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What Students Learned from Visiting Social Organisations and Contact with Vulnerable People

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Abstract

The study examines undergraduate students' learning experience in a community-based research service-learning course. The focus is on the lessons learned from the visit and cooperation with social organisations and from the contact with vulnerable people. We obtained data through qualitative interviews using inductive coding following the specific qualitative content analysis approach proposed by Mayring. The research population consisted of 13 geography students in the bachelor's degree programme at the Ruhr University Bochum, Germany. Despite the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was possible to demonstrate that the experiences positively contributed to character development. Students developed a greater understanding of life realities that differ from their own. The importance of not having prejudices, being tolerant, helping others, and being grateful for one's own life situation were also mentioned as learning effects. In addition, a wide range of theoretical and practical knowledge was gained, including knowledge on how to deal with vulnerable people in daily life and expertise in the structure, local distribution and working methods of social organisations and assistance service providers. Our findings demonstrate that collaboration with social organisations in service-learning or community-based research projects, as well as working with vulnerable groups of people, offers a holistic learning experience and can make an important contribution to value-oriented education.

Keywords: community-based research, learning outcome, service-learning, student

1. Introduction

Experiential learning, such as service-learning and community-based research, or research-based teaching and learning, demonstrates a strong focus on students as learners. The positive learning effect for students extends far beyond the acquisition of subject-specific skills, as has been proven in numerous empirical studies. Eyler et al. (2001) summarised the results of other empirical studies on the effect of service-learning in higher education on students. They pointed out that there are many positive effects, which can be categorised into personal outcomes, social outcomes, learning outcomes, career development, and beneficial effects regarding the

relationship with the institution. Research-based teaching and learning also yield a wide range of learning effects for students in non-subject-specific competence areas, which fall particularly within the area of research competencies (cf. Thiem et al., 2023). The university course we conducted combined various elements of both teaching experiences, community-based research or research-based teaching and learning (see for example Huber & Reinmann, 2019) and service-learning (see for example Furco, 1996). Both teaching formats have become significantly more important due to the shift towards a more student-centred and constructivist approach to teaching in higher education.

In the following, we would like to briefly describe the specific teaching concept of the newly developed course in the bachelor's degree programme in geography, for which the accompanying research was conducted, focusing on the specific learning outcomes achieved by the students. The development and implementation of the university course were financially supported by a funding programme of the Ruhr University Bochum from October 2019 to July 2020 (see Ruhr University Bochum, 2020). It was an elective course in the "study project" module, project-related, with a duration of two semesters and a total workload of 12 credit points. Some of the lessons were seminar-based with group work phases and took place in the seminar room during the first half of the project course. These lessons served primarily as an introduction to the course's topic "social inequality, poverty and housing".

Addressing this issue is particularly relevant in the Ruhr region, in our opinion, a region with a turbulent history and that has undergone economic restructuring since the coal and steel crisis in the 1950s and 1970s (cf. Fuchs, 1992; Wehling, 2022; Keil & Wetterau, 2012). A transformation from a region that was long dominated by a single industry, the coal and steel industry, and was economically powerful, to a region with a declining industry, high unemployment, population decline and the dismantling of infrastructure that is no longer needed (cf. Fuchs, 1992; Keil & Wetterau, 2012) to a now renaturalised and economically diversified region with a focus on the service-driven economy and an increasing importance of the knowledge economy (Kiese, 2019) that nevertheless still has problems to contend with and has not yet quite caught up with the economically successful regions in Germany (Bogumil & Heinze, 2021).

The seminar sessions also covered the theoretical basics of project management and teamwork. The students were introduced to the specific teaching concept. They developed their research ideas in three project groups, which they then worked on in collaboration with partner organisations, three social organisations in the cities of Bochum and Essen in the Ruhr area. To introduce the students to the topic, a social city tour was also organised, led by a former homeless person. Meetings with social organisations and vulnerable individuals were prepared, accompanied, and reflected upon collaboratively. The experienced lecturer provided advisory support for the further project work in the research teams. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was necessary to adapt the course schedule. The course was continued in a purely online setting. Unfortunately, direct face-to-face contact with social organisations and people affected by homelessness was then no longer possible. Our accompanying research study, as presented in this paper, focuses, therefore, on the first part of the course.

Further details on the teaching concept mentioned above will not be provided here; the specifics are presented in the relevant literature and are described in the other published sub-studies of the overall research study on our community-based research service-learning course. Reference is made to these publications again at this point.

This research study aimed to explore the learning outcomes of students, including the knowledge they acquired, the skills and expertise they developed, and the insights they gained, particularly from interacting with vulnerable individuals and exchanging ideas with employees

of social organisations. We believe that the results of our research can be useful for other university lecturers who wish to conduct or implement similarly designed, project-based courses in collaboration with social organisations, focusing on socially relevant issues. In line with the qualitative research paradigm followed, our research questions for this study arose from our teaching practice and the real world, rather than being developed as hypotheses from theory (cf. Marshall & Rossman, 1989). At the same time, we wanted to supplement and expand on the results of other empirical studies with our research.

