



**ARTICLE**

# “I’m Now Braver than Ever.” The Perceived Impacts of the Finnish “Gutsy Go” Program for Enhancing Adolescents’ Psychosocial Well-Being: A Qualitative Study

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**ABSTRACT: Objectives:** Positive Youth Development is an evidence-based, holistic approach that underlines adolescents’ strengths, competence, and interests instead of deficits, thus promoting psychosocial well-being in adolescents. This study aims to explore adolescents’ perceived impacts of the Finnish service-learning program “Gutsy Go”, which is based on a Positive Youth Development approach. **Methods:** The program educates 8th-grade comprehensive school students to perform good deeds in their communities and enhances adolescents’ psychosocial well-being. Focus group interviews were conducted two to three weeks after the program week with 61 program participants. The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. **Results:** Four broad themes of the perceived impacts of the program were derived from the data: emotional impacts, impacts on competence, impacts within the group, and lessons learned for future use. **Conclusions:** The perceived impacts of the Gutsy Go program in this study were mostly positive and related to adolescents’ psychosocial well-being. More studies are needed regarding the underlying mechanisms between participation in the program and the perceived impacts.

**KEYWORDS:** Adolescence; psychosocial well-being; positive youth development; school-based program; service-learning

## 1 Introduction

Adolescence as a challenging developmental phase is simultaneously tinged with the growing challenges of emotion regulation [1] and the heightened need for social cohesion and relatedness [2]. Indeed, psychosocial well-being in adolescence includes dimensions of psychological well-being (e.g., thoughts and emotions) and social and collective well-being (e.g., relationships and social participations) [3,4]. The ability to consider others’ needs, concerns, and perspectives strengthens throughout adolescence and, thus, simultaneously increases adolescents’ potential to thrive at a collective level of social life by, e.g., contributing more to the community [5]. However, loneliness and lack of social cohesion during adolescence have increased over the past years and are, therefore, significant public health matters [6,7].

The adolescents’ ability to contribute as active agents is underdetected, and the potential interventions that effectively target increasing youth agency are still rare [5]. The shift from programs designed “for” youth into programs carried “by” or “with” youth is based on the principles of positive youth development

(PYD). PYD is an evidence-based, holistic approach that underlines adolescents' strengths, competence, and interests rather than deficits, needs, or risks when applied in, e.g., programs for promoting psychosocial well-being and active agency [8,9]. The PYD approach is closely related to the self-determination theory that describes individuals as having three basic needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—through which someone's behavior is most efficiently motivated [10]. Enabling youth to actively practice future adult roles and autonomy in programs designed to promote their psychosocial well-being reportedly increases adolescents' participation, motivation, and other beneficial outcomes such as prosocial behavior and socio-emotional skills [11,12].

Service-learning is an experimental learning approach to implement PYD ideology in adolescents' everyday life by extending from the classroom to communities, guiding students to deliver social services to their communities. Service-learning programs aim to promote students' active agency and social participation, enhancing their awareness of social responsibilities and of their own abilities to influence problem-solving within the community [13].

Studies exploring the effects of service-learning programs in early adolescence are still scarce [14,15]. It is reported that participation in a service-learning program in adolescence improves leadership skills [15], communal participation and collaboration and cohesion, and enhances finding meaningfulness through social contributions, and increases awareness of self and others [16]. Later in adolescence, service-learning programs are associated with increased emotional intelligence and enhanced ability to overcome adversity in life [17]. Furthermore, good experiences in service-learning programs predict stronger intentions to continue with social and civic activities in the future [18].

The Finnish Gutsy Go program is a service-learning program that relies on the PYD approach with its design to enhance adolescents' psychosocial well-being and social participation by enabling the youth to actively plan and perform good deeds in their own community. It is a school-based program lasting for one week in which students are guided to plan, perform, and reflect on a good deed in their community together with peers. The central ideology of the program concentrates on the active role of adolescents in decision-making. The Gutsy Go program arises from the ideology that every adolescent has unique talents, strengths, and potential—an ideology that is in line with the basic thoughts behind the PYD approach [8]. Furthermore, adolescence is the developmental phase when the need to contribute to others is linked to the development of identity [5]. The Gutsy Go program aims to engage different levels of contribution possibilities, e.g., school, peers, and community. The role of adults in the program is to provide support and facilities for the adolescents to actively design their good deed and to perform it; therefore, adults are not to order, direct, or decide on behalf of the adolescents but to help them to thrive. Thus, the Gutsy Go program aims to provide an arena for adolescents to rehearse social roles they will adopt in the future as grown-up adults. Thus, the theoretical context of the program is linked to the 5 C's of self-determination theory related to PYD: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring/compassion [8].

The Gutsy Go program's positive impact on students' social competence has also recently been explored by a quasi-experimental study design and reported by Ahrnberg et al. [19]. The current study aims to gather in-depth views on the program participants' perceived impacts on the Gutsy Go program by using focus group interviews shortly after the program had ended.

