A High Quality Service Learning Project: High School Students Learning Experience

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Abstract

Service learning is a well-recognized form of experiential learning and 21st century pedagogy that connects classroom knowledge and skills with real world experience. While research has provided plenty of evidence that service learning has multiple benefits for students, there is very little empirical research on well-established high-quality service-learning projects. Through the lens of experiential learning theory, this single case study explored how high school students participating in a high-quality service-learning project were affected by their lived experience, determining what specific elements and activities provided the most benefit and meaning for them. Common themes associated with students’ high-quality experience included increased student involvement and interaction with peers and community, gaining a sense of teamwork/cooperation/collaboration, feeling of greater community awareness and involvement, a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction and a feeling of making a difference in their community. Additionally, this research identified partnerships, diversity and mutual respect, strong youth voice and curriculum connections as the most important essential elements for quality practice, and student involvement and role as the most important meaningful and satisfying components of their experience. These findings can help add to the gap in empirical research of what constitutes high-quality service-learning programming and can also provide valuable practice information for educators so that they can design and implement more effective and quality service-learning projects that ultimately lead to greater student outcomes.

Keywords: k-12 service learning, experiential learning, John Dewey, quality service learning, 21st century skills, real world application
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The world has become increasingly more globalized and fast paced. Education is changing. Over the past two decades changes in the economy, jobs, and businesses have restructured the workplace. Employees require a more complex skill set, including technology and media savvy than ever before (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2012). The skills necessary for students to be successful are no longer limited to academic proficiency. According to Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2012), a national organization that advocates for 21st century readiness for every student, students need to achieve “multi-dimensional abilities” to be successful in today’s complex life and work environment. These include life and career skills (such as flexibility, adaptability, initiative, and self-direction), media and technology skills (such as information literacy, media literacy, and information and communication technology literacy), and learning and innovation skills (such as critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and innovation) (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009, 2008). Today, successful employees are able to think, analyze, reason, problem solve, and communicate (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008, 2009). They are self-directed and computer- and technology-savvy (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008, 2009).

Evidence suggests that high school and college graduates are not obtaining these necessary skills and are thus unprepared for college and a career, respectively. To illustrate this point, in 2006, 400 new employers were surveyed for a “work readiness” report prepared by the Conference Board, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and Corporate Voices for Working, and the Society for Human Resources Management. The employers reported that nearly 50% of high school graduates were “deficient” in their preparation for the workplace and that less than 25%
of recent college graduates had the work readiness skills needed for success in today’s workplace (The Conference Board, 2006). This suggests a disconnect between knowledge and skills learned in the classroom and knowledge and skills needed for success in today’s real-world environment of college, careers, and citizenship (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Partnership for 21st Century, 2012; Wagner, 2008).

If the K-12 public schools in the United States are to close this gap, significant changes and realignment of classroom instruction to real-world skills and application must occur (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2012). One promising pedagogical tool for connecting classroom concepts with real-world purpose and application may be service learning. Its presence in K-12 education has spanned three decades, from the mid 1980’s to today. In particular, service learning gained national attention and momentum in the mid to late 1990s and today is viewed as an important component of K-12 education reform (Alliance for Service-Learning Education, 1995; Wagner, 2008) and 21st century preparedness (Goodall, 2011; Salpeter, 2008; Bradley, 2010; Singham, 2005). Further contributing to service learning’s importance is its association with a wide range of positive student outcomes, including attainment of the above mentioned skills necessary for success in today’s complex world (i.e., life and career skills, media and technology skills, and learning and innovation skills).

Despite its promise and increasing popularity, service learning has struggled with credibility. As prominent service-learning researcher Shelley Billig (2000, 2002) pointed out, service learning still has not earned credibility as a proven learning strategy, nor has it established a permanent presence in K-12 public schools. Concerns include: lack of a clear
definition of what constitutes high-quality service-learning practice; lack of universally accepted guidelines; variation in quality of practice; and limited empirical research on high-quality service-learning projects. In order to help fill this research gap, this study investigated a well-established, high-quality service-learning program.

The remainder of this chapter provides background information about service learning and this study. Specific sections address the research problem, the significance of this study, the research questions to be addressed, the theoretical framework, a general overview of the research design, and potential limitations of this study.

**Statement of the Problem**

Research is needed to inform practice. Limited empirical research exists that has investigated the factors required for high-quality practice in service learning. What factors contribute to student outcomes? What factors help students acquire the skills needed for success in today’s complex world? Understanding these factors will allow practitioners to design and implement high-quality service-learning programs.

Theorists such as Billig (2000; 2002; 2009), Eyler and Giles (1999), Root, Callahan & Billig (2005), and Furco (2003) note the inconsistency of quality in service-learning programs. This inconsistency reflects a variation in implementation of best practices and a variation in student benefits. Educators, researchers, and policymakers often have different definitions of service learning and community service, and this inconsistency in terminology often leads to inconsistency in quality of programming (Furco & Billig, 2001). Indeed, many passionate practitioners are unable to clearly define what constitutes quality service-learning pedagogy and whether they are implementing community service or service learning (Billig, 2004).
Practitioners’ uncertainty concerning the definition of service learning is not surprising, considering that service learning has long characterized a wide range of experiential learning pedagogies such as volunteer, community service, and internship programs of varying quality and student benefit (Furco, 2003). In particular, the distinction between community service and service learning causes the most confusion (Billig, 2004). One example of this confusion is in service-learning reporting. Pritchard (2002) states that service-learning statistics can be misleading since they are based on varying definitions of community service and service learning (as interpreted by stakeholders) and not as universally and specifically defined terms. More evidence to support this confusion is that community service and service learning are often grouped together and used interchangeably in the literature despite the differences between the two (Billig, 2004).