We investigated the following main research questions in our research study:

Research Question 1: What was learned from the contact/work with so-called vulnerable individuals?

Research Question 2: What was learned from the contact/work with the social organisations?

A review of the literature showed that contact, interpersonal interactions and working with homeless people help students to develop a more nuanced and positive image of vulnerable individuals (Buch & Harden, 2011; Hocking & Lawrence, 2000; Knecht & Martinez, 2009, 2012; Richmond & Noone, 2020; Stolley et al., 2008) and that students gain a deeper understanding of complex societal problems through such learning experiences (Anderson et al., 2023; August-Brady et al., 2013; Copeland et al., 2021; Hocking & Lawrence, 2000; Hughes et al., 2012; Hunt & Swiggum et al., 2007; Lashley, 2007; Phillips, 2012; Pierangeli et al., 2018; Stolley et al., 2008; Williams, 2016). In addition, awareness of people affected by homelessness and poverty or on a more deeper level empathy is raised (Buch & Harden, 2011; Gardner & Emory, 2018; Hocking & Lawrence, 2000; Hughes et al., 2012; Knecht & Martinez, 2009, 2012; Lashley, 2007; Park et al., 2019; Pierangeli et al., 2018; Richmond & Noone, 2020; Williams, 2016), negative preconceptions are reduced and students become aware of existing prejudices (Anderson et al., 2023; August-Brady et al., 2013; Buch & Harden, 2011; Copeland et al., 2021; Hocking & Lawrence, 2000; Hughes et al., 2012; Hunt, 2017; Knecht & Martinez, 2009, 2012; Park et al., 2019; Reeb et al., 2024; Stolley et al., 2008; Williams, 2016) and the ability is developed, not to adopt the prejudices of others and to treat people without prejudices (Civitelli et al., 2021). The experiences gained, discussions held, and direct interactions with those affected also lead to an increased desire to become active, to help and to do something for the homeless and against social injustice in the community (August-Brady et al., 2013; Buch & Harden, 2011; Hocking & Lawrence, 2000; Park et al., 2019; Williams, 2016). In addition, students become aware of their power through service or their later professional influence to act and their ability to bring about change (Buch & Harden, 2011; Gardner & Emory, 2018; Park et al., 2019; Reeb et al., 2024; Williams, 2016) and recognise their privileged position (Hughes et al., 2012; Reeb et al., 2024). The fear of approaching vulnerable people, coming into contact with them and dealing with them also diminishes; students probably feel more comfortable dealing with them (Bittner & Kempchen, 2024b; Gardner & Emory, 2018; Knecht & Martinez, 2009, 2012; Stolley et al., 2008; Williams, 2016). In their empirical study using the APS (Attitudes toward Poverty Scale) and the BRPH (Relationship between Poverty and Health Scale), Proctor et al. (2010) were able to show that advanced students of medicine, of other health-related courses and, in particular, social work students, changed their attitudes for the better by participating in a short experiential learning programme with associated personal contact with people affected by poverty. Additionally, changes in attitudes towards poverty and health were also observed. It should also be emphasised that such holistic learning experiences, with their manifold positive effects on, among other things, the personal development, civic engagement and social behaviour of students, as comprehensively described in the studies cited, also place demands on students and challenge them. Reference

is made here, for example, to Hunt & Swiggum (2007), who, in their qualitative accompanying study of a service-learning project with nursing students working with homeless families, show that the intensive and enlightening experiences, the observations made and the reflection processes are associated with high emotional demands on the students and that building relationships is also associated with difficulties. Civitelli et al. (2021) were able to show that participants in service-learning experiences with marginalised, undocumented migrants and homeless individuals predominantly reported being better able to build relationships and interact with marginalised individuals afterwards.

In the following sections, we will present the research design for the accompanying study, explain the data collection and analysis methods used, and present the study's results. It should be emphasised that RQ 1 primarily refers to homeless people or people who have previously been affected by homelessness. This is due to the fact that two of the three student project groups focused on a research topic related to homelessness. Only one project group with the fewest members chose a research topic with a different focus. However, this group was involved in overarching activities, such as the social city tour for the entire course, and thus had points of contact with the topic of homelessness, despite its different focus.

2. Method

We pursued a qualitative research approach in our study. We were interested in the individual learning experiences and reflections about the learning effects that emerged from our contacts, encounters and conversations with vulnerable individuals, especially homeless or formerly homeless people and employees of social organisations with whom we collaborated as part of the community-based research service-learning course. Our investigation focused on the personal experiences and the personal narratives of the relatively small number of students who participated in the specific university course in the bachelor's degree programme in geography at the Ruhr University Bochum, which we aimed to explore and document in detail. Therefore, a qualitative research approach was appropriate for our investigation (see e.g. Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018; Panke, 2018). The research questions we investigated were not derived from the literature or the current state of research. Instead, the direction of our research work was developed from our personal interest in the learning outcomes achieved by the students through the newly designed university course and how these were achieved (cf. Creswell & Guetterman, 2021).