## **2 Material and Methods**

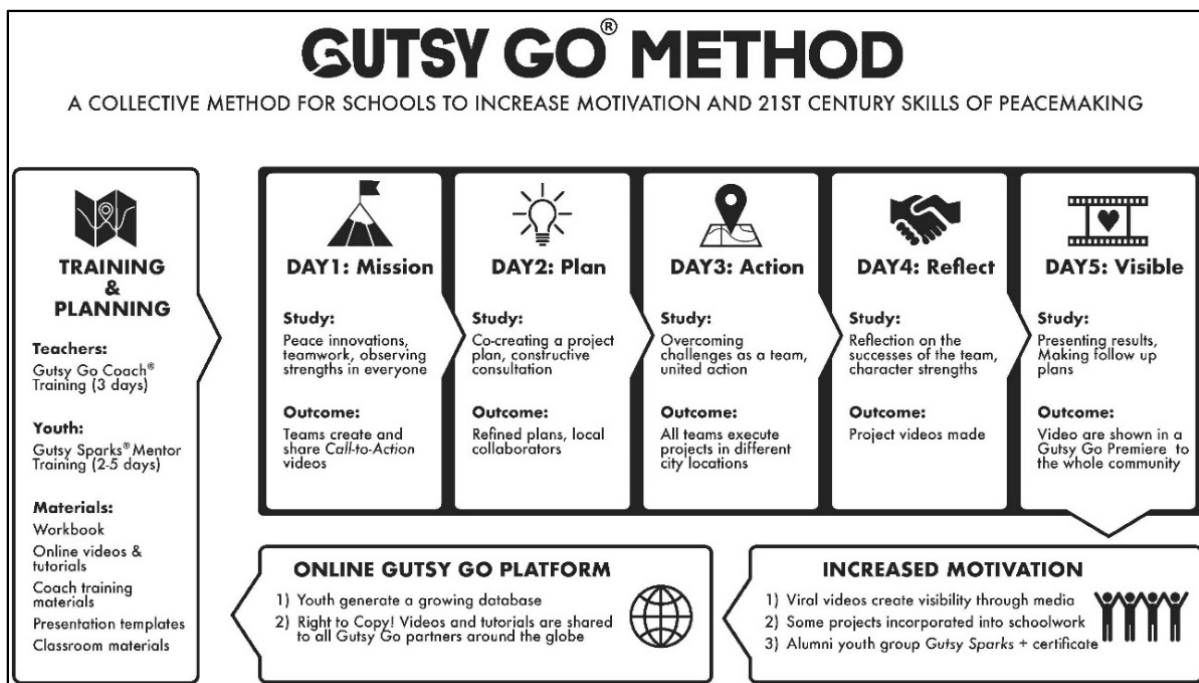
### **2.1 Gutsy Go Program**

The Gutsy Go program was developed together with Finnish educators, media professionals, and in cooperation with comprehensive school students, for schools and municipalities to enhance participation,

trust, and well-being in society (<https://www.gutsygo.fi>). The Gutsy Go program focuses on empowering adolescents to take action and actively interact not only with each other but also with other community members by enabling all eighth graders (mostly 14-year-olds) to develop and execute good deeds in their hometowns.

The Gutsy Go program is a school-based program that lasts for one school week (five school days) during which the students are exempt from regular school activities and challenged to perform good deeds within their community under the guidance of Gutsy Go coaches.

The flowchart of the Gutsy Go program week is presented in Fig. 1. The students receive an introduction to the Gutsy Go method and the program's ideology before being divided into groups of approximately ten students on the first day of the program week. In these groups, the students are assigned a task to invent a good deed they wish to perform in their community. The students make a concrete plan on the second day on how to prepare and implement the good deed. This phase of the program typically includes contacting potential sponsors and partners who are asked to support the students' implementation of the good deed. The third day is the main day when the good deeds are concretely performed. An important part of the program is documenting the program process, from expressing ideas to actual implementation and, finally, reflecting on the experience. The students are guided to record the process with their own mobile phones. Their recorded materials are then edited on the fourth day of the Gutsy Go program week with the help of media professionals, leading to videos of each good deed performed during the week. The videos are published online and screened in the school and in local premieres open for anyone to join on the fifth and last day of the program. The adolescents have the potential to serve as inspirations beyond their own communities by publishing the videos across social media.



**Figure 1:** The Gutsy Go program week.

The program was first implemented in 2017 and has been performed in various cities, reaching over 5000 comprehensive school students in Finland, Estonia, and Latvia. To date, adolescents have, for example, taught immigrants to skate, introduced internet skills to female inmates, organized playtime

for kindergarten children, and developed an experiment to increase awareness of bullying among youth (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FTHANZKu7Q>). In 2024, the Gutsy Go program was recognized by the European Commission's Best Practice Portal (2024) as best practice for mental health promotion.