The main difference between service learning and community service is that service learning intentionally allows students to gain an understanding of key classroom concepts while applying them in the real world to meet community needs (Billig, 2002; 2002), whereas community service primarily focuses on meeting only the needs of the community and does not involve intentional or prescribed learning goals (Howard, 2001).

Not all service learning projects are created equally. Research shows that to achieve stronger student outcomes in areas such as academic or cognitive, personal/social, civic, and career exploration, specific subject matter must be intentionally integrated in a real-world application and setting (Brown & Cocking, 2000). The ability of students to benefit from service learning depends on whether intentionality of student learning goals is present. Variation of intentionality causes a variation in quality of programming. In other words, quality matters —
especially in terms of relative student impact (Billig, 2004).

While determining the essential elements of service learning (as detailed in Chapter 2) can help eliminate some of the discrepancy in quality of practice, more empirical research on high-quality service-learning projects and programming is needed. Most of the literature is based on service-learning program evaluation. Little research has been undertaken to explain specific high-quality service-learning projects. Research is needed to determine what factors constitute high-quality practice and what factors result in positive student outcomes. Until more research is conducted in this area, variation in quality and in student impact will not be fully resolved, nor will service learning receive credibility as a proven educational approach so as to maintain a permanent presence in K-12 public schools (Billig, 2002).

**Significance of This Study**

The potential significance of this study is its contribution to the development of best practices in designing and implementing high-quality service-learning programs. Such best practices are needed to help ensure that U.S. high school students acquire the skills necessary for success in college and a career. Currently, the secondary school system does not adequately prepare all students for these endeavors.

According to America’s Perfect Storm (2007), over the next quarter century, at least half of the projected job growth includes jobs that will require advanced degrees and a high level of diverse skills (Kirsch, Braun, Yamamoto, & Sum, 2007). An estimated 85% of American jobs and almost 90% of fast-growing high-paying jobs require a post-secondary education, including many manufacturing jobs (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Business-Higher Education
Indeed, many American high school students struggle to achieve the requisite skills necessary for college and ultimately a career. Further compounding the problem is American students’ low rate of high school graduation, estimated at around 70%, which limits the number of students eligible to attend institutions of higher education. Furthermore, even students who do graduate from high school and go to college may not be prepared to succeed there. U.S. colleges report that approximately 66% of high school graduates are ill prepared for college (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007), and 65% of college professors report that what students are taught in high school does not adequately prepare them for college (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007).

The college unpreparedness statistics are troubling. Because only about one-third of all high school graduates are ready for college, and because more than a third of all students entering college take remedial courses (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007), it is no surprise that only one of two current high school students will graduate from college in the future (Wagner, 2008). Only approximately 56% of college students graduate within 6 years (Pathways to Prosperity, 2011). Moreover, the United States has the highest college dropout rate in the industrialized world (Organization for Economic Development, 2011/2012).

According to Wagner (2008), one of the primary reasons that students are unprepared for college is the focus on standardized tests, which are generally multiple-choice tests measuring only to ninth- or tenth-grade level of skill. They require little or no reasoning or application of knowledge to new situations. College skills—including problem solving, innovation, creativity,
reasoning, articulation, and applying knowledge to new situations—are necessary for success; however, they are not being attained or assessed in high school to the degree needed (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Wagner, 2008). For this reason, high schools must begin to better prepare students for college through rigorous coursework that is compatible with college readiness skills (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). High-quality service learning, as investigated in this study, is one promising 21st century pedagogy that meets college readiness criteria, including opportunities to apply skills and knowledge learned in the classroom to a real-world setting.

While our nation’s future economic success is not solely based on one factor, in the long run an educated and skilled workforce is one of the most important factors for improving our economic future (The National Center, 2005). In order for high school graduates to earn decent wages and fill the estimated 10 million vacancies anticipated in the new 21st century job market, a postsecondary education and a new skill set are required. The new skills developed in high school and college must meet the needs of potential employers (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007; The National Center, 2005; Wagner, 2008). Research is needed to determine what factors help students acquire these skills. In particular, there is limited research on how learning environments are cultivated or how to establish and nurture the development of a physical and social context for learning (Carver, 1996).

Thus, broadly speaking, the potential significance of this study is its ability to inform educational practices that best prepare high school students for college and a career. Specifically, this study examined the characteristics of high-quality service learning. The
findings from this study can inform future research in this area that collectively will inform best practices for service-learning programs.

This single case study involved a school district that has received both state and national recognition as a high-quality, service-learning school. Because of this district’s distinction, findings from this study can contribute valuable insight regarding how students are affected by their high-quality, service-learning experience, which is currently limited in the literature. The purpose of this study was to investigate the student perspective for his or her high-quality service-learning project and to determine what he or she perceived to be the most beneficial components of the learning experience.

