

Wrapped In Compassion: Segmenting Graduate Fellows' Experiences In Clothing And Care Outreach

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of graduate students who participated in the “WRAP in LOVE: A Community Clothing & Care Initiative” of San Pablo Colleges (SPC) Graduate School. The outreach program was conducted as part of SPC’s 80th founding anniversary and in response to the Octomonth theme -Clothe the Naked. Designed to serve both orphans and elderly individuals in homes for the aged through clothing donations and care sessions, the initiative provided a platform for graduate fellows to engage in socially transformative service. A total of 12 key informants—two each from MAEd, EdD, MA Counseling, MAN, MBA, and DBA programs—were selected using purposive sampling. Using the ORID (Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, and Decisional) framework for focused conversation and reflection, the study gathered rich narrative data on how fellows described their experiences, internalized their learnings, and envisioned future actions. Thematic analysis revealed that students underwent emotional shifts from hesitation to empathy, gained critical insights about human dignity and social responsibility, and expressed a renewed commitment to integrating service into their future professions. Findings emphasized the role of experiential learning in building civic consciousness, ethical leadership, and intergenerational compassion. The study concludes that structured outreach initiatives, when integrated with critical reflection, have lasting pedagogical and professional impact. It recommends institutionalizing similar programs in graduate education and calls for future interdisciplinary collaborations and longitudinal impact assessments. WRAP in LOVE is not merely a clothing drive—it is a formative journey in shaping servant-leaders grounded in empathy, equity, and community care.

Keywords: service-learning, outreach, graduate education, experiential learning, human dignity, compassion

Introduction

The Graduate School of San Pablo Colleges (SPC) remains steadfast in its mission to integrate academic excellence with socially responsive actions. With this, “WRAP in LOVE,” a community clothing and care initiative, was conceptualized and launched not only as a symbolic gesture of clothing the naked, but more so as a tangible response to the basic yet often neglected need of dignity through clothing. This initiative, aligned with the Octomonth theme and in celebration of SPC’s 80th founding anniversary, bridges academic learning and community service by immersing graduate students in socially engaging experiences that cultivate empathy, civic duty, and intergenerational solidarity.

Across the globe, higher education institutions have increasingly embraced service-learning as a pedagogical strategy to enhance student learning while addressing societal needs (Ash & Clayton, 2009). In particular, service-learning programs that focus on marginalized groups—such as orphans and elderly individuals—are gaining prominence as they foster deep reflection and transform participants’ perspectives on privilege, social responsibility, and human rights (Jacoby, 2017). This educational model positions students not as distant observers but as co-participants in the lived realities of the underserved, facilitating what Dewey termed as “education through experience.”

Moreover, recent studies highlight that outreach initiatives aimed at vulnerable populations can lead to the development of affective competencies such as compassion, empathy, and ethical sensitivity among student participants (Gutiérrez & Santiuste, 2021). These competencies are increasingly emphasized in graduate education, particularly in fields such as education, healthcare, business, and counseling, where interpersonal care and social awareness are integral to professional success. Furthermore, outreach programs that promote direct interaction and mutual storytelling between youth and elderly participants have been shown to reduce stereotypes and foster intergenerational understanding (Manning & Adler, 2019).

In this context, the “WRAP in LOVE” program is not merely a logistical exercise in clothing distribution. It is an intentional, value-laden experience that invites graduate students to embody SPC’s values—particularly a sense of pride, community, and respect for human dignity. This study thus seeks to examine and document the lived experiences of SPC graduate fellows during their participation in this outreach program, utilizing the ORID framework to segment their reflections into objective observations, emotional responses, interpretive realizations, and decisions for future action. The study positions “WRAP in LOVE” as a model for experiential education that not only addresses material deprivation but also fosters the internal development of socially committed, ethically anchored professionals. It contributes to the growing body of literature on critical reflection in service-learning and aims to inform the institutionalization of community-driven programs in graduate education.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach rooted in experiential inquiry and reflective practice, aiming to explore the lived experiences of graduate fellows who participated in the “WRAP in LOVE” Community Clothing & Care Initiative of the SPC Graduate School. Qualitative research is most appropriate when the objective is to understand complex, nuanced human experiences from the perspective of those who lived them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, the ORID model—Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, and Decisional—was utilized as a framework for structured dialogue and analysis, allowing participants to progressively deepen their reflection and meaning-making.