## 2.2 Data Collection

A qualitative focus group interview enables the expression of different opinions and further articulation of thoughts within a dialogue between the interviewer and the participants [20], and was therefore chosen as the method of the current study. Six focus group interviews were conducted in three different schools for 61 8th-grade students (35 girls and 26 boys) at two to three weeks after participating in the Gutsy Go program in September 2020. The good deeds the students performed during the Gutsy Go program week are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Themes of the good deeds performed by the students who participated in the focus group study after the Gutsy Go program.

Focus Group Number	School	Number of Students	Themes of the Good Deeds
1	I	17 (8 girls, 9 boys)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooking for the school kitchen staff</li> <li>• Cleaning the school</li> </ul>
2	I	11 (4 girls, 7 boys)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizing an activity playground for 1st graders (7-year olds)</li> </ul>
3	II	9 (5 girls, 4 boys)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visiting elderly care homes and keeping company with the elderly</li> </ul>
4	II	10 (6 girls, 4 boys)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visiting a group of adolescents with mental health problems and painting portraits of their support persons together with them</li> </ul>
5	III	6 (5 girls, 1 boy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thanking the local police officers by offering coffee and cake to them</li> <li>• Taking underprivileged kids to an indoor amusement park</li> <li>• Visiting an elderly care home and serving coffee and cake to the elderly</li> <li>• Taking a group of kids to a library and baking muffins with them (providing simultaneously their parents a coffee break)</li> </ul>
6	III	8 (7 girls, 1 boy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visiting an elderly care home and serving coffee and cake to the elderly</li> <li>• Cleaning outdoors in the city</li> <li>• Teaching Finnish language to barbers who were foreigners, and engaging customers to participate in the teaching process</li> </ul>

Two groups of students from each school, according to class division, were randomly selected; the group size varied between 6 and 17 students. The variation between group sizes was due to school schedules: the study was conducted within a regular school week, and teachers had the autonomy to decide in which lesson the interview could be conducted so that it would fit the best in the study program and would cause the minimum distraction to regular school activities. Thus, some of the focus group interviews were

conducted with half a class, and some, for the so-called combined class, included students from two classes of students. The number of boys and girls varied between groups. Each interview lasted an average of 62 min (range 50–76 min). The information to students about participating in the study was given by the first author and the Gutsy Go program manager through the schools. The procedure was based on passive consent that assumes participation or data collection unless the subject explicitly refuses. Participation was voluntary, and those who were willing to participate were informed about the possibility of refusing to participate at any time without any consequences. The ethical approval for the study was received from the Ethics Committee of Youth and Childhood Studies in 2019 (L4/2021).

All six interviews were conducted by the first author together with a senior supervisor with previous experience in focus group interviews (2nd and 5th authors). The interviews were conducted during a regular school class with the teacher's presence, but without the teacher participating in the actual interview. The interviews were carried out via video call (Microsoft Teams) due to the restrictions on social contact in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students were informed at the beginning of each interview of the study's purpose and of the confidentiality and anonymity regarding the data collected. The interview followed a semistructured discussion guide. The focus was on the students' experiences and the perceived impacts of the Gutsy Go program. The research question for the current study was: What were the perceived impacts of participation in the Gutsy Go program? Each interview was based on a natural discussion flow and did not strictly follow the discussion guide. However, the interviewers ensured that all the relevant topics were discussed. The participants were given an opportunity at the end of the interviews to bring up any topics that had not been discussed before. All focus group discussions were digitally recorded and later transcribed into 118 pages of transcribed text (font Calibri, size 11). Each student received a movie ticket as a reward for participating in the interview.

### **2.3 Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed with a qualitative content analysis to find the main themes that contributed to our research question. The analysis followed a stepwise, inductive, i.e., data-driven, approach according to Graneheim et al. [21] to retain the credibility and trustworthiness of the process. First, the transcribed text was read thoroughly multiple times to identify the expressions and themes relevant to the aim of our study. A thematic sorting of the data was performed after the initial observation by making notes and coding all the parts of the transcribed text that were interpreted to be helpful in understanding the topic. Then, the reduction of the data and clustering of those themes and subthemes that were relevant for the study were performed. Conceptually similar sentences and paragraphs were grouped according to these themes. The transcribed interviews were read again to fulfill and update the thematic division template. The first author performed the first coding. Together with the second author, the actual coding was performed using Microsoft Excel to ease the data's interpretation. All the authors discussed and reflected on the interpretation of the data and on the thematic division to increase the level of trustworthiness, and to reach a consensus regarding the codes, themes, and subthemes.

### **3 Results**

Four main themes were found in the analysis to contribute to the aim of our study on the program's perceived impacts: (1) emotional impacts; (2) impacts on competence; (3) impacts within the group; and (4) lessons learned for future use. Table 2 presents the different levels of analysis.

**Table 2:** Examples of different levels of analysis.

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Quotation
Emotional impacts	Positive emotional impact	Good feeling	'Like, it felt good to be able to tell things to others.'
Impacts on competence	Increase in courage	Got the courage to venture oneself into new situations	'And then one learned a bit of venturing into situations.'
Impacts within the group	Improving group dynamics	Improving team spirit	'Well, at least team spirit got better.'
Lessons learned for future use	Own agency	The will to continue to be friendly to strangers in the future	'Maybe when we were able to talk to those random people in a friendly way, maybe that would be nice to do in everyday life.'

