaboration skills. Celia and Rachel explained that students manifested in their reflection essays how they had developed teamwork skills and a sense of fellowship. In one of the reflections, a student wrote:

Visiting the kitchens with my friends was a memorable experience. I will never forget our faces the first days we arrived at that place. We met a lady named Lucía [fictional name added by author]. She told us that the only way to do good is to work together. She was right! During our

visits, I became friends with boys and girls that I had shared many classes with but had never spoken to!

Some of Celia's students went a step further and even considered that that sense of fellowship implied forming a support group for the future. One student working in a shantytown in Sao Paulo explained: "Service-learning taught us that we have a lot of privileged. In the future, those of us that have those privileges must work together to make a difference". Carlos's students engaged in SLP-promoted environmental education in their local community. In the interview, Carlos affirmed that their students felt that "because global warming was a worldwide phenomenon, they had learned to cooperate and develop teamwork skills." That is to say, according to Carlos, his students' environmental issues were massive and therefore required joint efforts. One of Carlos' students wrote in her reflection: "Sometimes we think that global warming is something that will not affect us; we are wrong! If we don't do something to save the world, together, we will lose our home!".

In addition, Celia and Pablo explained that SL significantly increased students' collaboration and group-work skills. According to them, some students discovered leadership skills they had not recognized before the SLP.

3.15. Empowerment as actors of social change

Rappaport suggests that empowerment is "a process, a mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs" (Rappaport, 1987, p. 122). Many of the interviewees expressed that the SLP allowed them to understand that because they could become actors of change.

Celia and Sandra's students' SLP raised funds for victims of natural disasters. In the case of Celia, students collected non-perishable food items and blankets for families whose houses had been flooded after intensive rain in a marginalized area. Sandra's students raised funds for local rural areas struck by a major earthquake. Sandra expressed that some of her students felt that "they could influence the lives of others." Similarly, Celia shared that her students felt that "if they wanted to, they could help those in need." One of Sandra's students wrote on her reflection:

I am finishing high school soon. I don't know what I am going to study next, but because of service learning, I know I want to do something to help people. After helping so many people through our work with my friends and Sandra, I now know that I can do something to help people that need me. Definitely, I can make a difference; I didn't know that before.

Marta expressed that she shared fragments of Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed with her students. She said she did that because she wanted to 'conscientize' her students about their ability to make a difference. Marta described that when visiting poor kindergartens, the students were able to reflect on their position of power. Rather than disheartening them, Marta explained that many of these students realized that they could use that power to improve the lives of 'others'; students became aware of their ability to impact others.

Other participants manifested that SLP had a positive impact on the different intrapersonal skills of the students. For instance, Pablo expressed that many of his students increased their self-esteem and trusted more in their judgment. Pablo affirmed that "students felt good about themselves and learned much more about themselves, which lead to personal growth." Ruben, whose students worked with LGBTQ organizations, claimed that "SL acted as a catalyst to stimulate in students the belief that, if they wanted to, they could impact the formation of social and cultural norms." Ruben remembered how one of the students was very proud because she could help her parents, who were very devout Catholics, understand the importance of respecting the sexual orientation of everyone. Ruben said that that student felt that she had changed her house's cultural norms.

4. Discussion

The nuanced exploration of service-learning programs (SLPs) within elite educational institutions, reveals intricate dynamics of social capital, power and privilege. This analysis extends to the operationalization of social capital within these programs, uncovering a tendency towards reinforcing existing social hierarchies present in the elite schools rather than dismantling them. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, elite schools invest significant resources in fostering social relationships among their students, based on the assumption that these strong bonds will later evolve into productive social capital. The empirical findings of this study suggest that contrary to the transformative potential attributed to SLPs, their execution might lean towards fostering bonding social capital among students from elite backgrounds aligning with one of the institutional goals of the elite schools. We aim to move the discussion from a dichotomic trap. Both dimensions of social capital are playing out in the service-learning experiences of elite students. However, the emphasis on the bonding phenomenon might potentially exacerbate the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy, by solidifying networks within privileged groups rather than creating bridges to diverse communities.

Bourdieu's (1989) notion of social capital, characterized by the accumulation and leveraging of networks for socioeconomic advantage, appears to be inadvertently bolstered through SLPs in elite schools. These programs, while ostensibly designed to engender social awareness and engagement, often culminate in strengthening the bonds among the elite. The emphasis on cultivating leadership, critical thinking, and other competencies within elite student cohorts, as lauded outcomes of SLPs, further underscores this inclination. While these skills are undoubtedly valuable, their prioritization often overshadows the programs' potential to foster community-level outcomes and promote social integration across disparate social groups. One way to shed light upon this phenomenon is by relating to the notion of reciprocity which is critical to social capital. As Coleman pointed out, reciprocity is a key norm in the social capital construct. However, in the SLP analysed the expectation of reciprocity is really weak. Certainly the odds that older people living in publicly administered shelters repaid the good to the elite students is close to zero. Hence, the question that emerges is to what extent it is possible to frame bridging relationships when their possible reciprocity is so weak.