The student perspective is needed so that teachers can incorporate what is learned, provide more productive classroom experiences, and devote more time and resources to purposeful activities outside the classroom. Ultimately, this will enhance student learning and real-world readiness skills (Kuh, 1991). By identifying the most meaningful and purposeful components of students’ high-quality learning experiences, as well as the specific elements and activities that provide real-world application of knowledge and skills, this study will help teachers provide quality programming. As a result, this study can help improve student outcomes and prepare students for real-world challenges. At the same time, this study has the potential to help this school district and similar school districts in planning, designing, and implementing what students perceive to be the most essential elements of the high-quality service-learning experience.
Research Questions

Four research questions guided this qualitative case study:

1. How do students describe their high-quality service-learning experiences?
2. What do students view as the most meaningful and purposeful components of their high-quality service-learning experience?
3. What components of the high-quality service-learning process provided the best opportunities for students to transfer what they have learned in the classroom into real-world experiences?
4. In what ways do students feel they have changed during their high-quality service-learning experience?

These guiding questions purposively focused on the student participants’ perception of their high-quality service-learning experience to provide a first-hand, in-depth understanding of the elements associated with high-quality practice and outcome.

Theoretical Framework: Experiential Learning Theory

Creswell (2009) states that theory provides a “lens that shapes what is looked at, the questions asked…” (p. 49) and “informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides for a call of action or change” (p. 62). For this study, experiential learning theory was the theoretical framework used to shape this investigation of the process of change (impact and development) that occurred for the student participants during their high-quality service-learning experience. In particular, the social-learning construct of experiential learning helps us to understand the extent to which learning is enhanced through connecting academic concepts with meaningful and relevant real-world experience and critical reflection (Itin, 1999). Utilizing this theoretical
framework as the lens through which to conduct this examination helped to understand the overall scope of a hands-on, experiential, high-quality service-learning experience with a purposive focus on the student participant (learner) and his or her real-world experience in the community. Ultimately, this study considered the student’s perspective and the experience itself.

As experiential theorist John Dewey explained, an individual and community are inextricable; a learner cannot be separated from the environment (as cited in Hutchinson, 2000). In order to understand the “whole” of the service-learning experience, both the learner and the environment must be understood in terms of the interdependency that exists between the two.

Service-learning pedagogy evolved from experiential, hands-on learning that connects meaningful life experiences with learning (Dewey, 1938, 1998, 2007). According to Dewey (1938), known as the father of experiential learning, all genuine education comes through experience. In other words, genuine learning occurs through social interaction in the real-world context; however, not all experiences are “genuine or equally educative… Everything depends upon the quality of the experience…” (Dewey, 1938, pp. 25-26). As this applies to education, it is important to remember that the quality of the experience may not always be equal, and that the quality of the experience does matter. As noted in the literature, higher quality experiences such those that occur in an experiential, service-learning experience, may result in a more profound learning experience (Billig, 2002). Learning should be meaningful and relevant and occur in a real-life context.

Much of the literature reviewed compares service learning, an experiential pedagogy, with traditional classroom pedagogy in order to gauge service learning’s effectiveness. The most significant difference between the traditional classroom experience and nontraditional service-
learning experience are the benefits of experiential, hands-on learning. This learning connects meaningful life experiences to students’ learning, challenging students on multiple levels (Dewey, 1938, 1998, 2007). Unlike service learning, traditional learning creates a structure of knowledge that does not often translate into usable skills required for employment (Resnick, 1987). For this reason, the service-learning experience can provide relevancy for successfully participating in the real world in a manner that traditional learning does not (O’Loughlin Brooks & Smith, 2011) and consequently, increase student learning and outcomes through enhanced content and in-context learning.

**Theorists**

One of Dewey’s followers, Kolb (1984), posited that people learn better by doing, such as in experiential, hands-on learning (Cone & Harris, 1996). Vygotsky (1997) similarly emphasized that learning is a social process whereby students are active participants in their learning. In this process, the roles of the teacher and student are shifted away from traditional roles. In experiential learning, for example, there is reciprocity of learning experience between the teacher and student: there is a collaborative effort to facilitate meaning construction for students. Other theorists such as Freire (1970) described service learning as an experiential approach to learning that “empowers” individuals and communities and opposes the conventional teaching method. For example, Freire referred to conventional teaching methods as a “banking approach” in which teachers “deposit information into the student, so that the student can then withdraw information when requested” instead of actively involving students in the learning experience (Itin, 1999, p. 93). Freire preferred “problem solving education [that] affirms men and women as being in the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted
beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (as cited in Cone & Harris, 1996, p. 32).

Similar to Freire, Moore (1990) posited that there is no such thing as fixed meaning, but rather shifting systems of meaning, such as in experiential learning.

Making connections to meaningful real life events through critical reflection and evaluation enhances the individual’s service-learning process and experience (Cone & Harris, 1996). This idea is consistent with Dewey’s philosophy of experiential learning. Dewey believed that a good education should have a societal purpose (i.e., should prepare individuals to be contributing members of society and community) and also a purpose for the individual student (i.e., should help students gain useful skills that prepare them to be successful in life) (Starnes, Paris, & Stevens, 1999). One such form of experiential learning, involving active and authentic learning on the students’ part, and meets both individual and societal purposes simultaneously, is service learning. Service learning purposefully provides opportunities to transfer knowledge and skill learned in the classroom to real-world setting in order for students to improve understanding and develop new skills.

Transference of Factual Knowledge to Real-World Application

Building on Dewey’s early work and research, experiential theorist Kolb (1984) wrote that learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience—transferring learning from past experience and building new skills to improve understanding (Starnes, Paris, & Stevens, 1999). Kolb outlined a theoretical model (see Figure 1) pertinent to understanding the process of the student’s service-learning experience. In this model, student participants move through the different stages of the service-learning experience: concrete
experience (feeling), reflective observation (observe/watching), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (doing).