### 3.1 Impacts of the Program

Four broad themes were derived from the data: emotional impacts, impacts on competence, impacts within the group, and lessons learned for future use. Table 3 presents an overview of themes, subthemes, and their coding.

**Table 3:** Overview of themes, sub-themes, and groups of codes.

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Theme 1: Emotional impacts	1.1 Positive feelings	1.1.1 Feeling good for doing a good deed 1.1.2 Feeling good about reactions from those who were helped 1.1.3 Feeling proud 1.1.4 Feeling brave 1.1.5 Feeling gratitude 1.1.6 Generating overall good feelings in others 1.1.7 Making others happy 1.1.8 Making others feel gratitude
	1.2 Negative feelings	1.2.1 Feeling scared 1.2.2 Feeling overwhelmed 1.2.3 Feeling distress
Theme 2: Impacts on competence	2.1 Increase in courage	2.1.1 Got the courage to venture oneself into new situations 2.1.2 Got the courage to face strangers 2.1.3 Got the courage to interact with peers
	2.2 Strengthening of social skills	2.2.1 Gained the ability to be socially adept with different kinds of people 2.2.2 Gained the ability to use situational awareness with different kinds of people 2.2.3 Gained the ability to get along with different kinds of people 2.2.4 Gained the ability to create a good atmosphere with different kinds of people 2.2.5 Learned to be fair to others
	2.3 Increase in own awareness	2.3.1 Understanding of peers increased 2.3.2 Understanding of strangers increased 2.3.3 Awareness increased of one's own and others' ability to detect problems 2.3.4 Increased the ability to detect things that should be done about and possible ways to help 2.3.5 Positive attitude strengthened
	2.4 Increase in others' awareness	2.4.1 The attitude of others towards young people became more positive 2.4.2 Becoming able to teach self-compassion to others

**Table 3: Cont.**

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Theme 3: Impacts within the group	3.1 Improvement in group dynamics	3.1.1 Improvement in team spirit 3.1.2 Improvement in getting along within the group 3.1.3 Increase in mutual understanding within the group
	3.2 Improvement in the ability for appreciative encounters	3.2.1 Increase in appreciation of others within the group 3.2.2 Others' ideas were listened to and accepted 3.2.3 Peers were able to treat others equally and to take others seriously
Theme 4: Lessons learned for future use	4.1 Own agency	4.1.1 The will to keep experiences (of the program) in mind 4.1.2 The will to continue doing good deeds 4.1.3 Aim to recognize the need for help 4.1.4 The will to continue to be friendly to strangers in the future
	4.2 Collective agency	4.2.1 Redo the program 4.2.2 Keep giving positive feedback in school 4.2.3 Keep strengthening group skills and social skills in school 4.2.4 Aim to achieve a common state of will in order to do good 4.2.5 Keep increasing awareness in the community

### 3.1.1 Emotional Impacts

The theme 'Emotional impacts' captures the experienced and expressed feelings in self and others during the program week. 'Positive feelings' were more common than 'Negative feelings'.

Students reported it "felt good" to perform a good deed for others and to have the courage to venture oneself into new, exciting situations. They experienced positive feelings when they saw the positive and joyful reactions and gratitude from the strangers they helped with their good deeds.

*'Our goal was to cheer up others. And then when we saw the paintings we had made (for them), and how the paintings were praised. And they were glad that we made them. That made us feel good.'*  
(Boy, focus group 4)

The students reported gratitude for 'getting sponsors', 'getting positive feedback', 'doing things together with others', and for 'succeeding' and 'having the opportunity to perform the good deed'. The emotional impacts were not limited only to the students themselves; they were also generated in the community. Students reported they made, e.g., police, customers, school cook, and elderly people 'happy' and 'made them smile' with their good deed. The students also generated gratitude in others.

*'And that made us feel really good that the customers were so grateful, and the barbers also, so that it made ourselves feel grateful, and of course, every time making others feel good makes you feel good too.'* (Girl, focus group 6)

Feelings of courage were reported from interacting with strangers: 'making phone calls' and 'when I had to go to the store to ask for a sponsor', especially were something the students had never done before; therefore, a lot of courage was needed to manage to cope with the task.

Many students reported they experienced courage in relation to interactions with peers when expressing ideas and thoughts. Regarding grouping exercises, one student reported 'it felt good to talk about things', and another said that 'to tell your own story, and about some problems you've had, to the whole group, like that was quite brave'. Positive emotions arose from receiving understanding and appreciative feedback from their peers, and when interpreting that their peers could possibly relate to others' stories, thoughts, and experiences.

*'And then you realized that it caused a positive feeling when someone could relate to, and when you noticed that you were taken seriously, and no one started to joke around or something.'* (Girl, focus group 5)

Furthermore, one student felt she had the courage to start to talk to her classmates who were completely new to her because of entering a new school just a short while before the program week; to be able to do so made her feel proud of herself.