The investigation of the two research questions was part of a more comprehensive interview study, which was designed as accompanying research for a community-based research service-learning course. The development of the teaching concept for the university course was funded by a teaching grant from Ruhr University Bochum as part of its research-based teaching and learning programme (cf. Ruhr University Bochum, 2020). This provided the necessary resources for developing the course concept and enabled comprehensive accompanying research focusing on various other aspects. The following published sub-studies should be mentioned: the sub-study on diversity learning experiences of the course participants (Bittner & Kempchen, 2024a), the sub-study on students' emotional experiences (Bittner & Kempchen, 2024b), on student motivation (Bittner & Kempchen, 2025) and a sub-study, which offers insights into the composition of course participants and their reasons for deciding to take part in this specific community-based research service-learning course (Bittner & Kempchen, 2024c).

2.1 Study Participants and Setting

The data collection for the qualitative interview study was carried out at the end of the course. All students participating until the end were informed about the study in advance and asked to take part. Participation in the study was voluntary and had no impact on the final examination, which consisted of a final report and a virtual group presentation. Two students chose not to participate, resulting in 13 study participants aged 21 to 27, comprising five males and eight females. The majority of the students came from North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, and were born in this federal state. More detailed information on the composition of the group and the characteristics of the students is available in Bittner and Kempchen (2024c).

2.2 Data Collection

Data were obtained from qualitative interviews. The interviews generated a wealth of qualitative data, covering several thematic areas and thus encompassing the various sub-studies. We developed an interview guideline and followed the recommendations of Helfferich (2011) and Kruse (2007, 2015). The principle of openness described here and the narrative construction of the guiding questions posed were very important for us. The interview guide was developed in four main steps, in accordance with the SPSS method of interview guideline development: collecting questions, checking the question pool against specific criteria, sorting questions, and subsuming or ordering questions (Helfferich, 2011; Kruse, 2007, 2015). The research questions examined in the sub-study presented in this conference paper were covered by two narrative-generating guiding questions in the interview guideline. In addition to these, content-related aspects that were to be covered with the three guiding questions were noted in advance as notes or reminders for the interviewer. Furthermore, we noted maintenance questions that could be asked to keep the narrative flowing and to elicit possible specific follow-up questions (cf. Helfferich, 2011; Kruse, 2007, 2015).

The following two very open guiding questions are relevant:

- What specifically could you derive from the experiences you have had so far with people whose backgrounds and lifestyles are different from your own?
- In the first phase of the project, we visited, among other things, the partner organisations with which we cooperate within the framework of the project or which may be important for our further work. This took place during excursions and personal meetings in small groups, which were prepared in advance. When you think back to these meetings, what did you take away from them, what did you learn? Could you please provide some examples?

Furthermore, a template for a pre- and post-script was developed, allowing for the recording of additional contextual information, such as the conversation situation and the location of the interview. This information can sometimes be very helpful in understanding different communication situations. The interviews, which addressed the topics of the various sub-studies, lasted between 32 and 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted by a student research assistant, an enrolled student in the geography master's degree programme at the Ruhr University Bochum, who had previously received extensive training in conducting qualitative interviews. This should prevent effects arising from power imbalances, such as those that occur in a student-instructor or student-examiner relationship. The interview language was German; in one case, parts of the interview were conducted in English. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted virtually via the Zoom conference system rather than face-to-face. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed using content-semantic transcription (Dresing & Pehl, 2018), and the transcripts were pseudonymised.

2.3 Data Analysis

We used qualitative content analysis to analyse the interview transcripts based on the research questions. Among the various types of content analysis described in the literature, we have chosen the method described by Mayring (2010a, 2010b, 2022a) and Mayring and Fenzl (2019) due to its clearly defined, rule-based nature and the possibility of integrating quantitative analysis steps. Here, we employed the inductive category formation method, which falls under the category of reduction procedures (Mayring, 2022b). At the beginning, the selection criteria, the coding unit and the level of abstraction for the content analysis to be carried out were defined for each research question investigated. We used the clear meaning component (seme) in the text, which we analysed line-by-line, as the smallest text component that can be categorised. A transcript was defined as the theoretically largest text segment assignable to a category (Mayring 2022a).

The data analysis was performed using a specific computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA Analytics Pro software, version Release 22.8.0, cf. Kuckartz, 2010; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2020). The AI assistant offered by the software was deliberately not used and not activated for the qualitative data analysis carried out. Regardless of our position on the use of artificial intelligence in qualitative data analysis, we would like to refer to Mayring (2025), who, after conducting a series of experiments, drew a rather sobering interim conclusion regarding the use of AI to perform qualitative content analysis according to his approach. The category system was developed manually and inductively from the text material using the software by systematically reviewing the text line by line. In addition, the software was used to determine the frequency of categories and to visualise the results, to record ideas and interpretation approaches, and to write memos (cf. Kuckartz, 2010; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2020).

