

Impact of the JumpStart Service—Learning Experience on Leadership Skills Among University Student Ameri-Corp Volunteers

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the motivation for university students to become JumpStart AmeriCorps members (volunteers) and to examine the relationship between volunteers' participation in the program and their leadership skills development. A total of 46 participants were surveyed to identify their two main reasons for becoming a JumpStart AmeriCorps volunteer. The results showed that most of the participants were motivated by the opportunity to gain field experience with children and to fulfill their passion of working with children. Furthermore, the program was found to provide a valuable platform for college students to engage in community service and volunteerism and to develop leadership skills in early childhood education. These findings highlight the importance of providing practical opportunities for college students to gain experience in the field and to contribute to their communities.

Keywords: JumpStart, Ameri-Corps, service-learning, college students, leadership development, community service, early childhood education

1. Introduction

Service-learning has gained increasing attention in higher education institutions as a bridge between academic knowledge and practical experience. This type of learning also promotes civic engagement and social responsibility (Santos-Rego et al., 2021). Service-learning not only enriches the learning experience, but also fosters a sense of community involvement and personal growth among student volunteers (Pinto & Costa-Ramalho, 2022; Vadalía et al., 2024).

The significance of service-learning on leadership development cannot be overstated. Leadership, as a skill, is not just about leading others but also about understanding communities, empathizing with community members' needs, and working collaboratively towards problem-solving, solutions, and collaborative effort, thereby nurturing essential leadership attributes such as communication, teamwork, and civic engagement (Carpenter & Morrison, 2021; Jones & Hill, 2019; Krsmanovic, 2022; Yorío & Mitchell, 2019).

For university students, who are at an early stage in their personal and professional development, the benefits are manifold. Engaging in service-learning allows them to enhance theoretical knowledge in practical scenarios, fostering adaptability and resilience. It also provides them with the opportunity to understand societal structures, challenges, and their role in instigating positive change. This holistic development is important in preparing them for diverse professional environments and instilling a sense of responsibility towards their communities (Tijssmaetal et al., 2020). The JumpStart program, a national AmeriCorps initiative that began in 1993, exemplifies the potential of service-learning. It aims to promote kindergarten readiness among at-risk preschool children through enlisting trained college and university student AmeriCorps volunteers. While research has demonstrated the success of the JumpStart program from underserved communities, limited research has examined the impact of the program on the university student volunteers. This pilot study seeks to investigate the significance of service-learning among university students in terms of their leadership development. Specifically, this study examines the impact of participation in the JumpStart program on the development of leadership skills among university student volunteers.

1.1 JumpStart Program for Kindergarten Readiness in Children Who Are At-Risk

JumpStart is a national AmeriCorps program that began in 1993 with the intent of providing literacy and socio-emotional scaffolding to young children by means of offering university students organized, pre-planned

opportunities for working with preschool children from underserved communities to help these children prepare for kindergarten success. Jumpstart's mission is to provide language, literacy, and socio-emotional programming for preschool children and promote quality learning for all. JumpStart helps break the cycle of poverty, giving children the "jumpstart" they need in life (JumpStart Children First, n.d.)

Over the last 24 years, more than 45,000 college and university students have helped over 100,000 children in the United States prepare for kindergarten (JumpStart Children First, n.d.). However, research about American's children's literacy development and the deleterious effects of poverty, has revealed some concerning results.

"Although providing intervention has been shown to improve the skills of students with significant reading problems, teachers often ask whether students...can *ever* catch up and read like their typically achieving classmates. The honest answer is that for students to catch up, they'll need to participate in a regular intensive intervention that focuses on gaining skills at a faster pace than their classmates" (Brown, 2023, n.p.).

The JumpStart program acknowledges the effects of poverty on literacy in children that tend to narrow the emergent literacy gap among at-risk preschool-age children. Although the main focus is directed towards these children who are in receipt of the services, there are numerous ways the JumpStart experience can benefit the volunteer (Vadalia et al., 2024).

1.2 The Significance of Service Learning on Leadership Development

Service-learning is a pedagogical approach that interlinks academic instruction with impactful community service. This unique blend allows students to actively participate in real-world scenarios, fostering a deeper understanding of the content they study in the classroom. By reflecting on their experiences in seminars that accompany the service-learning, students cultivate a shared sense of civic responsibility, which in turn strengthens the communities they serve. Service-learning is an effective means of acquiring and applying socially responsive knowledge (Huvarad et al., 2023; Rao et al., 2021).