The participants of the study were purposefully selected based on their active involvement in the outreach program. A total of twelve (12) graduate students served as key informants, comprising two representatives each from six graduate programs: Master of Arts in Education (MAEd), Doctor of Education (EdD), Master of Arts in Counseling, Master of Arts in Nursing (MAN), Master of Business Administration (MBA), and Doctor of Business Administration (DBA). The inclusion criteria required that each participant (1) directly participated in at least two key program components (e.g., donation drive, community distribution, care sessions), (2) attended the March 22 outreach event with either the orphanage or home for the aged, and (3) submitted a written reflection or participated in a group post-activity debriefing session.

To facilitate deep and authentic reflection, participants were invited to engage in one focused group discussion (FGD) moderated by the researcher. The FGD was guided by the ORID model, which systematically explored four modes of reflection: objective (what happened), reflective (emotional responses), interpretive (meaning drawn from experience), and decisional (actions or changes resulting from the experience). The discussion was conducted in a neutral, comfortable environment and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Audio recordings were taken with the consent of participants, and these were later transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

Thematic data analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Coding was conducted manually and independently by two researchers to ensure inter-coder reliability. Emerging patterns were further validated through member checking, whereby participants confirmed the accuracy of the summaries and interpretations drawn from their narratives. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research

process. Participation was voluntary, and all informants provided written informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical safeguards. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and documentation to maintain confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Objective Mode: Seeing the Scene, Feeling the Weight—Shared Awareness of Reality

The initial phase of the ORID framework focused on the objective mode, wherein participants were asked to recall specific details and scenes they witnessed during the “WRAP in LOVE” outreach. Here, a recurring theme emerged: *a shared awareness of material need and emotional vulnerability*. Fellows from different graduate programs reflected not only on what they physically observed but also on how these impressions initiated a sense of communal realization—recognizing the reality of need, yet also the resilience of the beneficiaries.

A fellow recounted the initial atmosphere of the home for the aged:

“I remember walking in and seeing an old woman sitting quietly in the corner, clutching a jacket with both hands. It was just a piece of clothing, but the way she held it—parang hawak niya ang mundo. That moment told me this is not just about giving. It’s about restoring dignity.”

Similarly, a MA Counseling fellow who volunteered in the orphanage shared:

“The first scene that hit me was a child smiling as she received shoes that actually fit. She whispered to another kid, ‘Akin talaga ’to,’ as if she had never owned something truly hers before. That line haunted me.”

Another MAN participant noted how the atmosphere varied between the settings:

“At the elderly home, it was very quiet, almost solemn. In contrast, the orphanage was noisy and energetic. But in both places, you could feel a kind of hunger—not just for clothes, but for connection.”

This pattern of shared awareness supports the idea that transformational learning often begins with a concrete encounter with disparity. According to Taylor and Cranton (2018), students involved in service-learning often experience what Mezirow (1997) calls a *disorienting dilemma*—a moment where assumptions are challenged by real-world confrontation. Here, witnessing unmet basic needs became that catalytic moment. For most students, this awareness created a cognitive bridge between academic discussions of poverty and the human realities behind them.

What was particularly notable is that students came with different expectations depending on their fields of study, yet found common ground in what they experienced. A fellow noted:

“I thought I’d be assisting with logistics and distribution, but I ended up kneeling down to tie shoelaces for a child. That image stuck with me—it’s not about management; it’s about humility.”

Their responses affirmed the centrality of situated learning, as described by Lave and Wenger (1991), wherein knowledge acquisition is embedded in authentic social practices. In this case, witnessing need firsthand moved students beyond their disciplinary lenses and into human-to-human encounters. The collective narrative across all programs revealed a striking cohesion in what students remembered: scenes of children overjoyed by simple gifts, elderly recipients smiling with tears in their eyes, and a pervasive sense of gratefulness that transcended age, language, and socioeconomic background. These memories anchored the students’ subsequent reflections and shaped how they would later interpret the outreach as a transformative experience, not just a requirement or an institutional activity.

This segment of the findings confirms that exposure to real-world vulnerability, particularly in face-to-face outreach work, activates students' capacity for empathy and moral engagement—a view echoed by Eyler (2016), who emphasized that direct interaction with marginalized populations leads to deeper social awareness and long-term civic commitment.