*'Well, I was pretty proud of myself for I could start talking to everybody, even though I'm a new student here, and I didn't really know anyone here in my class. So, through that project I basically started to talk to my classmates a lot.'* (Girl, focus group 6)

Some negative emotional impacts were also detected, even though they were very few in number compared to the positive emotional impacts. Therefore, the second subtheme 'Negative feelings' contributes to feelings of being scared, overwhelmed, and distressed. In most of the groups, the students reported feelings of distress due to the time limit and having only one school week to manage a quite extensive task. Similarly, in most of the groups, interacting with strangers was reported as a somewhat stressful situation. Some students reported feeling overwhelmed when their plan of a good deed had to be changed to something else because of difficulties in organizing the act. The time limit gave additional pressure to the program week.

*'We had to change the idea, because other groups had the same idea and even with the same location.'* (Girl, focus group 2)

Some students felt slightly distressed at the beginning of the program and were scared about the task and the need to confront strangers. Additionally, realizing the amount of problematic things in the community that should be done felt overwhelming, as well as realizing one's limited opportunities to help.

*'Well, maybe that was a bit distressing that there was only one week time to complete the project, and that when I realized that there were so many problems, but one wasn't able to do so much to those things, especially within just one week.'* (Girl, focus group 6)

In one of the groups, the experience seemed more neutral compared to the other groups. Mostly, the perceived benefits and positive emotional impacts were related to the fact that students were not obliged to perform regular school activities.

*'We were allowed to leave the school and do other things.'* (Boy, focus group 1)

Mixed feelings with both positive and negative emotional impacts at the same time were also reported. Some students felt they had positive feelings about the program week, but afterwards they felt disappointed because they needed to go back to regular school activities, since they would have liked to continue the program.

*'It was interesting and fun. But I don't know, it felt good, but at the same time a bit bad. It felt bad when I would have wanted to continue the Gutsy go when we were doing so well on Thursday, when we were painting, and would have wanted to keep on going.'* (Boy, focus group 4)

### 3.1.2 Impacts on Competence

The theme 'Impacts on competence' has four subthemes and captures the program's effect on the students' strengths, skills, and awareness. This theme also includes the effect of the program on the awareness of others besides the students.

The first subtheme, 'Increase in courage' relates closely to the students' description of experiences of skills they considered were needed during the program, e.g., 'It took a lot of courage to make the phone calls', and the positive feelings they reported feeling during the program, e.g., 'I feel now braver than ever'. The students described that they acquired the courage to venture into new situations and 'learned to throw oneself into new settings', even when 'not knowing exactly what we were supposed to do'. They reported that facing strangers and people of different ages brought them courage, e.g., 'we got the courage to go there and film the elderly people', which revealed their ability to go into their discomfort zone in order to pursue something good.

*"In the Gutsy Go week, we went there to talk to random people, so I don't know, I guess that shows one have to gain courage to be able to do that."* (Boy, focus group 4)

Many students reported they gained the courage to interact with peers in a way they felt would not normally happen. Students described they were a bit afraid of how their peers would react to their ideas, and they felt they needed to gain courage to be able to speak out. 'But when you managed to say it out loud, others listened and took it well'.

The second subtheme, 'Strengthening of social skills', refers to students' descriptions of gaining skills to interact successfully with people of different ages and different backgrounds. Students described that they needed to be 'socially adept' and able to 'use situational awareness in whom you're talking to'. Many students reported they learned to 'get along with others'. One student reported after experiencing the program, 'I dare to be more social with other people' in the future. Students described that they learned to create a good, peaceful atmosphere among different people and therefore to unite people together.

*'Even though we were all of different ages, we still managed to do things together, and that brought people together.'* (Girl, focus group 6)

Interacting with strangers from different backgrounds made students learn 'how to be fair to others' and how one could 'treat others equally' even when not sharing the same background or interests.

*'Basically, thinking of how to be fair and to treat everyone equally. If you like something, it doesn't mean everyone has to like it. And still, you should take everyone seriously and act like it, because everyone is different and there is nothing wrong with that. Then there would become less that kind of bullying and such. Just to take everyone seriously.'* (Girl, focus group 6)

The third subtheme, 'Increase in own awareness', comprises students' thoughts on the increase in awareness regarding people, i.e., strangers and peers, and their own community. Many students brought up that they were surprised by their peers' shyness: 'Everyone was so shy'. Speaking to elderly people was especially described as a learning experience, and it became clear to the students that the elderly experienced loneliness and, thus, were glad to talk to them.

*'It was nice to listen to the elderly talk and so. It was nice to listen when I realized that I haven't really listened to elderly people's stories. And I noticed that some of them didn't have any close people, and they would therefore talk quite a lot because they didn't have anyone to talk to.'* (Girl, focus group 3)

The increased awareness also became evident by many students reporting that they realized during the project how many problems exist that people should do something about. They described that they started to observe that 'not everyone even notices that there are so many problems' and there are 'many problems where one could really help'. However, students also noticed that not all people are indifferent,

and that, e.g., ‘people are interested about environment’. Students were wondering ‘why no one has done anything about the problems before’.