One of the most significant impacts of service-learning is associated with leadership development among college students. During service-learning experiences, students experience real-life situations. In most cases, the community settings present students with unstructured situations and challenges that require the use of problem-solving techniques, teamwork, and effective communication which are important elements of leadership. These experiences generate a situation in which students are not in their comfort zone. Consequently, they are pushed to take responsibilities and take the lead by example (Astin et al., 2000; Colvin, 2020; Keles & Altinok, 2020; Xavier & Jones, 2021). Service-learning motivates students to take responsibility for their actions, a value that promotes their leadership skills.

Another advantage of service-learning related to leadership is exposure to diverse populations. By interacting with individuals from various backgrounds, students develop positive attitudes and a deeper consideration for others' lives. These experiences with individuals and groups with different cultural backgrounds are crucial for leadership, as it equips future leaders with the ability to appreciate diversity in their working environments. As workplaces become increasingly culturally and socially diverse, such immersion in social issues enhances students' academic journeys and transforms them into more empathetic facilitators and leaders (Xavier & Jones, 2021). They gain the skills of listening, understanding, and adapting—key qualities for effective leadership.

Service-learning also reinforces students' sense of purpose and commitment. When integrated into undergraduate education, particularly for future teachers, service-learning instills a strong sense of purpose and dedication. The immediate visible impact on the community often inspires students to pursue long-term change, focusing on community development and social justice (Anderson et al., 2022). This intrinsic motivation carries over into their careers, where they may become proactive change agents contributing to societal betterment.

1.3 Impact of JumpStart on Mentors

The new theory on mentoring suggests that the mentoring experience positively impacts both the mentor and the mentee. Integral to this process are reflective practices, both mentor-to-mentee and independent reflection (Smith & Lee, 2021). Additionally, adopting a child-centered, constructivist approach may yield better results compared to a teacher-directed approach (JumpStart, 2020; Shah, 2019). Recent research also supports mentorship's role in advancing academic and career planning, while strengthening mentor-mentee relationships (Johnson, 2024).

Across the literature on teaching approaches, a common theme is that preservice teachers understand the importance of play and child-directed activities in learning. However, teacher-directed learning environments that are common today remain more prevalent in classrooms. This mentoring program aims to help preservice teachers shift their mindset to embrace a research-based, constructivist approach, moving away from the traditional, skill-based teaching methods ingrained by societal beliefs (Shah, 2019).

As college and university students train to be JumpStart volunteers as mentors for the preschoolers, they are taught how to engage with the children at their site in a way that is both fun and educational. Cognitive, literacy, and social development evolve throughout the year as the children continue to develop kindergarten readiness skills. According to results of pre-and post-JumpStart surveys, the volunteers have indicated that the program has helped them become more confident leaders, feel more comfortable in the classroom, develop effective communication skills (both with the children and with their peers), understand how to respect others, and gain an understanding of child development (Jumpstart, 2020). A New York-based survey of JumpStart volunteers showed statistically significant growth in workforce gains for preservice teachers involved in JumpStart during their undergraduate years in comparison to preservice teachers who were not involved in Jumpstart during their undergraduate years. Additionally, 5.77% of the sample size of 280 Jumpstart volunteers in this same survey stated that they felt that diversity awareness was the most important understanding that they acquired from their year as a Jumpstart AmeriCorps member.

While data support the success of the JumpStart program for children from underserved populations, the impact of the JumpStart program on mentors is under-researched. Programs involving mentors are typically established with the mentee in mind and are constructed specifically to benefit the mentee, while simultaneously having a positive impact on the mentor (Vadalia et al., 2024). In the case of the JumpStart program, mentees (the children) benefit because as development progresses, children build a stronger sense of self. Research shows that these children show a stronger sense of competency and empowerment and, in turn, view themselves as capable individuals. Additionally, these feelings of self-worth are seen in the mentors as well. Preservice teachers gain confidence, inner strength, and agency, which allows them to improve their classroom skillset and confidence. Furthermore, the current Jumpstart research also shows that preservice teachers who participate in JumpStart show statistically significant improvements in the following areas compared to those who do not participate: problem solving, workforce skill, understanding of the process of literacy development, and confidence in teaching literacy skills (JumpStart, 2020). Further research that examined the satisfaction levels of 280 JumpStart Corps members in New York has shown that, at a statistically significant level, students who participate in JumpStart feel more overall satisfaction with college, have high satisfaction with civic responsibility, have a better understanding of child development, and have high confidence levels in the classroom (Hecht et al., 2013).