After reviewing the text material, the categories formed were grouped at a higher level to form supercategories. This resulted in a category system for each of the two research questions, which generally consisted of two levels or three levels for individual categories.

3. Results

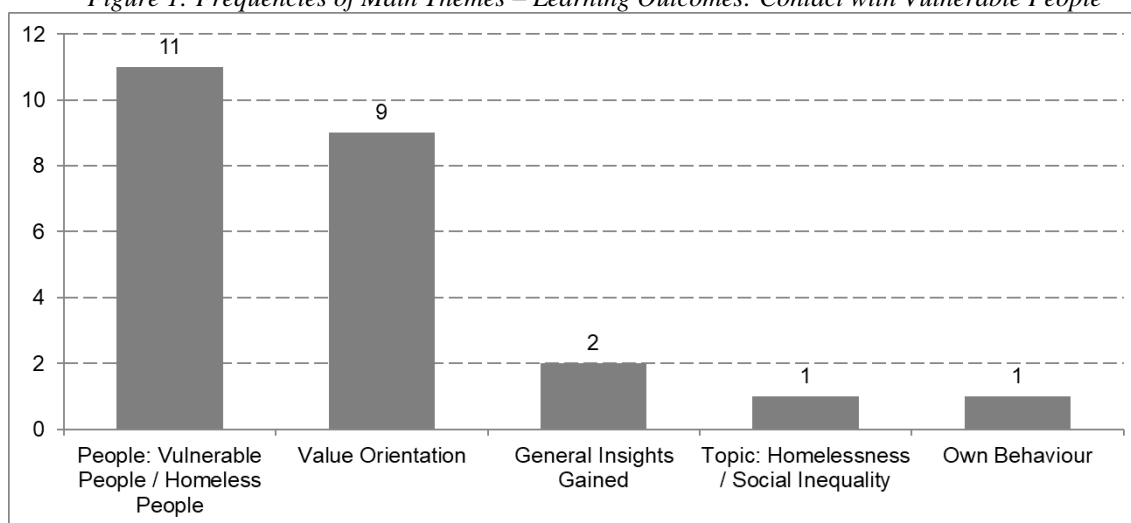
This section presents the results of the qualitative analysis. First, the results related to RQ 1 are presented, specifically the learning effects that students gained from interacting with vulnerable individuals. The results for RQ 2 will then be discussed. The learning effects of the students from their contact and encounters with social organisations. It should be noted at this point that these contacts, as well as personal contacts with our community partners, three social organisations, were limited to the first half of the university course, before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. After that, face-to-face meetings were no longer possible due to university regulations adapted to the pandemic situation. First, the main categories resulting from the inductive category formation of the qualitative content analysis are specified, along with the absolute frequencies (reference: documents/interview transcripts). The results of the interviews are then discussed in more detail for each of the main categories, using sample quotes from the interviews to illustrate the points made. The names of the categories created are displayed in the title case.

3.1 Learning Outcome: Contact with Vulnerable People

Figure 1 shows the results for RQ 1. No applicable statements are available for one interview on this question. A total of five main categories were formed by inductive coding of the interview transcripts, which will first be listed here with their frequencies: a) People: Vulnerable People/Homeless People (91.7%, 11 out of 12 documents), b) Value

Orientation/Character Development (75.0%, 9 out of 12 documents), c) General Insights Gained (16.7%, 2 out of 12 documents), d) Topic: Homelessness/Social Inequality (8.3%, 1 out of 12 documents) and e) Own Behaviour (8.3%, 1 out of 12 documents).

Figure 1: Frequencies of Main Themes – Learning Outcomes: Contact with Vulnerable People



Note: This figure shows the absolute frequencies of the main categories as a result of the inductive category formation (qualitative content analysis) to the question what were the learning outcomes of contact with vulnerable people. The frequencies indicated refer to the occurrence in the documents (transcripts)

3.1.1 People: Vulnerable People/Homeless People

One key learning outcome regarding knowledge about vulnerable people, specifically those affected by poverty and homelessness, was the students' realisation that gaining insight into their personal life stories is fundamentally valuable, a point emphasised in several interviews. In particular, contact and conversation with those affected have led to a greater understanding of other realities of life which is particularly noteworthy.

Berta Schleich told us, for example, "I think you understand people better and would perhaps be more willing to stand up for them than before because you've spent more time getting to know them." Maria-Luise Haase also emphasised the special significance that the contact and conversations had for her personally and the added value she gained, "So, when you first interact with someone who is different from you, who has a different life path, different ideas about life than you do, for example, it's always interesting to get to know these different perspectives. And I think that somehow helps you understand life better, that okay, there are people who are different, not everything is the same. Everyone does things differently. Exactly, and I think that through this exchange with each other, you can enrich yourself and realise that."

Another important learning effect frequently mentioned by the students was that the encounters gave them an understanding of how best to deal with people affected by homelessness or other similar social emergencies in their everyday lives. It should be noted that the meetings were well prepared and accompanied. Immediately afterwards, there was a reflection on the impressions gained. The students could also contact the accompanying course instructor at any time if they had any questions.