**Figure 1.** Kolb’s Cycle of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning classrooms employ a variety of instructional methods to foster each of the stages in Kolb’s model. Concrete experience might include recalling past experience. Reflective observation might include group discussion, reflective papers, or journals. Abstract conceptualization might include stimulation by lectures, films, or resource materials. Active experimentation might include problem-solving exercises, role playing, and mock exercises. Kolb’s model helps explain the process of service learning as a form of experiential learning, whereby students process real-life scenarios and analyze course content through real-life situations (Lewis & Williams, 1994). Kolb’s model suggests that learning can begin at any point in the cycle, and the preferred entrance point reflects the learning style preference of the student (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). Equally important, Kolb suggests that reflection is essential to the
overall learning process, since it can connect the concrete to the abstract. Reflecting and reviewing the actual experience helps students to examine how learning occurred and how they were affected by their experience, thereby making deeper connections and adding relevancy to their learning process (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997).

As a theoretical construct, Kolb’s model of the experiential learning process is important for understanding how students are affected by their learning experience as they move through the different stages. In particular, examination of student reflection as a tool to connect classroom learning with real-world experience is valuable to this study’s guiding question because it will help provide a more in-depth understanding of the service-learning phenomenon and the connections between learning and application from the student perspective.

Inquiry-Based Learning to Foster Student Growth and Development

Experiential learning theory also incorporates Dewey’s view that inquiry-based learning is needed to be educative. Inquiry-based learning: (a) generates interest in the learner; (b) becomes intrinsically worthwhile to the learner; (c) presents problems that awaken new curiosity and creates a demand for information; and (d) covers a considerable time span and is capable of fostering development over time (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Experiential learning theory helps us to understand the learning benefits and value of service learning for the student, specifically how service learning enhanced and connected academic learning through meaningful and relevant real-world experiences.

Experiential learning theory also helps clarify and explain the research questions regarding the scope of the student experience and what the students viewed as the most meaningful and purposeful components of their high-quality service-learning experience. This
intellectual lens allowed for further examination of learning, specifically what components of the service-learning process provided the most value for students and how students were able to be more reflective.

**Cultivating a Student Learning Environment**

Experiential learning theory provided insight into the process of change (impact and development) that occurred for the student participants during the service-learning experience. Experiential learning theory also helped to examine the transactive process between the teacher and students—that is, the process of how student participants constructed knowledge, skill, and value from their direct service-learning experience, which was facilitated by the teacher (Itin, 1999). Dewey’s (1998) philosophy of learning (an extension of experiential learning theory) specifically explained the process that occurred between a teacher and student as one that purposefully engaged the learner and infused direct experience with learning environment and content, as in the case of service-learning projects.

The philosophy of experiential learning is to involve the learner and integrate what is being learned (curriculum) with the actions (service) that are required to develop competency in the learner (Itin, 1999). That is, the teacher has the responsibility of selecting opportunities for experiences, helping students to utilize these experiences, establishing the learning environments, and sharing pertinent information to facilitate learning (Itin, 1999). With this in mind, findings from this research suggest that schools should make classroom experiences more productive and devote more time and resources to purposeful activities outside of the classroom to enhance student learning and real-world readiness (Kuh, 1991). For this study, experiential learning as a theoretical lens helped clarify the teacher’s role as a facilitator of the student
service-learning experience and environment. It also helped increase understanding of which components of the high-quality service-learning process provided the best opportunities for students to transfer what they learned in the classroom into real-world experiences. This was of particular interest in this study because it addressed the relationship between academic and service learning, as well as the extent to which a student’s potential increased through successfully learning and working with others in real-world environments.

In order for teachers to apply the gained knowledge and insight learned from the student perspective in this study, identification of the service-learning components that created the greatest benefit to a students’ overall service-learning experience needed to be determined. Examined through this theoretical lens, this study contributed information that could help teachers provide the maximum learning context and resources within the classroom environment (Kuh, 1991). In addition, an examination through this lens contributed to better understanding how and why student participants were affected by specific productive and purposeful activities while participating in a high-quality service-learning experience. It will help teachers better utilize and distribute resources to improve and cultivate the learning environment (Carver, 1996, pp. 8-13).

The teacher and student engagement in purposive experience is an important component of experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1938). The dynamic relationship between teacher and student is student centered and essential for creating an educational process based on the implied interactional exchange of teacher and student (Itin, 1999). In experiential learning environments such as service learning, the teacher and student reciprocally present information, exchange knowledge, and learn from one another during the process while also affecting the environment
(Itin, 1999). Above all, mastering the curriculum is only part of the learning process—understanding how to apply it to the real world is the goal of service learning as an experiential learning process.

**Summary of Research Design**

This research used a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2012) involving high school students participating in a high-quality service-learning project. The goal was to purposefully investigate how student participants were affected by their learning experience. Student participants were involved in a year-long, service-learning project at Mountain View High School, a long-established, nationally and state-recognized school. The school has contributed to its district’s overall high-quality service-learning programming distinction; therefore, the school has also contributed empirical data specifically related to high-quality practice. This distinction was particularly significant and necessary for this research study in order to determine what essential elements of a high-quality service-learning program contributed the most meaning, relevance, and real-world opportunities for student participants.