1.4 Service Learning and Leadership Development in Early Childhood Education

Service-learning and leadership development are important topics in the field of education, particularly in early childhood education. In recent years, researchers have expressed increasing interest in exploring the potential of service learning as a tool for promoting leadership development among students.

Schleicher and Silliman (2015) explored the potential of service-learning to address the achievement gap in early childhood education. Their study offered an innovative approach to developmentally appropriate practice, highlighting the potential of service learning to promote academic achievement and social-emotional development among young children. LaGoy and Williams (2015) examined the role of service-learning in developing leadership capacity among college students. Their case study of JumpStart provided valuable insights into the potential of service-learning to promote leadership development, while also fostering a sense of social responsibility and civic engagement.

Masiello and Goc Karp (2017) investigated the impact of service-learning on leadership development in early childhood teacher education. Their study offered practical strategies for incorporating service-learning into teacher education programs, highlighting the importance of intentional leadership development activities. Peterson and Dunne (2019) explored the use of service-learning as a tool for developing leadership skills among early childhood educators. Their study highlighted the potential of service learning to promote leadership development among educators, while also enhancing their ability to support children's learning and development.

Overall, these empirical studies provide valuable insights into the potential of service-learning and leadership development in early childhood education. These studies highlight the importance of incorporating service-learning into the curriculum and teacher education programs, while also emphasizing the need for intentional leadership development activities. By incorporating service-learning and leadership development into early childhood education, educators and researchers can promote positive outcomes for young children and the broader community.

Research studies have implied that volunteering in service-learning enhances volunteers' confidence in working with young children, improves their teaching strategies and skills, and self-efficacy in teaching, resulting in successful professional leadership development (Pinto & Costa-Ramvalho, 2023; Vadalia et al., 2024).

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by examining the impact of service-learning programs on

leadership development in the critical field of early childhood education. While previous research has demonstrated the effectiveness of service-learning programs in enhancing volunteer students' academic performance and career readiness, little attention has been given to the influence of service-learning on leadership development. Given the importance of effective leadership of mentors in ensuring the well-being and development of young children, this gap in knowledge is a pressing concern. Consequently, the study's significance lies in its contribution to our understanding of how service-learning programs, such as JumpStart, can improve university students' leadership development in early childhood education, and the implications for institutions of higher education in providing meaningful and impactful learning experiences for students. This study seeks to:

- 1) Understand the motivations and demographic backgrounds of JumpStart volunteers.
- 2) Analyze variations in leadership development based on academic major, experience with young children, and education courses undertaken.
- 3) Assess the influence of JumpStart participation on volunteers' leadership growth from Time 1 to Time 2.

By shedding light on these areas, the study aims to underscore the importance of service-learning programs in shaping the leadership trajectories of university students. New insights and possibilities for educational institutions to refine and/or redesign their curricula for maximum societal impact are potential positive results of this study.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

A total of 46 JumpStart volunteers (university students) participated in both pre-service and post-service surveys for this study. All participants except one identified as female and ranged in age from 17 to 22 years old ($M = 18.50$, $SD = 1.05$). Majors, as reported by the participants, were predominantly elementary education, early childhood education, and secondary education (47.8%), with 52.2% non-education majors including psychology, communicative disorders, sociology, human development and family studies, and kinesiology. All volunteers had enrolled in at least one to three courses in education prior to their first participation in JumpStart. The 46 volunteers, in groups of 9-11, from a small northeastern state, served pre-assigned small groups of preschool children who were enrolled in one of the state's 11 JumpStart programs. Twice each week, for three hours for each session, the volunteers, prepared with pre-packaged JumpStart literacy kits and related literacy materials they independently prepared, worked with small groups of preschool children. Each session began with a whole group JumpStart song, "Hello, Jumpstart," which was followed by volunteers' reading a book to the children who were redirected into small groups. Next, the small groups of children rotated to several learning stations and engaged in puppetry, role play, pretend cooking, art, and writing, prepared by the JumpStart volunteers prior to the literacy session. The session continued with a whole group discussion and review of the book of the week. Reflections about the center activities and a culminating "Bye-Bye JumpStart" song culminated the session.