Norma Girschner told us, "So from such a personal perspective, all of this has a huge impact on how I interact with people affected by poverty and homelessness. And that sometimes [it] affects me in my everyday life. There are still people who don't have a home or who have financial difficulties or problems with drugs, medication or alcohol, but I still encounter them

in my everyday life. And the how I deal with it in such a situation. For example, I still say hello or goodbye, just to show recognition. Or if I see someone who might be working for [the street newspaper organisation] and selling newspapers, I buy a newspaper." Lotte Heinrich takes away the lesson that it is important not to differentiate between people, explaining her insights gained from her encounters as follows, "That you should treat everyone the same way you treat everyone else around you. So everyone should be treated equally, and there shouldn't be any distinctions. Just because of appearances or preconceived stereotypes, everyone should be treated equally, and, yes. You don't need to be afraid, and, yes."

Additionally, the students mentioned that their own lives differ fundamentally from the life reality of the vulnerable people and that the issues that are important in their lives are completely different. Added to this are personal insights of individual students that vulnerable people are often grateful for receiving help, the impression that they also have prejudices, and sometimes do not feel understood. The personal encounters also led to deeper reflection, increased awareness of existing problems and people in social difficulties, and a greater willingness to help and get involved.

3.1.2 Value Orientation/Character Development

Next, we examine the learning effects that fall into the category 'Value Orientation/Character Development'. The following aspects are particularly important here, as they were mentioned several times by the students: not having prejudices and being grateful for being able to have a more privileged life.

For example, Alfons Eberth learned from the experiences and contact with vulnerable people in the university course that it is important not to judge anyone immediately and to be open-minded, which he expresses as follows, "Well, partly, you already had your own thoughts beforehand; you don't go in completely unaware and without any idea of how people could end up in situations like that or in other situations that are different from your own. So you have your own thoughts on the matter. But of course, it can always happen that you only think in a very one-sided way. You forget many aspects, or the aspects you had considered turn out to be completely different from the other person's point of view, and you get a very individual picture of each person, which allows you to get to know them better. So you can't judge a person right from the start or make a judgment about a person without knowing them properly." Also Berta Schleich emphasised that she had learned that it is important to treat people as impartially as possible, "I would say that you shouldn't judge people straight away or form any kind of opinion about them. Instead, you should get to know them first and listen to what they have to say before you start thinking about anything. And maybe let them open up more and then wait and see what happens or what they are like before you think or say anything or act in any way." Carmen Spieß summarised her thoughts, having realised through her experiences in the community-based research service-learning course that she is glad that she is better off than the homeless or formerly homeless people we spoke to, as follows, "Well, you do ask yourself that, or perhaps you become a little more grateful that you are doing well. That may sound a bit arrogant, but yes, certain feelings are triggered by such encounters. And you may ask yourself, where am I doing well? What resources do I have, what resources do others have? How can life work? And I think, yes, you can develop a sense of gratitude when we, as students are able to attend university and other people are not. Yes, feelings like that are generated."

Two students each mentioned that their contacts and conversations with vulnerable people had taught them the importance of tolerance and helping people affected by poverty and homelessness.

Ludmila Mude told us, "That, for example, the way I live is not the only right way. That structuring your life differently, doing things differently, is also a good option. But not for me, for example, only for others. That you tolerate that and say, 'Okay, that's fine, do it your way.'" Wolfram Wagner emphasised, as did Amelie Scheibe, that they had realised that it is meaningful and important to help. Wolfram Wagner explained, "Well, that it is worth helping these people and, above all, that one should not judge them, because fate is also partly to blame for what happened." And Amelie Scheibe saw it much the same way, "And then when I have a quiet moment at home, I think back on everything and reflect on it, and that triggers a feeling inside me: I can or I must help these people in some way. Whether that's through volunteering or with the ideas for getting involved that we've developed over time, it really triggers something in me." Further learning outcomes from encounters with vulnerable individuals in the context of the community-based research service-learning course in the main category described here mentioned by individual students include: empathy is important, sensitivity is important when dealing with vulnerable individuals, and openness is important.