In this light, the theoretical framework's articulation of bridging social capital, as expounded by Putnam (1995), reveals a challenge in the current implementation of SLPs. The capacity of these programs to facilitate connections across diverse social cleavages is underutilized, with implications for social cohesion and equity that warrant critical reflection. The transformative agenda posited by Freire, advocating for a critical consciousness that empowers individuals to challenge and reshape oppressive structures, seems diluted in practice. The focus on individual and interpersonal skill development within the elite, fails to actualize the envisioned societal change. This approach aligns with empowerment theory, emphasizing collaborative processes and equitable partnerships as means to enable communities to gain control over their lives but somehow leaving behind more ambitious goals related to contributing actively to societal restructuring.

This discussion calls for a reevaluation of the objectives and methodologies of SLPs within elite educational contexts. A paradigm shift toward more equitable, inclusive, and reciprocal models of service-learning is essential. Such models should not only focus on developing the personal and leadership skills of elite students but also prioritize bridging social capital and fostering genuine community engagement and social transformation. One potential approach to fostering reciprocity through SLPs is to focus on the commonalities between the two groups in service-learning programs, such as shared notions of citizenship, humanity, and ecological challenges. These concepts—humanity, citizenship, and ecology—serve as both symbolic and material spaces that can connect elite students with low-income communities. On a more practical level, specific practices could include collaboratively

establishing shared objectives that transcend the "us-them" dichotomy, fostering a sense of mutual investment in the project's success. Additionally, sessions where community members teach elite students their strengths, culture, and values can create opportunities for meaningful dialogue and learning. By bridging these divides, SLPs can move beyond traditional hierarchies and develop integration rooted in respect, shared responsibility, and a commitment to mutual growth.

Incorporating these perspectives, a comprehensive framework for reimagining SLPs within elite schools emerges, advocating for a holistic approach that balances skill development with the imperative of social cohesion. By fostering critical engagement, collaborative problem-solving, and reciprocal learning between students and community members, SLPs can transcend the limitations of current practice. This reimagined approach promises not only to bridge the divide between disparate social groups but also to contribute significantly to the co-creation of a more equitable and inclusive society.

In sum, we do not propose necessarily reducing the bonding effect of SLP but increasing the bridging dimension by promoting inclusive social capital and community-level outcomes. By doing so, educators and policymakers can leverage SLPs as powerful catalysts for social equity and change. This transformation is essential for unlocking the full potential of service-learning to bridge the persistent divides in Latin American societies, paving the way for a more just and integrated world.

5. Conclusion

This investigation into service-learning programs (SLPs) within elite Latin American schools aimed to scrutinize their capacity to foster bridging and bonding social capital, as delineated by social capital theory. Through this lens, our study has not only illuminated the commendable intentions and beneficial skill developments attributed to SLPs but has also critically examined their broader social impact, particularly in terms of fostering social integration and addressing socio-economic divides. In doing so, we acknowledge the limitation of not having had the opportunity to interview low-income organizations to gain insight into their experiences and challenges with SLP. Echoing the concerns raised in our research question, the findings reveal a complex landscape where SLPs, while successful in enhancing personal and interpersonal skills among elite students, often fall short in achieving their potential to bridge the socio-economic chasms. Despite the altruistic motivations and the cultivation of valuable competencies such as leadership and critical thinking, these programs primarily foster bonding within the elite student cohort, with limited evidence of effective bridging to marginalized communities. This tendency not only maintains but could potentially exacerbate existing social divides, underscoring a critical gap between the aspirational goals of SLPs and their practical implementation.