Reflective Mode: Walking with the Vulnerable—From Hesitation to Heartfelt Connection

As the participants moved from observing the outreach activities into the **reflective mode**, their accounts began to reveal a deeper layer of emotional engagement—*initial apprehensions*

transforming into unexpected moments of connection and joy. Across all graduate programs, students shared common emotional shifts, describing how their feelings evolved from uncertainty to empathy, from distance to personal involvement.

A student from the MAEd program expressed her initial discomfort:

“When we arrived at the orphanage, I was anxious. I didn’t know how to approach the children. I kept thinking, ‘What if they don’t want to talk to me?’ But when a little girl ran up and hugged me after I gave her a jacket, I was caught off guard. She held on as if we had known each other for a long time. That changed everything for me.”

This response resonates with Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which asserts that learning is most impactful when learners engage in a cycle that begins with concrete experiences and moves through reflection and active experimentation. The emotional openness displayed by the children and the elderly prompted many students to confront and revise their assumptions.

A MAN student, who had previous exposure to hospital-based geriatric care, shared a poignant moment:

“I thought I understood elderly care, but this was different. One lola told me she had not been hugged in over a year. She cried while I was helping her choose a blouse. At that moment, I wasn’t a student nurse. I was just a person giving another person some warmth.”

Students from the business disciplines, often trained in analytical objectivity, also reported surprising emotional responses. A participant from the DBA program shared:

“We came to manage the logistical flow—boxes, checklists, labels. But during distribution, one of the residents asked me to help her try on a dress. She turned around and said, ‘Bagay ba sa akin?’ and smiled when I nodded. I didn’t expect that a small act could feel so... sacred.”

This shift from structured thinking to *affective presence* illustrates what hooks (2010) calls “education as the practice of freedom”—whereby learners not only consume knowledge but embody compassion. Many participants described feeling emotionally unprepared, yet gradually allowing themselves to be transformed by the authenticity of those they served.

An MA Counseling student captured this tension between professional training and emotional vulnerability:

“I kept thinking of boundaries and therapeutic distance, but in that setting, you need to meet them where they are—with your heart, not just your skill set. A child told me, ‘Salamat po kasi tinulungan n’yo ako maging maganda.’ That shook me.”

This statement echoes Noddings’ (2016) theory of the ethics of care, which highlights the importance of relational engagement in any context of service. Rather than relying solely on pre-existing roles (e.g., teacher, counselor, administrator), the outreach demanded a response rooted in shared humanity and affective presence.

What became evident was that emotional responses were not distractions from the outreach’s educational purpose—they were *integral to it*. As Gutiérrez and Santiuste (2021) argue, emotional engagement in community-based learning deepens reflection and fosters moral development. Through this, students begin to see not only what others need but what they themselves can give beyond academic credentials.

Another participant from the EdD program summarized this transformation well:

“It was no longer about donations or timelines. It became about being there. Sitting beside a child who had just gotten new slippers. Listening to an elderly woman talk about her past. I learned more in those quiet moments than in any lecture.”

These emotional breakthroughs formed the foundation for interpretive meaning-making, reinforcing that *reflection is not only cognitive but deeply affective*—an idea supported by Ash and Clayton (2009), who advocate for structured reflection to promote deeper learning, personal growth, and social responsibility.

Interpretive Mode: Realizing the Deeper Meaning—Empathy, Dignity, and the Role of Human Connection

In the interpretive mode, students moved beyond their emotional responses to analyze what the experience meant to them both personally and professionally. This mode illuminated the *transformative potential* of community engagement as participants began to draw meaning from their encounters with orphans and elderly residents. Common across all graduate programs was the recognition that outreach is not merely about giving—it is about honoring human dignity, recognizing social inequality, and internalizing the value of relational care.

A student from the MA Counseling program reflected on what the outreach meant in terms of human worth:

“I realized that what we were giving wasn’t just clothes—it was affirmation. When a child smiled and said, ‘Ang swerte ko,’ I saw that we weren’t just helping them dress. We were helping them feel seen, feel valued.”

This realization reflects the findings of Manning and Adler (2019), who argue that intergenerational service interactions can foster self-worth in vulnerable populations and compassion in student participants. Here, the act of clothing became symbolic—not just of warmth, but of *recognition and acceptance*.

Students also articulated how the outreach experience bridged theory and lived realities. A MAN student connected her learning to the core values of holistic care:

“In nursing, we’re taught that health isn’t just physical. It’s emotional, social, and spiritual. Seeing how the elderly lit up just from being listened to reminded me that sometimes, healing starts with attention—not medication.”