3.1.3 Summary of the Other Main Categories' Results

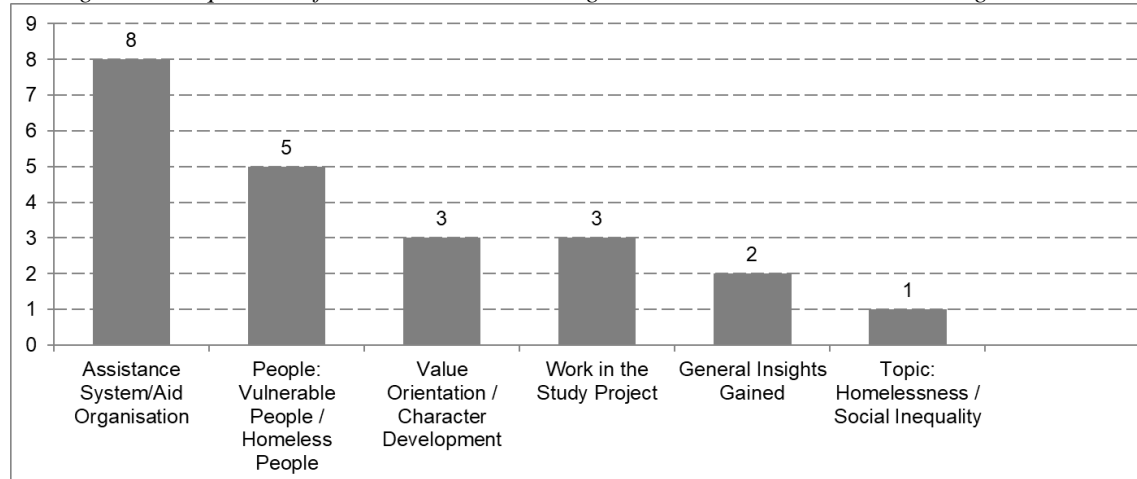
The following section summarises the learning effects described by the students, which have been assigned to the other three main categories. These are grouped together because these categories occur less frequently.

One participant, Rosi Trupp, emphasised that her experience had taught her the importance of continuing to engage with the topics covered in the university course and deepening her knowledge and that it is important to her to use her opportunities to make a difference, even in small ways. She told us, "That it is definitely important for me to continue researching this topic in my future career. And I can't change the world as a single person, but you can try to make a difference or get the ball rolling. And continue researching and making people aware of what is really wrong in this society." Carmen Spieß reflected on how she will use what she has learned in the community-based research service-learning course in future communication situations with other people, what will be more important for her in the future, and what she will value even more than before. She described her thoughts in the interview as follows, "Yes, what conclusions have I drawn? I want to remain open, enter into conversations without prejudice, be cautious about what I say. In other words, I want to place a lot of emphasis on communication, on speaking respectfully to one another and trying to communicate on an equal footing, even if it's not easy. And finding common ground instead of differences."

3.2 Learning Outcome: Contact with Social Organisations

The six main categories identified for RQ 2 are presented below: a) Assistance System/Aid Organisation (66.7%, 8 out of 12 documents), b) People: Vulnerable People/Homeless People (41.7%, 5 out of 12 documents), c) Value Orientation/Character Development (25.0%, 3 out of 12 documents), d) Work in the Study Project (25.0%, 3 out of 12 documents), e) General Insights Gained (16.7%, 2 out of 12 documents) and f) Topic: Homelessness/Social Inequality (8.3%, 1 out of 12 documents). Please also refer to Figure 2.

Figure 2: Frequencies of Main Themes – Learning Outcomes: Contact with Social Organisations



Note: This figure shows the absolute frequencies of the main categories as a result of the inductive category formation (qualitative content analysis) to the question what were the learning outcomes of contact with social organisations. The frequencies indicated refer to the occurrence in the documents (transcripts)

3.2.1 Assistance System/Aid Organisation

The students primarily identified learning effects concerning assistance systems and aid organisations as an enhancement of general knowledge about social organisations, including who works there, where the social organisations are located, what tasks the social organisations perform, what activities are involved and, finally, how the work processes are organised.

Nico Gunf told us, for example, that his questions were answered and reported, "And how are they [the homeless people] being helped, and who is helping them? You kind of had a preconception or a basic idea about all these things, but I think that, as I said, your worldview was broadened a bit because you can now assess much better what problems they really have and how bad things really are for them. And then, of course, on the other side, there are the people who do this and offer help, and where these aid organisations are located and what kind of work they do. We were told a lot about that and given a lot of information. I think everyone, including me, got a good impression, or at least a deeper impression or a broader overview of the topic itself, which is what we are basically dealing with in the whole project." Norma Girscher reported that the social city tour with a formerly homeless person, during which various social institutions were visited, helped her to understand how support facilities are distributed in Bochum. She explained her experiences, "Yes, during the city tour, that's what it's called. We were given a tour of Bochum, and I got to explore parts of Bochum that I didn't know before. Also with a view to where I would go if I were homeless. It was a personal tour by someone who knows Bochum well. I definitely took that with me." Regarding the organisation of work processes, the students drew various conclusions from the discussions and visits to social organisations. Hans-Jochen Löffler described his impressions as follows, "that these places are extremely crowded and that they can no longer keep up with demand. That the supply is simply far too small. That the workers there work very hard and are very dependent on volunteers and students, who simply don't have the specialist knowledge, which is also a problem." Enno Roskoth also emphasised the limited free time available to employees at social organisations and reported his impressions as follows, "That they have less time available. You may have noticed this a little during the meeting, because they wanted to know what the goal was right away. That way, the conversation doesn't drag on and on. Yes."

3.2.2 People: Vulnerable People/Homeless People

During the visits to social organisations and in discussions with employees, learning effects were also achieved regarding knowledge about vulnerable people. This concerns communication with vulnerable individuals, insights into the everyday lives of homeless people and those affected by poverty, including the problems and difficulties they face, as well as their emotional state.