2.2 Data Collection Process

The data used for this study were collected from a weekly service-learning JumpStart seminar course that was designed to review and evaluate the volunteers' learning experiences and skill development. The evaluation form, including leadership instruments, was adapted from the National JumpStart Survey by one of the JumpStart supervisors/authors of this article. The surveys, addressing students' learning and motivation, were distributed to each JumpStart volunteer by the JumpStart seminar instructor at the beginning of the first seminar in September. Survey time was approximately 20 minutes. JumpStart volunteers were asked to indicate their majors and previous JumpStart experience, and other background information. Post-service surveys were distributed at the conclusion of the spring semester and evaluated the same learning and motivation related to the JumpStart program.

2.3 Measures

1) Leadership

As mentioned above, the researchers used a modified national JumpStart survey questionnaire to gauge the volunteers' leadership experiences and skills. The items on this questionnaire included measures of self-confidence/self-efficacy, perceived leadership competence, and desire to work with children in one's career and/or teach. The researchers used 18 question items enlisting a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) representing volunteers' overall leadership. A sample item is "When working with a team, I encourage everyone to work toward the same overall objectives." A high leadership score represents that the volunteer possesses a strong presence in the early childhood education community, while a low score indicates that the volunteer has not yet acquired effective collaborative skills.

2) Motivation for Becoming a JumpStart Volunteer

In this study, the university student volunteers who were all concurrently enrolled in a JumpStart-related seminar, answered open-ended questions about their main reasons for becoming a JumpStart volunteer. The surveys were administered in the fall (Time One) and again in the spring (Time Two) of the JumpStart academic year. The researchers' goal was to understand the factors that motivate college students to participate in JumpStart prior to, and at the culmination of, their experience.

2.4 Data Analysis

To better understand the volunteers' qualitative responses pertaining to their reasons for volunteering at JumpStart, a coding agenda was established and then the themes for the reasons for volunteering at JumpStart were established. Responses were analyzed according to the themes. Using SPSS 27, this study examined the factors that influenced the volunteers' leadership in general and the changes in leadership over a year of volunteering at Jumpstart.

3. Results

3.1 Themes in Motivation for Becoming a Jumpstart Volunteer

This study aimed to investigate the main motivations for university students to enroll as volunteers in the JumpStart program. The participants in the study were 46 AmeriCorps members (volunteers) who were asked to identify their two main reasons for becoming a JumpStart volunteer at two different time points. Their responses were grouped into five themes: (a) passion for working with children; (b) volunteer work/community involvement; (c) gaining field experience with children, (d) academic credits/scholarship money, and (e) other reasons.

Passion for working with children. Several respondents articulated a deep-rooted affection for, and commitment to, working with children. One responded with the same feeling, expressing:

"I have always felt a deep passion for working with children, witnessing their growth and development firsthand. Being part of their lives, offering guidance, and ensuring a safe environment is safe for them brings me a lot of satisfaction."

Volunteer work/Community involvement. A strong sense of community and the transformative power of volunteer work were evident in many responses. One respondent encapsulated this sentiment by noting:

"Being a volunteer has really changed how I look at life. The work I've done in local daycare centers and after-school programs has allowed me to come into contact with a wide variety of children and their families."

Gaining field experience with children. Practical experience in the field emerged as a dominant theme. As pointed out by one of the respondents:

"Direct field experience with children has been pivotal in shaping my understanding of early childhood education. Observation and engagement with children in their learning journey has given me invaluable insight."

Another respondent, emphasized the importance of hands-on experience:

"Ever since I started my major in Early Childhood Education, I've been itching to get real, hands-on experience. Classroom lectures and textbooks are great, but nothing compares to the real thing. When I heard about JumpStart, I was like, "This is my jam!" It's the perfect chance to dive into the nitty-gritty of teaching and understand what it's genuinely like to shape young minds. Plus, working directly with the kiddos gives me a sneak peek into the challenges and rewards of the job—something that'll definitely prep me for my future classroom."

Academic credits/Scholarship money. The synergy between academic aspirations and the JumpStart program was another recurrent theme. As one respondent noted:

"Earning academic credits aligns with my growth and brings me a step closer to my professional objectives." Another chimed in with, "When I found out JumpStart could score me some academic credits? Total game changer. Plus, every bit helps when it comes to tuition, right?"