Some students described their increase in awareness as a process emerging during the program week. Students began to capture the collective aspect of the good deeds and how to pass on the ideology within their community.

*‘Well, in the beginning, it wasn’t really clear. At first, I at least thought that let’s just do something, some project where we do good things. But then in the middle of the week, I realized that there was quite a lot of the aim to bring people together, so that it wouldn’t be just us in the group doing the thing, but the idea was to help out the whole city. Like, everyone would do it with us. Or so, so that others would join in.’* (Girl, focus group 6)

Finally, to the theme of ‘Increase in own awareness’, the students reported adapting a positive attitude and a strengthened awareness of their actual ability to help by their own actions.

*‘Like the whole team, or the Gutsy Go program. The idea is like really good, and it can help. It gives help to many people and helped to consider adolescents more, and I think it helped some people to think more positively.’* (Girl, focus group 6)

The fourth subtheme, ‘Increase in others’ awareness’, captures how the students thought the program affected the awareness of others other than the students. The students discussed that attitudes towards adolescents possibly had changed through the program and their interaction with different groups of people. The students thought that ‘grannies were surprised’ by their meetings with the adolescents, and some elderly people changed their thoughts on adolescents to be more positive after the students’ visits to the elderly people. One group described how they managed to teach self-compassion and being supportive to adults facing a difficult situation, a difficult situation similar to where the adolescents themselves were during the program. Therefore, the students increased others’ awareness of mediating compassion and being kind to themselves and others.

*‘In the beginning, I noticed when we went to the barber shop, they didn’t have the courage to say anything because they were afraid that it would go wrong. But then we showed that it’s important that they try. I mean, all of us get something wrong sometimes, and no one can do everything. Then you learn.’* (Girl, focus group 6)

### 3.1.3 Impacts within the Group

The theme ‘Impacts within the group’ highlights the effect of the program on intragroup phenomena and has two subthemes. ‘Within the group’ refers in this context to the students participating in the program. The first subtheme, ‘Improvement in group dynamics’, involves experiences of ‘improving team spirit’ and ‘improving getting along’ among the students. The students described that they reached a mutual understanding during the program week and were able to share the same goals of generating ‘good spirit’ and ‘peace’ in the community. The students felt that ‘others understood’ and ‘there were no (negative) comments’ when generating ideas for the good deed. Students described that they felt they were all taken seriously and given an opportunity to give their opinions, and that others’ ideas were listened to and accepted respectfully.

*‘And then, everyone got along during that week. There were no conflicts or bickering, like “that’s not a good idea” or anything like that. Everyone agreed on things and that the ideas were good.’* (Girl, focus group 5)

### 3.1.4 Lessons Learned for Future Use

The theme ‘Lessons learned for future use’ describes the students’ thoughts on the will and ways to maintain the skills and knowledge gained during the program. The first subtheme, ‘Own agency’, describes the students’ thoughts on their own future goals based upon what they learned during the Gutsy Go program. Many students expressed their willingness to keep on practicing the skills learned during the program by actively ‘keeping in mind the experiences’ and ‘when realizing something that needs to be done, one could really do it’ and ‘not passing by’ problems that should be solved. Some students thought they could try to ‘do such things on a daily basis’, and some already reported they had been continuing the good deeds by, e.g., helping the elderly. A friendly attitude towards strangers was something the students thought they could continue doing.

*‘Well, I have been helping some grannies to carry their grocery bags that at least looked really heavy. I don’t know if that was very challenging, but anyway.’* (Girl, focus group 6)

The second subtheme, ‘Collective agency’, represents the students’ thoughts on how to expand the lessons learned on a larger scale. Many students brought their wish to continue doing similar projects at school into the discussion, e.g., ‘going to the elderly care home in history class’, or even doing the Gutsy Go program again. Students thought that similar programs on a smaller scale could be done in the school, even on a ‘weekly basis’ by ‘going through positive things by everyone in turn’ to promote giving and getting positive feedback in the school. Students wished to receive feedback on things they have succeeded in as they received during the program week. Enhancing group dynamics and social skills were discussed in many interviewed groups, and students wished that ‘no one would joke around in a way that could hurt someone’ and ‘everyone should be taken seriously’.

Students thought that ‘the will to do good’ should be a matter for all people, despite their background and age, ‘not only adolescents’. According to the students, achieving a common will to do good requires ‘something that adolescents, children, and the elderly would all be interested in’. The students discussed that helping others should be ‘everyone’s responsibility’. They also generated ideas for how to spread the Gutsy Go program’s ideology to a wider audience and to ‘increase visibility’ so that ‘more people would see it and get excited about it’, thus leading to a snowball effect.