Norma Girschner told us for example about communication, "Also, establishing contact and being able to talk to the salespeople normally, without necessarily feeling afraid or guilty because of their special situation. That's definitely something I took away with me." Nico Gunf and Wolfram Wagner emphasised that they have learned how homeless people organise their daily lives. Nico Gunf said when we asked what they had learned from their contact and discussions with social organisations, "Or what kind of condition do they [homeless people] really live in, and what do they have to deal with every day?"

3.2.3 Work in the Study Project

Through meetings with social organisations, which were prepared in collaboration with an experienced senior lecturer, accompanied by reflection and guidance from the senior lecturer, the students also learned a great deal about working in a project-oriented university course, specifically a community-based research service-learning course. These learning effects are transferable primarily to students' future professional practice. Noteworthy here is the realisation that meetings should be well prepared, the importance of a professional appearance, general knowledge of conversation skills and the structuring of collaborations, and the need to be able to adapt to surprises.

Ludmila Mude told us what she had learned about participating in meetings, "Okay. So, I understood that these appointments require very, very good preparation. That you have to be prepared for anything that might happen, including what the answers might be. So, preparation is key." Alfons Eberth also shared what he has learned about meetings, "And that you can [should] bring as much information and input as possible to such meetings." Ludmila Mude learned that it is important to maintain a professional appearance when participating in meetings. She told us, "So, preparation is key. Then, how you present yourself, including your clothing. Also with the name tags." Enno Roskoth and Ludmila Mude shared their thoughts on what they learned about professional communication. Enno Roskoth told us, "Yes, I learned one thing. I think, in general, how you talk to your partner, on what basis you talk. That perhaps in this case, we were the ones who should have talked more. Or rather, we should have contributed more." And Ludmila Mude reported on what she had learned about communication as follows, "And how to conduct the conversation now: That's a funny story, too. I was hoarse that day and couldn't talk to the partners. That's why (I don't really know why) I didn't know what to say. I was more of an observer, as the guys in my team were the ones doing all the talking. And I think if I had spoken, it would have gone a little better. So I was able to observe more how the guys did it." Both students also emphasised that they had learned how important it is to be flexible and able to adapt to surprises, as things do not always go as planned. Ludmila Mude told us on this point, "That you have to expect anything that could happen now, including what the answers might be." And here is what Alfons Eberth told us in the interview, "You shouldn't necessarily stick to your expectations. Things will definitely not always turn out the way you think they will; they can also turn out completely differently."

3.2.4 Summary of the Other Main Categories' Results

This section summarises the learning effects described by the students, which have been assigned to the other three main categories which were not so frequently mentioned in the

interviews with the students. These are the following categories: 'value orientation/character development', 'general insights gained' and 'topic: homelessness/social inequality'.

This includes for example that it was stated that participants had learned to better understand and empathise with other people's fates and had developed even greater openness. In addition, it was generally acknowledged that their own worldview had been broadened by the experiences with the social organisations. These were identified as the two most significant learning outcomes.

4 Discussion, Future Research and Recommendations

This research study provides valuable insights into the fundamental learning processes that can occur in community-based research service-learning projects through contact and collaboration with vulnerable people and with social organisations. Despite the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessary adjustments to the course schedule and concept, the accompanying interview study revealed a wide range of different learning outcomes, which have been described in detail.

Regarding contact and discussion with vulnerable individuals, homeless or formerly homeless people, these include developing a greater understanding of others' life realities, the fundamental insight into how valuable it can be to engage with vulnerable individuals and to gain insights into their everyday lives, challenges and biographies, to subject one's ideas and prejudices to critical examination and to learn ways of respectful treatment of people affected by poverty and homelessness. In addition, the following positive effects were observed: awareness of existing problems and people in social difficulties, increasing willingness to take action and stand up against social injustice and for people in difficult social situations, respecting other ways of life and views, the importance of respectful communication, focusing more on similarities than differences and becoming aware of how privileged your life is and feeling grateful for it. These results are largely consistent with our expectations based on the literature review conducted. It was surprising that the effects were so clearly identified and described in detail by the students in the qualitative interviews, even though the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated major deviations from the original course schedule and programme. Due to institutional restrictions, the amount of time students spent in contact with vulnerable individuals and also with employees of social organisations was significantly less than originally planned during course planning. Our study clearly showed that even short-term exchanges and direct meetings with vulnerable individuals can generate a substantial added value.

In summary, the learning effects achieved through exchanges with employees of social organisations can be described as follows: acquisition of fundamental knowledge about social organisations, their structure, areas of activity, work processes and geographical distribution, obtaining information about the daily lives of homeless people, their everyday challenges, and how to address vulnerable individuals appropriately. In addition, the students were able to gain the following further insights from the prepared and accompanied meetings: the importance of good meeting preparation and a professional appearance, adaptability in communication processes, the importance of being open and it was noted that one's own world view was expanded by the experiences and insights gained.