Yet another shared:

"Look, college is no joke when it comes to expenses. JumpStart not only gives me real-world experience but also helps lighten the financial load with scholarship opportunities. It's a win-win!"

Other Reasons. A few respondents cited diverse reasons that did not strictly fall under the previous themes. Responses were as follows:

"The multifaceted growth of children—be it cognitive, emotional, or social—and the potential to positively influence it, offers an unparalleled sense of reward."

“Every day in this field is a new challenge, a new story. The dynamic nature of working with kids ensures that no two days are the same. That’s what makes it so exhilarating.”

“All I care about is learning from them, not teaching them. Their innocence, their raw view of the world offers me a new vision, which is something I will cherish for life.”

“I always believed in doing something for others. JumpStart, for me, means not only developing a career but also developing a community and leaving behind a source of meaningful change.”

Extracted reasons for students’ volunteerism in the JumpStart program are noted in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Extracted Reasons for Volunteering in the Jumpstart Program (N = 92)

<i>Response Themes</i>		1 st	2 nd	Total Count	1 st	2 nd	Total Count
1	Passion for working with children	19	16	35	9	4	13
2	Volunteer work/Community involvement	4	2	6	9	15	24
3	Gaining field experience with children	20	19	39	10	11	21
4	Academic credits/Scholarship money	0	0	0	5	2	7
5	Other Reasons	3	9	12	13	14	27
Total Counts		46	46	92	46	46	92

Table 1 delineates the primary motivations underpinning participation in the Jumpstart program. Notably, “gaining field experience with children” consistently emerged as the predominant motivation. At Time 1, gaining field experience was cited 39 times, while at Time 2, gaining field experience garnered 21 mentions. Following closely behind was the “passion for working with children”, with 35 citations at Time 1 and 13 at Time 2.

A significant increase in frequency was observed for “volunteer work/community involvement.” Although this item was only cited six times at Time 1, it saw a four-fold increase, with 24 mentions at Time 2. Meanwhile, “academic credits/scholarship money,” which did not register any mentions at Time 1, began to resonate with participants by Time 2, as reflected in its seven mentions. The category “other reasons” also witnessed a notable uptick, rising from 12 mentions at Time 1 to 27 mentions at Time 2.

From these findings, it is discernible that the primary impetus driving Jumpstart volunteers lies in volunteers’ aspiration to gain hands-on experience with children, coupled with a profound passion for child-centric roles. This finding underscores the program’s role as a potent platform for university students who are anticipating careers in early childhood education. Moreover, the program’s potential to nurture a spirit of community service and volunteerism is evident from the escalating interest in community engagement.

The outcomes accentuate the significance of field experience with children as a pivotal motivation for university students to enroll in the JumpStart program. These findings proffer a deeper understanding of university student motivations and insinuate that the program stands as a valuable conduit for budding educators to hone leadership skills pertinent to early childhood education.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics and Group Differences on Leadership

Descriptive statistics for leadership qualities were assessed among students who volunteered in the Jumpstart program. Initial results revealed that these volunteers displayed strong leadership competencies, both at the outset of their participation ($M = 4.02, SD = .40$) and towards the end of their service year ($M = 4.37, SD = .35$), based on a 5-point Likert scale (refer to Table 2).

In exploring potential factors that might influence leadership scores, no significant variations were found based on the academic majors (either within education or outside of it), prior experience with young children, or the number of educational courses completed by the participants at both the assessed time points. A more granular breakdown, however, highlighted that the volunteers, specifically those volunteers from early childhood education and elementary teacher education programs (when combined), had marginally elevated mean scores ($M = 4.12, SD = .34$) in comparison to their counterparts from other disciplines.

A detailed representation of these leadership attributes, item-wise, is provided in Table 2.