This aligns with Watson’s Theory of Human Caring (2018), which emphasizes the power of intentional presence and relational engagement in health contexts. The student’s insight reflects the move from textbook definitions of care to a profound, situated understanding born from actual human contact.

For the MAEd and EdD students, the outreach brought forward a new appreciation for experiential pedagogy. One EdD student shared:

“I’ve always advocated for student-centered learning, but this reminded me that education should be life-centered. How can we teach values in the classroom if we never embody them in our actions?”

This speaks to Freire’s (2017) notion of praxis—the fusion of reflection and action. By participating in WRAP in LOVE, the graduate students became agents of praxis, enacting the values of compassion, justice, and dignity they espoused in theory.

MBA and DBA students also experienced shifts in their views. A participant from the MBA program recounted:

“For years I focused on return on investment, productivity metrics. But here, I saw that impact can’t always be quantified. How do you measure the value of a smile from someone who thought they were forgotten?”

This insight parallels recent scholarship by Liu and Leung (2020), who advocate for compassionate leadership and social impact frameworks in business education, particularly in developing emotional intelligence and ethical decision-making among future administrators.

In this interpretive space, students came to understand the complex interplay between their roles as professionals-in-training and human beings-in-community. The meanings they derived were not only introspective but also outward-looking—many began to consider how their professions could be leveraged in service of the marginalized.

One DBA student concluded:

“This outreach made me ask: How can we use business not just to make profit but to bring dignity back to those the system often forgets? That’s a question I want to take with me into my career.”

Overall, the interpretive mode revealed a deep internalization of social and moral responsibility, catalyzed by direct engagement with those in need. The experience provided what Taylor (2017) identifies as a transformational learning juncture—where students reframe their worldviews through

critical reflection informed by personal and emotional experience. This stage of the ORID model, therefore, serves as the bridge from awareness and empathy to purposeful, values-driven action.

Decisional Mode: From Reflection to Resolve—Action Rooted in Compassion

The final phase of the ORID framework—the **decisional mode**—focused on how participants planned to integrate the lessons from their WRAP in LOVE experience into their personal, academic, and professional lives. Here, students articulated a renewed sense of *commitment to service*, with many resolving to continue similar outreach efforts, embed compassion in their professions, and influence others to take part in social action. This segment of their journey reflects what Mezirow (1991) calls a perspective transformation, whereby critical reflection leads to behavioral change and long-term reorientation of goals and values.

One MAEd participant summarized the lasting impact of the outreach:

“I don’t want this to be a one-time thing. I now plan to integrate outreach activities into my future classroom practice—maybe as student-led community projects. I want my learners to feel what I felt, to understand that education must go beyond textbooks.”

This response echoes Dewey’s principle that experience is not truly educative unless it leads to growth. For this participant, the outreach became a pedagogical model—a living lesson in empathy and social engagement that she aspires to replicate in her own teaching.

Students from business and administration programs were similarly affected. One MBA fellow reflected:

“We always talk about corporate social responsibility in class, but this experience made it real. I realized that businesses should not treat CSR as a checkbox activity. It should be part of the company’s soul. As a future executive, I want to lead with both strategy and compassion.”

This realization aligns with recent research by Patel and Mehta (2021), which asserts that purpose-driven leadership—that is, leadership that blends profit with purpose—yields stronger organizational cultures and more meaningful societal contributions.

Meanwhile, counseling and education students also expressed new ethical imperatives. A fellow from the MA Counseling program noted:

“WRAP in LOVE reminded me why I chose this profession. Counseling is not just about theories and diagnoses. It’s about presence, listening, seeing people as worthy. I promised myself I will never overlook the emotional needs of those who seem invisible.”

The emphasis on human dignity, as seen in this account, resonates with Noddings’ ethics of care (2016) and Furman and Lambie’s (2019) model of integrative counseling ethics, which position relational respect, responsiveness, and social justice as central to professional conduct.

Other participants drew parallels between their outreach work and the kind of leadership they hope to embody. A fellow shared:

“This wasn’t just an outreach. It was a call. A call to use our platforms—whether in business, education, or governance—to create systems that serve, not exclude. I want to be a policymaker who listens to voices from the margins.”

This statement reflects a shift toward advocacy-oriented leadership, as discussed by Banks (2017), who contends that transformative leaders must move from charity to empowerment, from assistance to systemic change.