*“One could try to get it to a ‘higher level’, like on tv. I don’t know, has it ever been though, but like some adults could see it by accident in the evening, and get interested, and when many enough are changed, everyone begins to help.”* (Girl, focus group 6)

## 4 Discussion

The current study’s main findings were that adolescents reported perceived impacts on emotions and competence, and impacts within the group, as well as lessons learned for future use from participating in the Gutsy Go program. The interviews also reflected the students’ general views and experiences of the program, with most reporting a positive tone. The perceived impacts seemed to reflect well the theoretical framework the Gutsy Go program is designed with, the PYD. The perceived impacts were closely related to the 5 C’s of self-determination [8,10], including gaining competence, experiencing a sense of connection with others, improving confidence and self-efficacy in varying situations, enhancing awareness of moral issues, and caring for others.

The emotional impacts derived from the interviews included positive emotions generated not only from doing a good deed but also from receiving positive feedback from others by words (e.g., thanking and praising), expressions (e.g., smiling), and reflective discussions (e.g., expressing gratitude). The students

performed their good deeds in the Gutsy Go program in face-to-face interactions with others, which is interesting because social connection, especially when performing good deeds in a face-to-face manner, has been reported to be important in transforming good deeds into positive emotions [22].

Helping others and the associated positive emotional feedback from self and others is reportedly good for adolescents' general well-being. Adolescents with higher levels of altruism are reported to have more positive emotions and higher life satisfaction [23,24]. Enhancing one's own sense of gratitude, which was also reported by Gutsy Go program participants, is also reported to act as a protective factor against depressive symptoms in adolescence [25]. Therefore, enabling interpersonal situations in which adolescents can experience more positive emotions can have drastic effects on multiple levels of psychosocial well-being. As some students reported negative emotional impacts within the program, it should be acknowledged that the increase in positive emotions can act as a counterweight to negative emotions in order to reach a balance with various emotions in a tolerable way [23]. Therefore, emotional impacts are not necessarily only an outcome of a counteract but are also a reflection of a mechanism underlying associations between social interactions and different dimensions of psychosocial well-being.

One of the perceived impacts on competence was the increase in courage reported by many students who participated in the program. Students used the term 'courage' in various ways in the interviews, not only to describe an emotional impact but also as a type of act or behavior and something more stable—a disposition. A sense of courage or of being brave was associated in some of the students with feeling other emotions, e.g., joy, pride, or being surprised, indicating that courage can indeed have many forms and functions in coping and experiencing different situations. The perceived increase in courage is an important outcome, since courage is known to associate with better life satisfaction and to mediate the relationship between the ability to tolerate uncertainty in school and career-related future fears in adolescence [26]. Increasing one's courage can have the potential to enable experiences of success and overcoming challenges and, further on, to enhance one's sense of autonomy and feeling capable, which are basic psychological needs indicated for well-being [27].

The perceived impacts on strengthening social skills were related to interacting not only with strangers but also with peers. The need for social cohesion, acceptance, and a sense of belonging is vital for adolescent well-being as well as for fulfilling developmental tasks typical for that age [2,28,29]. Beyond just an individual's well-being, improving one's prosocial skills and, thus, improving social cohesion is a potential route to decreasing bullying in schools [30]. Adolescent loneliness, including school loneliness, has increased over the past years [6,7]. The literature suggests that interventions designed for the general population would be the most acceptable for reducing their loneliness and social isolation, but more research is needed on the most feasible mechanisms and designs to address this problem [6]. The Gutsy Go program is designed for a general population; therefore, further studies on its potential to reduce bullying and loneliness would be well addressed after the current study's findings.

Social cohesion is typically linked to a shared or mutual understanding and therefore to awareness of one's own and others' thoughts, emotions, and capacities. The adolescents in this study reported an increased awareness of self and others and, on a larger scale, of the environment and community. Adolescents' awareness of societal inequality has been reported to predict future civic engagement and, thus, agency within the community [31]. In this study, students reported an increased awareness regarding the environment, and the unmet needs and unsolved problems present in the community. Long et al. [32] studied adolescents' environmental awareness and reported that they have a great potential to receive information and thus, to increase awareness of the environment, but the effects are not long-lasting unless they are actively maintained.

It should be acknowledged that in this study, the students' reports of negative emotional impacts were linked to their increased awareness of concerns present in the community. Therefore, increased awareness seems to be a somewhat controversial influence for adolescents; thus, the need for trustworthy adults' presence and social support is important when the youth are facing new, potentially overwhelming situations. Receiving social support from their peers, teachers, and family also facilitates the increase in subjective well-being in even the more vulnerable adolescents [33]. A sense of social support can also buffer internalizing and externalizing symptoms in times of distress [34] and, thus, may help individuals cope with stressful and adverse experiences, such as any overwhelming emotions associated with increased awareness.