Most items showcased high mean scores, fluctuating between 3.33 to 4.63 for Time 1 and 3.80 to 4.74 for Time 2. One point of particular interest was the participants’ pronounced agreement with the statement, “It is important to spend time building and sustaining team morale” as indicated by its high mean score ($M = 4.46, SD = .55$). Conversely, the item “I expect to work harder than the other people in my group” was met with the least agreement, reflected by its lower mean score ($M = 3.33, SD = 1.17$). Cumulatively, the data underscore that the Jumpstart

volunteers already possessed and exercised notable leadership capabilities; these leadership skills were apparently enriched through their engagement with the program.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Leadership Items

#	Question Items	Time 1		Time 2	
		M	SD	M	SD
1.	When assigning tasks I consider people’s skills and interests.	4.15	.67	4.52	.51
2.	I believe in myself and in my ability to succeed.	3.96	.87	4.54	.69
3.	I expect nothing less than top-notch results from people.	3.39	.83	3.80	.86
4.	I expect to work harder than the other people in my group.	3.33	1.17	3.96	.80
5.	When someone is upset, I try to understand how he or she is feeling.	4.63	.61	4.74	.530
6.	When circumstances change, I am able to adapt to know what to do.	3.93	.83	4.17	.68
7.	I think that personal feelings require attention in order to ensure performance and productivity.	4.30	.79	4.39	.77
8.	I am highly motivated because I know I have what it takes to be successful.	4.30	.70	4.50	.62
9.	It is important to spend time building and sustain team morale.	4.46	.55	4.61	.54
10.	I am able to effectively regulate my personal feelings and moods to myself in the workplace or at school.	4.07	.80	4.39	.65
11.	My actions show people what I want from them.	3.72	.86	4.04	.70
12.	When working with a team, I encourage everyone to work toward the same overall objectives.	4.24	.77	4.57	.54
13.	I completely abide by my original rules and expectations.	4.04	.67	4.33	.67
14.	I enjoy planning for the future.	4.15	.84	4.40	.78
15.	I am open to criticism, and use criticism to improve my performance or products.	3.96	.79	4.27	.72
16.	I take time to learn what people need from me so that they can achieve success.	3.96	.79	4.36	.77
17.	I’m optimistic about life, and I can see beyond temporary setbacks and problem.	4.02	.91	4.57	.66
18.	I think that teams perform best when individuals learn new skills rather than doing the same tasks and perfecting them over time.	3.87	.91	4.49	.76

Most items showcased high mean scores, fluctuating between 3.33 to 4.63 for Time 1 and 3.80 to 4.74 for Time 2. One point of particular interest was the participants’ pronounced agreement with the statement, “It is important to spend time building and sustaining team morale” as indicated by its high mean score ($M = 4.46, SD = .55$). Conversely, the item “I expect to work harder than the other people in my group” was met with the least agreement, reflected by its lower mean score ($M = 3.33, SD = 1.17$). Cumulatively, the data underscore that the Jumpstart volunteers already possessed and exercised notable leadership capabilities; these leadership skills were apparently enriched through their engagement with the program.

3.3 Effects of Volunteering in the Jumpstart Program on Leadership

The primary objective of the present study was to explore the potential influence of volunteering within the Jumpstart program on the leadership acumen of university student participants. The evaluative approach involved discerning potential variations in leadership scores based on academic major, previous experiences working with young children, and the number of education-centric courses completed by participants prior to their involvement with JumpStart. Interestingly, none of these three factors manifested a statistically significant effect on self-perceived leadership competencies of the volunteers. Nevertheless, a deeper dive, utilizing a paired t-test, shed light on a consequential enhancement in leadership competencies from Time 1 to Time 2 ($M(\Delta) = -.34, F = 6.18, p < .001$), as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Paired Samples Test Results (Pre-Post Leadership Test)

	Time1	Time 2	M	M(Δ)	SD	SD(Δ)	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df
							Lower	Upper		
Time 1	1	.515***	4.03	-.34	.40	.37	-.45	-.23	-6.18***	45
Time 2		1	4.37		.35					

Note. p*** < .001.

4. Discussion

The present study endeavored to delve into the motivations of university students for volunteering in the Jumpstart program and to assess the impact of such volunteering experiences on their leadership competencies. The findings

offer enlightening perspectives on both fronts.

First, the motivation for becoming a JumpStart volunteer showcased diverse reasons. Foremost, among them was the aspiration for gaining practical field experience with children. This result aligns with prior research which emphasizes the value of hands-on experiences in shaping a future educator's approach and professional trajectory (Jumpstart, 2020; Pinto, 2023; Tijmsa, et al., 2020). The allure of direct interaction with children and its consequential potential for insights into early childhood education appeared paramount as motivators. Moreover, the findings affirm that the program attracts students who harbor a genuine passion for working with children, potentially suggesting that the program's reputation and outreach are effectively targeted.