Case study methods allow for multiple points of view. In-depth descriptions, insights, and perspectives were gathered from student participants who could directly describe their high-quality service-learning experience. Additionally, the teacher facilitator’s perceptions of her students’ high-quality service-learning experience were gathered. Three methods were used to collect the impressions of the student participants: a quantitative survey with two open-ended descriptive questions, a qualitative review of student journal entries, and focus groups comprised of student participants. The teacher facilitator’s perceptions were also collected by a survey that included two-open ended questions asking for descriptive information along with focus group
questions (the same questions that student participants received, but modified to reflect the teacher’s perspective). Collectively, these methods provided sufficient data to allow an in-depth analysis of students’ high-quality service-learning experience.

**Limitations of the Study**

In a qualitative study, the researcher uses purposeful sampling to select participants who either: a) have knowledge and abilities that are representative of a population (Yin, 2009; Maxwell, 2005) or (b) have a unique or expert point of view that others lack (Weiss, 2008). Most often, qualitative studies are not representative of the larger population. Rather, they are more specific to a smaller audience, with similar situation and characteristics.

This research project used a single case study consisting of a smaller population, which was nonrepresentative of the larger population. For this study, the researcher purposefully selected the school based on its high-quality service-learning program. Within this school, the researcher purposefully selected three class sections of Honors English students based on their participation in a year-long, high-quality service-learning project. The project was designed and facilitated by the same teacher coordinator. Because the study used a nonrepresentative sample, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to a larger population.

This case study was also somewhat limited by researcher’s inherent bias or subjectivity regarding the impact of high-quality service-learning projects (Maxwell, 2005). The researcher acknowledges this inherent professional bias based on her prior and extensive high-quality service-learning experiences as an educator, administrator, and author of state service-learning grants. The researcher has witnessed the positive impact of service-learning experiences.
However, she remained open to all data, whether positive or negative, and reported findings objectively.

**Organization of This Dissertation**

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Following this chapter, Chapter 2 reviews the literature exploring the origin and history of service learning, including theorists associated with service learning, a close examination of definitions and quality-of-practice guidelines, and service learning as a viable 21st century learning tool and alternative to traditional education. Chapter 3 presents the research design, including practical elements such as site, participant selection, data collection, analytical strategies, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 interprets the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework and discusses implications for practice. This chapter suggests recommendations for future research in this area. Appendices include the application to the Institutional Review Board and all the related and supporting documents used for this study.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter reviews the literature on service learning. Specifically, it traces the origins of service learning and establishes service learning as a viable experiential, 21st century pedagogy and an alternative to traditional classroom instruction in K-12 education today. A comprehensive review of the literature ascertains the value and positive impact of service learning for student participants as well as the importance of providing the essential elements of quality practice, such as critical reflection in order to provide high-quality programming. As has been previously noted, little empirical research has been conducted on high-quality service-
learning projects. Nor is there research that examines how student participants are affected by the service-learning experience. The following questions guided the literature review:

1. What is the origin of service learning, and how has the practice of service learning evolved to shape the ideas and guiding principles of service-learning programming today?
2. How are students affected during the service-learning experience, and are all service-learning experiences considered equal in value?
3. Is service-learning a viable 21st pedagogy and alternative to traditional education? How so?

The researcher conducted an extensive review of over 60 research studies, as well as contemporary service-learning books by several well-known, service-learning researchers (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco & Billig, 2001; Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson; 2004; Root, Callahan, & Billig, 2005) and scholarly literature pertaining to service learning’s origins and history. The researcher utilized a variety of resources for an extensive examination of the literature, first employing general search engines with Google Scholar as a primary database and when that was exhausted, utilizing ERIC Digest and Northeastern University Library databases to access information. Keywords included K-12 service learning, experiential learning, John Dewey, quality service learning, 21st century skills, real world application.

The literature review is organized around three primary areas of inquiry:

1. History of service learning, including its origins and the theorists associated with service-learning;
2. Service-learning defined and quality-of-practice guidelines; and
3. Service learning as a viable 21st century learning tool and alternative to traditional education.

A comprehensive review of the literature demonstrated that this study is well grounded in the existing literature and has particular relevance to the stated problem of practice. This review suggests that service learning may help narrow the gap between what today’s students are learning in the classroom and what they need to be successful in 21st century college and career. All three themes in the literature provided important insight and information that helped the researcher gain a better understanding of the service-learning experience for student participants.

History of Service Learning/Origins

Our country has a long and storied history and spirit for service. As early as 1933, there were government programs that closely resembled today’s service learning, in that they combined knowledge and skill with real-life application. The first evidence of such programs, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Emergency Conservation Work Act (ECW, more commonly known as the Civilian Conservation Corporation, 1933), comprised a President’s call for service and the blending of education with that service. The Civilian Conservation Corporation was the first to combine the fields of education and the application of service, pairing professional foresters with unemployed youth to combat joblessness, and restore the erosion of our natural resources, though the program was not specifically called “service learning” (Titlebaum, Williamson, Daprao, Baer, & Braehler, 2004).

In the 1960s, more notable acts followed during the education reform and civil rights movements, as well as the national upheaval from the Vietnam War. President Kennedy continued this call for service and established the Peace Corp, which is a volunteer program run
by the U.S. government that created opportunities for young Americans to apply their education, knowledge, and fields of expertise to serve the greater world. President Johnson established the White House Fellows, a governmental fellowship program that awarded 1-year assignments to outstanding Americans who worked alongside leaders in the federal government. As part of the “war on poverty,” in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Johnson created Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), a program in which American volunteers served some of the poorest regions of the United States such as Appalachia and migrant worker camps in California (Titlebaum et al., 2004).