Addressing this critical gap necessitates actionable strategies. Firstly, engaging in co-design with communities is essential. Schools must establish participatory design processes that include representatives from local marginalized communities, ensuring that the projects are based upon certain reciprocity norms. Additionally, the implementation of reflective practices based upon the notion of reciprocity between actors is crucial. Encouraging students to engage in critical reflection before, during, and after their service-learning experiences can foster an understanding equality able to transcend socio-economic contexts. Cultivating long-term partnerships with community organizations rather than pursuing short-term projects can lead to deeper engagement and sustainable impact. Integrating interdisciplinary learning into SLPs allows students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world challenges, enhancing both academic learning and understanding of complex social issues. Moreover, fostering inclusivity and diversity within these programs by actively seeking diverse voices and perspectives ensures relevance and accessibility for all participants. Lastly, future research should explore ways of measuring and sharing the impact of SLPs' bridging dimension through well-defined metrics and regular evaluations. This

research can help foster best practices across the broader educational and policymaking communities. In light of these strategies, we advocate for a conscientious reevaluation of SLPs within elite schools in Latin America. Our findings contribute to filling the empirical gap in understanding the complex interplay between service-learning, social capital, and social cohesion in regions marked by pronounced economic disparities. Moving forward, educators, policymakers, and practitioners must heed the lessons learned from this study, reimagining service-learning as a robust mechanism for social integration and equity. By embracing these challenges, we can harness the full potential of education as a transformative force, capable of bridging the divides that fragment our societies and paving the way for a more equitable and cohesive society.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ignacio Barrenechea: Project administration, Methodology. **Gomez Caride Ezequiel:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT-4 only in order to improve the language and readability. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

References

- Belal, S., 2017. Participating in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme: Developing international mindedness and engagement with local communities. *J. Res. Int. Educ.* 16 (1), 18–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240917702789>.
- Bernstein, B.B., 2000. *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control, and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique*. Rowman & Littlefield. Vol. 5.
- Blanca, N., Lombardi, G., Rodriguez, M.A., 2013. El servicio comunitario en la Facultad de Ciencias de la Universidad Central de Venezuela y su papel en la formación de capital social. *Análisis de dos sub-proyectos*. *Rev. @ Serv.* (1), 10–35.
- Bourdieu, P., 1989. Social space and symbolic power. *Sociol. Theory* 7 (1), 14–25.
- Bringle, R.G., Santos Rego, M.A., Regueiro, B., 2022. Editorial: Service learning, educational innovation and social transformation. *Front. Educ.* 6, 818660. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.818660>.
- Bryk, A., Schneider, B., 2002. *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Cambridge, J., Simandiraki, A., 2006. Interactive intergenerational learning in the context of CAS in the IB Diploma Programme: A UK case study. *J. Res. Int. Educ.* 5 (3), 347–366. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240906069463>.
- Campbell, D.E., 2000. Social Capital and Service Learning. In: *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 33, pp. 641–645. <https://doi.org/10.2307/420872>.
- Charmaz, K., 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. Sage Publications, London.
- Coleman, J.S., 1988. Social capital in the creation of human capital. *Am. J. Sociol.* 94, S95–S120.
- Coleman, J.S., 1992. Some points on choice in education. *Sociol. Educ.* 65 (4), 260–262.
- D'Agostino, M.J., 2010. Measuring social capital as an outcome of service-learning. *Innov. High. Educ.* 35 (5), 313–328.
- Dunne, S., Edwards, J., 2010. International schools as sites of social change. *Journal of Research in International Education* 9 (1), 24–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240909356716>.
- Eyler, J., Giles Jr, D.E., 1999. *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. Jossey-Bass, Inc. 350 Sansome St., San Francisco. CA 94104.
- Furco, A., 2002. Is service-learning really better than community Service? In: Furco, A., Billig, S.H. (Eds.), *Service-Learning: The Essence of Pedagogy*. Information Age Publishing, Greenwich, CT, p. 25.
- Gasparini, L., & Cruces, G. (2022). The Changing Picture of Inequality in Latin America: Evidence for Three Decades. UNDP. (<https://www.undp.org/latin-america/blog/changing-picture-inequality-latin-america-evidence-three-decades>).
- Gaztambide-Fernández, R., 2009. What Is an Elite Boarding School? *Rev. Educ. Res.* 79 (3), 1090–1128.
- Geier, I., Hasager, U., 2020. Do service learning and active-citizenship learning support our students to live a culture of democracy? *Front. Educ.* 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.606326>.
- Grenfell, M., James, D., 2003. *Bourdieu and Education: Acts of Practical Theory*. Routledge.
- Hatziconstantis, C., Kolympari, T., 2016. Student perceptions of Academic Service Learning: Using mixed content analysis to examine the effectiveness of the