Additionally, other tangible benefits, such as academic credits and scholarship money, also emerged as motivation factors. As postulated by Nguyen (2019) and Graziosi, Sneyers, Agasisti, and DeWitte (2020), in the landscape of increasing college tuition fees, opportunities that dovetail academic advancement with financial relief are seen as both strategic and valuable by students. Yet, it was intriguing to observe that while these tangible benefits were present, intrinsic motivations such as passion and field experience appeared to play a more dominant role.

Furthermore, the study illuminated a significant enhancement in leadership competencies among volunteers from the inception of their JumpStart experience to its culmination. This observation is pivotal as it underscores the program's efficacy beyond its primary aim. While participants may primarily seek hands-on experience, the program inadvertently equips them with leadership skills. Previous research posits that effective leadership, especially in educational settings, can be honed through experiential learning (Dallimore et al., 2018; Rao et al., 2021; Seider et al., 2019).

The Jumpstart program, given its structure and immersion depth, seems to provide a fertile ground for such development. Interestingly, this leadership growth was observed irrespective of the volunteers' academic major, prior experience with young children, or previous education courses undertaken (JumpStart, 2020; Kim et al., 2017).

The absence of significant differentiation in leadership scores based on the variables such as major and prior experience was an unexpected observation. This finding suggests that the Jumpstart program provides a level playing field, where all volunteers, irrespective of their backgrounds, are equally positioned to cultivate leadership attributes. It might be postulated that the shared experience of volunteering, the unique challenges encountered, and the nature of the program itself have a universal impact on leadership development.

Interestingly, while there was no statistically significant difference in leadership based on majors, education majors exhibited a marginally higher leadership level than their non-education major peers. The primary motivation for volunteers was found to be "gaining field experience with children," followed by a "passion for working with children." These findings suggest that most of the volunteers were intrinsically motivated to serve the preschoolers in the JumpStart program. Moreover, the inclination of most volunteers to continue their association with the program by volunteering for more than one academic year indicates its potential in fostering professional leadership in early childhood education. These data align with prior studies that have highlighted the benefits of service-learning programs for both pre-service teachers' professional development and the enhancement of young children's learning (Kim et al., 2017; Schleicher & Silliman, 2015).

In conclusion, the current research accentuates the multifaceted value of the Jumpstart program. While it attracts college students with a diverse array of motivations, it simultaneously imparts invaluable skills that extend beyond their immediate objectives. Future research could further probe the specific facets of the Jumpstart experience that most significantly contribute to leadership enhancement, including the related twice-weekly JumpStart seminar and peer sharing of experiences. It is also worth exploring how these skills manifest in the volunteers' subsequent professional endeavors.

5. Implications and Recommendations

The findings hold significant implications for the realm of service-learning among university students and its broader impact on program satisfaction including early childhood education programs. Institutions of higher education might consider integrating service-learning programs such as JumpStart into their curricular offerings. Such integration could offer students the dual advantage of applying their academic knowledge in real-world settings and honing students' leadership skills. This recommendation aligns with previous research advocating for service-learning programs as effective bridges connecting students to their communities (Seider et al., 2019).

6. Limitations

As with all research, this study involves some limitations. The sample size of 46 was relatively modest, and the reliance on self-reported data might introduce biases. Future studies with larger, more diverse samples and

additional objective measures, such as supervisor and/or head teachers' observations and students' related degree of success in the concurrent JumpStart seminar, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits of the JumpStart program.

7. Conclusion

This study underscores the potential of service-learning programs such as JumpStart in fostering leadership skills among university students, particularly those enrolled in early childhood education programs. The broader societal implications suggest that such programs not only benefit the students but also have a ripple effect, positively impacting the communities they serve. Institutions and educators are encouraged to recognize and harness the power of service-learning programs, ensuring that students from various disciplines are equipped with both the knowledge and the leadership skills essential for meaningful community engagement.

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Authors' contributions

Both authors were responsible for study design and revisions. Drs. Brand and Kim contributed equally to the study. Dr. Kim, as corresponding author, was responsible for data handling and drafted the initial manuscript. Dr. Brand was primarily responsible for analyzing the qualitative data.

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Competing interests

The author declare that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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