The results of our qualitative research study clearly highlight the value of collaborating with social organisations as community partners and, in our specific case, of contact with vulnerable people, homeless people or formerly homeless people facing difficult social situations for students, as well as the associated examination of a highly socially relevant issue in a university

course. Strengthening social skills, contributing to positive personal development, teaching values, addressing socially relevant real-world issues, and imparting practical knowledge that is important for future careers are positive effects attributed to the service-learning teaching approach, as proven in numerous empirical studies. Here, this was achieved as described above through a combination of two different teaching approaches.

Increasing diversity in society presents opportunities but also poses challenges and creates demands on individuals. Social polarisation is a particular problem in large cities. It is essential to raise awareness among students at an early stage about complex social issues, to equip them with the basic knowledge they need to understand the background, and to promote values, empathy, and responsibility. Our findings demonstrate that whenever it is not possible to design a course entirely as a service-learning course or a community-based research course, for example when curricular requirements do not allow it, integrating relevant elements or, as in our case, the time-limited interaction between vulnerable individuals, social organisation staff and students can have positive and lasting learning effects. Effective, personal and, if possible, regular contact between members of different social status groups on an equal footing can lead to a reduction in existing prejudices, in line with Allport's contact hypothesis (cf. Allport, 1954).

In our view, it makes sense to examine the learning outcomes of service-learning and community-based research projects as of other specialist teaching approaches. We distinguished in our investigation between learning outcomes that arose from contact and discussions between the students and two different groups of people. And we deliberately refrained from making any preliminary distinctions or classifications of learning outcomes from the literature. In line with the primacy of the qualitative research paradigm (cf. Kruse, 2007, 2015), we aimed to maintain an open view and avoid limiting it by making these preliminary considerations.

However, this may well be helpful for other studies. Furthermore, no learning outcomes to be achieved were defined in advance by the course instructor in detail when designing the project study, as this was the first university course to be designed using both specific teaching approaches, even though such considerations naturally played a role in the design phase. If a similarly designed course is offered repeatedly and sufficient time is available, it is advisable to define the learning outcomes to be achieved or expected in advance and compare them with the actual results. If you want to examine the learning effects achieved through cooperation with social organisations and vulnerable groups and do so within the framework of a university course with a limited number of course participants, it seems sensible to focus more strongly on a specific topic, even if this restricts the students' freedom to choose the topic for their 'own' small projects. This reduces the preparation and supervision work for the course instructor and also enables more targeted accompanying research. Further recommendations for course instructors on how to implement and teach a university course with a similar thematic focus can be found in the following publication: Bittner and Kempchen (2024b).

The study's limitations arise in particular from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the university's overriding regulations, major changes had to be made to the course schedule. This particularly affected the personal contacts and cooperation with our partner organisations and vulnerable people. Therefore, the learning outcomes described in the analysis section refer to the contact, discussions and cooperation with the two groups mentioned in the initial phase of the project. If the project had continued as originally planned, an even wider range of different learning outcomes would probably have emerged, and individual categories would have been represented more frequently. In addition, restrictions result from the overall low number of study participants. Although smaller sample sizes are common in qualitative

research than in quantitative research, larger sample sizes are recommended, especially when conducting qualitative content analysis as an evaluation technique (Mayring, 2002b). This should be considered in future studies. Similar research studies are needed but with a larger number of interviews. These then offer the opportunity to derive theoretical implications from the results as well.

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Author Contributions

JB: conceptualisation, data analysis, manuscript draft preparation, reviewing and editing.
JK: data collection (conducting the online interviews), proofreading of the manuscript.

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Appendix

Table 1: Frequencies of Main Categories (Documents with Codes) – Learning Outcomes: Vulnerable Groups of People

	Documents	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
People: Vulnerable People/Homeless People	11	84.6	91.7
Value Orientation/Character Development	9	69.2	75.0
General Insights Gained	2	15.4	16.7
Topic: Homelessness/Social Inequality	1	7.7	8.3
Own Behaviour	1	7.7	8.3
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	12	92.3	100.0
DOCUMENTS without code(s)	1	7.7	-
ANALYSED DOCUMENTS	13	100.0	-

Note: The table shows the main category frequencies as a result of the inductive category formation (qualitative content analysis) to the question what were the learning outcomes of contact with vulnerable people.

Table 2: Frequencies of Main Categories (Documents with Codes) – Learning Outcomes: Social Organisations

	Documents	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
Assistance System/Aid Organisation	8	61.5	66.7
People: Vulnerable People/Homeless People	5	38.5	41.7
Value Orientation/Character Development	3	23.1	25.0
Work in the Study Project	3	23.1	25.0
General Insights Gained	2	15.4	16.7
Topic: Homelessness/Social Inequality	1	7.7	8.3
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	12	92.3	100.0

DOCUMENTS without code(s)	1	7.7	-
ANALYSED DOCUMENTS	13	100.0	-

Note: The table shows the main category frequencies as a result of the inductive category formation (qualitative content analysis) to the question what were the learning outcomes of contact with social organisations.