In a similar fashion, President Reagan established Youth Service America in 1985, which provided an opportunity for high school students to engage in community-service activities while also receiving college credit (Titlebaum et al., 2004). Another comparable government-driven program was the National and Community Service Act, signed by President George H. W. Bush in 1990, which provided federal grants to support service-learning initiatives. In that same year, President Bush also set up an office of national service in the White House and created the Points of Light Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization connecting volunteer organizations with volunteers to meet community needs and national legislation. During this time, President Bush also established the Daily Point of Light Award, recognizing more than 1,000 individuals who made a difference through service. Today, the Daily Point of Light Award is administered by the Point of Light Foundation.

Similarly, President Clinton in 1993 passed the National and Community Service Trust Act, creating the Corporation for National and Community Service, a government agency and coalition of community organizations such as Youth Service America, Campus Compact, and
State Education Agency K-12 Service-Learning Network (SEANet). A program known as AmeriCorps was also established to engage citizens in a combined effort to combat illiteracy and poverty, provide job training, and enhance educational skills in order to fill environmental needs (Titlebaum et al., 2004; National Service-learning, 2013). Other, more contemporary programs include the King Holiday and Service Act in 1994, which transformed Martin Luther King Day into a day of national service; the USA Freedom Corps; and the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009, which expanded the national service programs. As the result of this long history of President and government support of service learning, credibility was added to the service-learning field (Tittlebaum, et al., 2004).

**Theorists Associated with Service Learning.**

Theorists from the fields of education, humanities, psychology, and other social sciences have contributed to the practice of service learning over the past 30 years. The theoretical roots of service learning can be traced back as early as the 1900s during the Progressive Movement when John Dewey’s pragmatic approach and philosophy of experiential education emphasized the continuity and interaction of experience. Continuity is the aspect of the learning experience that relates to the individual, with each past individual experience influencing future experiences. Interaction is the aspect of the active learning experience that relates to the environment (Dewey, 1938, 1998). In other words, a person’s present experience is a function of the interaction between both their past experiences and their present situation (Neill, 2005). We are what we know, and past experience should not be separated from the present circumstance of learning. Dewey greatly influenced the service-learning field with his philosophy of experiential learning and the belief that “for knowledge to be usable through recall and application it has to be
acquired in a situation; otherwise it is segregated from experience and is forgotten or not available for transfer to new experiences” (Giles & Eyler, 1994, p. 79). That is, application of knowledge and skill in real-world context is crucial to retaining and using the information learned.

Dewey’s theory of experience challenges teachers to understand the nature of individual learners, especially how they have come to know what they know at this point and time, and to design the most effective programming for individuals based on this past experience. Dewey stated that when both the individual and environmental components of the learning experience are working together, the result is a valuable learning experience that changes both the learner and the conditions of the environment (Aedo, 2002). This process can help students reach their potential as learners and as members of society (Neill, 2005). This line of thinking is consistent with the primary goal of this study, to gain insight from students regarding what components and activities of service learning are most valuable to them during their high-quality service-learning experience. This insight will allow teachers to design and incorporate the most effective programming and learning experience for students.

Dewey’s theory of experience is also particularly pertinent to this study because of the importance of student/teacher interaction and dialogue during the service-learning experience. Dewey believed that learning occurs when a teacher and student both purposefully engage in learning and infuse direct experience with the learning environment and content (Dewey, 1916, 1938). According to Dewey, pedagogy must be built around what the individual learner already knows so that teachers can design, facilitate, and provide the necessary resources, context, and conditions for student learning. It is the relationship between the process of actual experience
and education that is the premise of Dewey’s idea of progressive education—when past experience and prior knowledge intersect with present learning circumstances. Further to this point, Dewey (1938) also emphasized that classroom learning should be enhanced by demonstrating knowledge in a “real-life” context. Learning should incorporate a student’s life experiences into the curriculum. Service learning is based on acquired curricular knowledge application to a real-world context. This is particularly important for acquiring the skills needed to compete in college and career.

**Contextual learning.** Dewey was one of the first theorists to consider the idea of contextual learning. Contextual learning begins “from the premise that learning cannot take place in a vacuum, but should somehow be connected with real world attributes to make sense to learners” (Westera, 2011, p. 201). Linking concepts learned in the classroom with real-world application adds value, effectiveness, and meaning to the learning process. Contextual learning is a widely accepted and implemented practice that includes pedagogies such as internships in social services, authentic learning, action learning (McGill & Beaty, 2001), experiential learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984), and service learning (Eyler & Giles, 1994).

Contextual learning is also the primary principal of service learning: the process of student knowledge acquisition of concepts, principles, and skills from course content and the integration of service action to reinforce such knowledge in a real-world context. Many scholarly authors (Schank & Cleary, 1995; Resnick, 1987; Johnson, 2002) attribute the decline of the public school system to the absence of real-world application (Westera, 2011). The authors argue that the reason students make no connection between what they learn in school and how they will use their knowledge outside of school is because public schooling itself is internally
focused, self-insulated from the outside world. Dewey (1938) emphasized the importance of authentic learning, or the provision of real-life situations in learning and the interrelatedness of concepts and ideas that are best learned when placed in realistic, real-world situational settings. This information is significant to this study because it reinforces the value and importance of real-world application pedagogies such as service learning.