- International Baccalaureate Creativity, Action, Service programme. *J. Res. Int. Educ.* 15 (3), 181–195.
- Henderson, A., Brown, S.D., Pancer, S.M., Ellis-Hale, K., 2007. Mandated community service in high school and subsequent civic engagement: the case of the “double cohort” in Ontario, Canada. *J. Youth Adolesc.* 36 (7), 849–860.
- Hume, M., Mondal, O., 2023. Service-learning in an increasingly global context. *INTESOL J.* 20 (1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.18060/27617>.
- Kahne, J., Westheimer, J., 1996. In the service of what? The politics of service-learning. *Phi Delta Kappan* 77 (9), 592.
- Kahne, J., Westheimer, J., Rogers, B., 2000. Service-learning and citizenship in higher education. *Mich. J. Community Serv. Learn.* 42–51.
- Kandel Veghazi, V.N., 2015. Hay algunos que sienten que esto les parte la cabeza. Notas sobre experiencias de aprendizaje-servicio en la universidad de Buenos Aires. *Rev. Int. De Educ. óN. Para. la Justicia Soc.* 2 (2).
- Kennedy, M., & Power, M. (2014). The Smokescreen of meritocracy: Elite Education in Ireland and the reproduction of class privilege. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies.* (<http://www.jceps.com/archives/649>).
- Kenway, J., Koh, A., 2013. The elite school as ‘cognitive machine’ and ‘social paradise’: Developing transnational capitals for the national ‘field of power’. *J. Sociol.* 49 (2-3), 272–290.
- Kenway, J., Koh, A., 2015. Sociological silhouettes of elite schooling. *Br. J. Sociol. Educ.* 36 (1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.977557>.
- Leeman, Y., Pels, T., 2006. Citizenship Education in the Dutch Multiethnic Context. *Eur. Educ.* 38 (2), 64–75. <https://doi.org/10.2753/EUE1056-4934380205>.
- Maxwell, C., Aggleton, P., 2013. Privilege, Agency and Affect: Understanding the Production and Effects of Action. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- McMurray, A., Niens, U., 2012. Building bridging social capital in a divided society: The role of participatory citizenship education. *Educ., Citizsh. Soc. Justice* 7 (2), 207–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197912440859>.
- Moiseyenko, O., 2005. Education and social cohesion: higher education. *Peabody J. Educ.* 80 (4), 89–104. (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3497054>).
- Nelson, G., Prilleltensky, I., MacGillivray, H., 2001. Building value-based partnerships: Toward solidarity with oppressed groups. *Am. J. Community Psychol.* 29 (5), 649–677.
- Piuggrós, A., 2019. La escuela, plataforma de la patria. CLACSO. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvtwx38q>.
- Puiggrós, A. (2005). De Simón Rodríguez a Paulo Freire: educación para la integración iberoamericana / Adriana Puiggrós. (1. ed.). Convenio Andrés Bello.
- Putnam, R.D., 1995. Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital. *J. Democr.* 6 (1), 65–78. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1995.0002>.
- Rappaport, J., 1987. Terms of empowerment/exemplars of prevention: toward a theory for community psychology. *Am. J. Community Psychol.* 15 (2), 121–148. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00919275>.
- Riedel, E., 2002. The impact of high school community service programs on students’ feelings of civic obligation. *Am. Polit. Res.* 30 (5), 499–527.
- Rizvi, F., 2014. “Old Elite Schools, History and the Construction of a New Imaginary.”. *Glob., Soc., Educ. Spec. Issue: Elite Sch. Glob. Circumst.: N. Concept. Dir. Connect.* 12 (2), 290–308.
- Strauss, A.L., Corbin, J.M. (Eds.), 1997. *Grounded Theory in Practice*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Tapia, M.N., 2007. The Potential Effects of Service-Learning and Community Service in Educational Settings in Latin America. In: *Civic Service Worldwide*. Routledge.
- Tapia, M.N., 2010. Service learning widespread in latin america. *Phi Delta Kappan* 91 (5), 31–32. Retrieved from. (<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/service-learning-widespread-latin-america/docview/218500178/se-2>).
- Tapia, N., 2016. *Inserción curricular del Aprendizaje Servicio en la Educación Superior*. Ediciones Clayss. Buenos Aires.
- Twine, F.W., Gardener, B., 2013. “Introduction.” In *Geographies of Privilege*. In: Twine, F.W., Gardener, B. (Eds.), 1–16. Routledge, London.
- Van Zanten, A., 2010. The Sociology of Elite Education.” In: Apple, M., Ball, S., Gandin (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Education*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York.
- Waters, J., Brooks, R., 2015. ‘The magical operations of separation’: English elite schools’ on-line geographies, internationalisation and functional isolation. *Geoforum* 58, 86–94.
- Westrick, J., 2004. The influence of service-learning on intercultural sensitivity: A quantitative study. *J. Res. Int. Educ.* 3 (3), 277–299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240904047356>.
- Wright, E., Lee, M., 2014. Developing skills for youth in the 21st century: The role of elite International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme schools in China. *Int. Rev. Educ. / Int. Z. Erzieh.* / *Rev. Int. Educ.* 60 (2), 199–216. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24636723>.