Many of the perceived impacts described by the students are related to the concept of psychological safety—feeling safe in one's environment so it is possible to grow, learn, contribute, and perform successfully, and to be creative [35,36]. Psychological safety enables expressing oneself without fear of negative consequences, such as not being accepted, suffering from deprivation of one's status or image, and having a stronger will to take interpersonal risks, e.g., venturing oneself into new situations [35–37]. The Gutsy Go program participants reported improvements in understanding their peers, feeling connectedness, and a sense of acceptance in one's group and on a larger scale, in one's community, all of which have the potential to enhance psychological safety. The students reported they felt taken seriously by their peers and adults in situations when there were risks of otherwise being laughed at or bullied. Therefore, students who reported that they were able to express their own ideas, to share their experiences, and to use creativity and prosocial skills to solve the problem of how to perform a good deed during the program were probably already provided with the possibility of feeling psychologically safe in their community.

As presented, promoting youth agency increases adolescents' participation motivation and even socioemotional skills [11] and should be considered more often in programs designed for youth [5]. The students who participated in the Gutsy Go program reported quite extensively that they would wish to keep their learned skills in mind and how they could act in their everyday life to do good and to spread the program's ideology. It could be that this enthusiasm was reached through active participation and encouraging the students to actively design and carry out the project by themselves, but with adequate support from the adults.

Many students discussed in the interviews that they felt that, despite their improved agency, they would need support and a suitable framework from the school and the adults around them to be able to further exercise the skills learned and to collectively maintain the program's benefits. Lavy [38] described that indeed a central challenge of educational organizations is to be able to foster young people's capacity to fulfill their potential, which is also one of the Gutsy Go program's aims. Fostering students' autonomous motivation through positive affects and positive feedback for successful actions is known to predict helping behavior better than external motivation [39,40]. In fact, Telle and Pfister [40] proposed that after an experience of such positive feedback, the likelihood of seizing an opportunity to help others increases, both when the opportunity arises spontaneously or as directly formulated. Providing training for adults who work with young people is a potential route to increase adolescents' positive encounters and enhance their positive relationships across contexts, from school to community.

Repetition or another active reinforcement of the learned skills is needed to maintain the beneficial outcomes of any program. Furthermore, importantly linked to the service-learning program is the reflection process, during which students are encouraged to understand their experiences through, e.g., engagement in the discussion [41]. Adolescents have already reached the ability for reflective discussion and abstract thinking in their development, such that they are capable and willing to engage in reflection and, thus, to use service-learning opportunities to evaluate themselves and their roles and relationships with others in school, class, and communities [15]. Some students, during this study's interviews, discussed that the focus

group interviews felt like a chance to reflect once more on the experiences and impacts of the program week; they also reported that it felt needed.

Lastly, some limitations to this study should be acknowledged. Qualitative analysis is always subjective to some extent. To increase the objectivity of this study, the participants were randomly selected and not chosen only within those participants especially engaged with the program. The interviewers did not participate in participant selection and did not know beforehand what kind of good deed the participants had performed. Having two interviewers in each session also enabled reflections on the interview process immediately after the session.

Focus group interviews are traditionally conducted face-to-face, thus enabling better observation of the group dynamics and maintaining good contact between the interviewer and the participants. In this study, the interviews were conducted via video connection due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions on visitors in schools at the time. However, today's generation of youth is very skilled in information technology and might even feel more comfortable in remote communications than in more traditional face-to-face interaction.

The participants expressed mostly positive experiences. However, it should be noted that there were differences in the activity level of discussion between focus groups. Especially groups 5 and 6 were very expressive and active in verbalizing their experiences, and it seemed like their teachers were active and supportive in their attitudes during the focus group interview by encouraging students to share their thoughts on the topic. It is possible that those groups with more meager expression did not manage to thoroughly bring out their experiences. Truly, it seems that it might have been easier to express the positive outcomes and experiences than the negative ones. We noticed that in some groups the students were very talkative, and in others it seemed more difficult to express their thoughts in more than just a few words. This could be due to group dynamics in general, but also, of course, due to their experiences during the program week. In addition, except for one group, the girls were more talkative in the focus group interviews than the boys.

## 5 Conclusions and Further Implications

The program 'Gutsy Go' has been studied with quantitative and qualitative methods and suggested to be beneficial in improving psychosocial well-being among adolescents of the general population. However, when conducting the program, it seems crucial that profound social support from adults is available in order to allow adolescents to thrive and gain the positive impacts of the program. When implementing the program, cultural and contextual factors should be assessed carefully. Furthermore, research on both positive and negative experiences and impacts, and the mediating factors between participation and the expected outcomes, should be conducted within the program.

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**Availability of Data and Materials:** Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

**Ethics Approval:** The ethical approval for the study was received from the Ethics Committee of Youth and Childhood Studies in 2019 (L4/2021). Ethics Committee of Youth and Childhood Studies operates under the auspices of the Finnish Youth Research Society. The committee offers ethical review to members of the Finnish Youth Research Society and the Finnish Society for Childhood Studies who cannot be provided with such assessment by their respective organisations. The committee cooperates with the Finnish Society for Childhood Studies, the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK) of the Ministry of Education and Culture and the field of multidisciplinary youth and childhood research. The procedure was based on passive consent that assumes participation or data collection unless the subject or their guardian explicitly refuses. Participation was voluntary, and those who were willing to participate were informed about the possibility of refusing to participate at any time without any consequences.

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