Similarly, the origin of service learning can be found in other scholarly works such as William Kilpatrick (1918), a follower of Dewey and an early proponent of school-based community service. Kilpatrick developed the “project method,” a child-centered approach that actively engages participating students in their individual projects (Beyer, 1996; Kilpatrick, 1918). According to Kilpatrick, the key to achieving maximum student interest and engagement is to involve students in their learning, much like high-quality service learning does. Kilpatrick embraced the educational philosophy that students should apply classroom knowledge to the real world in the context of service to meet real community needs (Neal, 2003).

David Kolb (1984) is another important theorist who has contributed to the service-learning field. Kolb argued that learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience, transferring learning from past experience and building new skills to improve understanding (Starnes, Paris, & Stevens, 1999). Dewey and Kolb believed that people learn better by doing, such as in hands-on learning (Cone & Harris, 1996). Kolb developed a theoretical model pertinent to understanding the process of the student’s service-learning experience. Kolb’s model helps explain the process of service learning as a form of experiential learning, where students process real-life scenarios and analyze course content through real-life situations (Kolb, 1984). Kolb’s model is useful to this study because it helps us
understand the best elements of service learning from the students’ perspective, determine the
ture benefits of quality service learning for participants, and examines students as active learners.

The beginnings of service learning can also be found in Pablo Freire’s (1970) work, which was concerned with dialogue or discussion rather than curricular and praxis. Freire wrote that action is informed by, and linked to, certain values and that dialogue should not just deepen understanding within the learner, but also make a difference in the world (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003). In other words, dialogue or discussion not only is a catalyst for deepening meaning of the experience, but also helps initiate action, ultimately inciting individuals to make a difference in the world. Service learning’s guiding principle embraces Freire’s notion that student dialogue and action should result in equal benefits to the learner and to the recipient of service. Learning should make a difference in both the learner and the recipient’s lives (Darder et al., 2003).

The development of service-learning pedagogy also has threads of cognitive psychology researchers Lev Vygotsky (1924) and Jerome Bruner (1960). Both Vygotsky and Bruner’s work emphasized that learning was most effective when highly individualized meaning was created for each learner, as in actual experience. While these theorists were not directly related to the field of service learning, their fundamental ideas associated real learning with experiences that take place outside of the classroom and within real life: the social interaction context (Feden & Vogel, 1993). Vygotsky (1978) maintained that education consisted of social interaction and language and that knowledge and experience were gained through the facilitation of an adult. This idea is similar to the principles of service learning, where the importance of social interaction and
exchange is carried over from the classroom and through the student-teacher exchange and applied to academically and meaningfully designed projects in the community.

Bruner’s (1960) cognitive construct provides the framework for the process of learning through experience and application of knowledge, based on preconceived notions regarding subject matter, current knowledge, and past experiences. According to Bruner, students interpret new learning experiences and information through their preconceived knowledge construct. In service learning, the teacher is the facilitator who cultivates the learning context for students by providing opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge as well as transfer new information to new situations, thereby allowing students to use their cognitive structure to expand their understanding and add new meaning to their learning experience.

Further contributors to the field of service learning include contemporary researchers Shelley Billig and Andrew Furco (2001) and contemporary educators Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles (1994). These researchers have made substantial and extensive contributions to the service-learning field, including research that supports service learning as a worthwhile pedagogy. For example, Billig and Furco (2001) have conducted comprehensive and longitudinal studies that have contributed pertinent information to service-learning practice. They have identified a wide range of student benefits during service-learning participation. Additionally, they have specifically researched the quality-of-practice issue, argued for more universal guidelines, written numerous journal articles and several books concerning service learning and quality of practice.

Contemporary educators Eyler and Giles (1994) have researched service learning in depth and over long periods of time to contribute much evidence that supports service learning as
a viable 21st century pedagogy with many student benefits. Their seminal work (such as *Where’s the Learning in Service-Learning?*) and their longitudinal studies (included *At A Glance: What Do We Know About the Effects of Service-Learning on College Students, Faculty, Institutions and Communities?* [1993-2000]) have been lauded by the service-learning community as an assessment of the true merits of service-learning practice.

Eyler and Giles (1994) have conducted comprehensive and longitudinal studies and have led the annual international conference on service learning in an effort to open discussion on methodological approaches and a more definitive theoretical framework to advance service learning as a credible field of study. Much of Eyler and Giles’ research focuses on the elements of service-learning practice that contribute to effective and high-quality service-learning projects, such as critical reflection. For this reason, Eyler and Giles’s research on service learning as an authentic and meaningful learning experience helped to guide the research questions in the study.

**Service-Learning Defined**

While service learning’s growth as a pedagogy is grounded in experiential learning, which has a relatively long history, service learning is not referred to as an experiential pedagogy in the literature until 1979 (Sigmon, 1979). At that time, service learning was first referenced as an experiential pedagogy that included “reciprocal learning,” where both learner and recipient mutually benefited from the experience (Furco, 1996, p. 2). Since then, over the past three decades, there have been more than 150 varying definitions of service learning (Kendall, 1990), with practitioners, researchers, and policymakers attempting to distinguish service learning from other experiential education and service activity pedagogy such as community service, volunteerism, internships, and field work (Eyler & Giles, 1999).
Over time, consensus on some issues emerged, but disagreements and inconsistency in defining service learning persist. As such, there is great variation in service-learning implementation and, consequently, in student outcomes, which makes building a case for service learning as a viable pedagogy with significant student impact, challenging (Billig, 2000, 2002, 2004). Before high-quality service learning can be better understood, it is important that it is clearly defined. To begin, a distinction must be made between service learning and community service, given the extent to which these terms are often (and incorrectly) used interchangeably in the literature.