Several participants expressed their intent to continue supporting the partner institutions—be it through donation drives, continued volunteering, or inviting others to do the same. One MAEd participant shared:

“I already told my friends and co-teachers: the orphanage needs more than one-time help. They need consistency. I want to organize quarterly visits even after I graduate.”

The decisional reflections showed that the outreach had planted *seeds of sustained civic action*—a key indicator of what Astin et al. (2016) describe as deep civic learning, where participants move from personal involvement to long-term social commitment.

Notably, many participants emphasized that what they received from the experience far outweighed what they gave. As one MAN fellow aptly stated:

"We came to give clothes, but we left with full hearts. I'm not just a student anymore. I'm a person more aware of what it means to be part of a community."

In this final phase, the transition from experience to action became evident. The outreach initiative, while temporally limited, proved to have lasting emotional and ethical consequences. As such, it fulfilled what Eyler (2016) describes as the most powerful outcome of service-learning: a moral awakening that shapes not only what students know but who they become.

Implications

The findings of this study reveal far-reaching implications for graduate education, professional formation, and institutional commitment to community-engaged learning. Through the WRAP in LOVE initiative, graduate students from diverse disciplines experienced a profound transformation—one rooted in relational encounter, ethical reflection, and a renewed sense of social responsibility. These implications cut across the personal, pedagogical, and institutional levels and point to promising future directions for San Pablo Colleges and similarly positioned academic institutions.

At the educational level, the results underscore the power of experiential learning in shaping student attitudes and values. The ORID-guided reflections highlighted that compassion, dignity, and human connection are best internalized not in abstract theoretical frameworks but in authentic encounters with marginalized populations. Graduate students from education, nursing, business, and counseling programs reported greater awareness of their professional responsibilities and a renewed commitment to ethical and inclusive service. This affirms the value of integrating structured outreach and reflection into graduate-level curricula. Institutions would benefit from institutionalizing such service-learning models as part of academic programs, ensuring that social engagement becomes a continuous, reflective practice rather than a one-time event.

From an institutional standpoint, WRAP in LOVE positions San Pablo Colleges as a learning institution that lives out its core values, particularly in terms of service, pride, and community solidarity. The outreach initiative demonstrates the potential of mobilizing graduate students not only as learners but as servant leaders and change agents. The implications suggest that outreach must not be limited to commemorative occasions like anniversaries but should be embedded into the rhythm of institutional life. San Pablo Colleges could consider establishing a Community Engagement Office or Service-Learning Program Coordination **Unit** to ensure sustainable linkages with partner organizations, proper monitoring and evaluation, and alignment with national development goals such as those articulated in the MATATAG Agenda and SDGs.

Professionally, the study points to the need for embedding values-based leadership, ethical responsiveness, and interpersonal empathy in the core competencies expected of graduate students. The consistent finding across all programs was that students do not simply want to excel in academic or technical knowledge—they want to be professionals who uplift the lives of others. This desire should be supported through courses that include reflective practice, critical pedagogy, and modules on inclusive community work, ethics of care, and social entrepreneurship. The outreach also highlighted the importance of equipping graduate students with the tools to understand systemic inequalities, so they can move from compassion to advocacy.

Future Directions

Looking forward, several future directions arise. First, there is an opportunity to develop longitudinal studies that track the long-term impact of outreach experiences on graduate student dispositions, career paths, and leadership styles. This can provide evidence of the enduring influence of values-driven service-learning. Second, future outreach initiatives should consider more interdisciplinary collaboration, wherein students from various programs work together to develop multi-dimensional interventions—from educational workshops for orphans to wellness programs for the elderly. Third, building on the success of WRAP in LOVE, future iterations may include policy and program proposals co-developed with community partners, moving from charity models to co-designed empowerment models.

Finally, to ensure that the essence of “wrapping in love” is preserved, the college may consider including beneficiaries in feedback processes, allowing their voices to inform future programming. Their narratives, combined with those of students, can contribute to a richer understanding of mutual transformation—a hallmark of truly meaningful community engagement.

WRAP in LOVE offers not just warmth through clothing, but a pedagogy of care, a pathway for transformative leadership, and a blueprint for compassionate institutional identity. The challenge and opportunity now lie in sustaining the momentum, deepening the reflections, and institutionalizing the commitment to serve with love and dignity.

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