The most significant difference between service learning and community service is that the former intentionally integrates academic content and service, while the latter does not. Specifically, service learning includes a well-structured design and understanding of the purpose and goals of any project, two components not found in community service (Billig, 2000; Allen, 2003). While community service is often a valuable service activity, it does not embrace the same level of alignment and integration of academic and service goals as service learning. When the two terms are incorrectly used interchangeably by practitioners or researchers, our understanding of how service-learning components affect student learning outcomes is compromised (Hutchinson, 2005). As a consequence of unclear delineation between the two, significant reporting discrepancies are found in the service-learning literature.

The discrepancies in how service-learning is defined and the variation in its implementation commonly found in the literature presented additional challenges for this research study. To this point, the crux of this study was to better understand how students were affected by a high-quality service-learning project; however, because of limited (and perhaps
unidentified) high-quality service-learning studies in the literature, this researcher purposely chose to examine an established, nationally distinguished, high-quality service-learning project. This approach helped to eliminate some of the discrepancy associated with quality of practice found in the literature. The findings from this study may have also added new information to the limited empirical research on high-quality service learning.

**Quality-of-Practice Guidelines**

As previously emphasized, quality of service-learning practice matters. To this point, student gains in academic achievement and social/personal growth depend largely on the quality of the experience (Billig, 2002). While high-quality service-learning projects—defined as intentional incorporation of essential elements of quality practice (as described later in this section)—have been shown to provide substantial student outcomes, community service projects and low-quality (e.g., poorly executed, limited use of essential elements) service-learning projects typically provide varying degrees of quality and outcomes for students (Billig, 2002). To help illustrate this point, consider one study between groups of high- and low-quality service-learning projects and non-service-learning schools (Billig & Klute, 2003). The intent of the study was to compare programs on the basis of several indicators aligned with K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice or Essential Elements of Quality Practice (National Youth Leadership Council, 1999), standards and criteria for high-quality service-learning implementation (explained in detail later in this section) as well as other factors associated with quality practice such as duration and scope of project. Evidence from this study revealed that low-quality service-learning projects had little or no impact on academic achievement and, in some instances, even generated lower standardized scores than non-service-learning schools.
Another study (Billig & Meyer, 2002) found that using varying degrees of essential elements of quality practice resulted in varying degrees of student outcomes.

These findings demonstrate that when service learning does not adhere to standards for best practices, benefits for students may be questionable (National Youth Leadership Council, 2010). In other words, until practitioners and researchers adhere to guidelines such as the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (1999) that lead to quality service learning, it will be difficult for educators “to understand the difference between service-learning activities and outcomes associated with each [kind of service activity]” (Terry, 2004, p. 29). Clearly, quality of programming matters. Full potential of students cannot be attained or ascertained until the essential elements of high-quality service-learning practice are more regularly implemented. In order for this to happen consistently, more rigorous research needs to be conducted to identify these elements (Terry, 2004).

Although inconsistent, research indicates that there are many positive outcomes for students, schools, and communities involved in service learning (Billig, 2002), it is important to recognize that not all service learning is equally effective. Indeed, there are more marginal-quality, service-learning programs than there are high-quality service-learning programs (Billig, 2009; Furco, 2003), which may account for the limited amount of high-quality programming research reported. Further, there are many service-learning projects that have not demonstrated any positive outcomes for student participants (Giles & Eyler, 1998; Hutchinson, 2005). Therefore, quality programming that includes well-planned, -structured, and -implemented service-learning opportunity for students becomes paramount if service learning is to be considered a credible pedagogical tool now and in the future.
When looking at high quality programming, research has shown that high-quality service-learning projects result in positive student outcomes (Eyler & Giles, 1999, 2001; Billig, 2000; Terry & Bohnenberger, 2003). In high-quality service learning, expectations require teachers to serve as facilitators to student learning and students to serve as self-learners, who make decisions and take ownership to construct their own learning experience. There are numerous benefits to participating in a high-quality service-learning experience; in particular, students can develop a wide variety of real-life skills, such as complex problem-solving and communication skills and the ability to connect information and knowledge with real-world situations (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2003). In so doing, they learn to become resourceful, responsible, and caring citizens (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2003). It is the development of such high-level real-life skills that separates high-quality from marginal-quality service learning. Therefore, guidelines for quality practice become essential (Eyler & Giles, 1997).

Service learning has been researched for the past three decades; however, only in the past 15 years has this research centered on the most effective practices. The Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform (1995) or the Essential Elements of Service-Learning was established by a consortium of service-learning advocates and in 1998, an updated version of these standards and criteria were developed by 13 service-learning organizations known as the National Service-Learning Cooperative (1998). Other variations of service-learning standards include: National Youth Leadership Council’s K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (1999), Wingspread Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning (1996), and Coverdell World Wise Schools Service Learning Rubric (Peace Corps, 2006). Of these, the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (NYLC, 1999), a shortened
version of the essential elements of quality practice (used by the National Service-Learning Cooperative) was particularly helpful for this study. By clearly outlining the components associated with high-quality service-learning projects, these criteria served as a guide to determine the quality of students’ service-learning experience. The K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (1999) or the essential elements of quality practice include the following:

- **Meaningful Service:** service activities are actively engaged, meaningful, and personally relevant to participants.

- **Academic Skill Development and Real-World Application Link:** classroom concepts and curriculum are linked to service-learning activities.

- **Active Student Reflection:** multiple reflection activities such as journals promote deep thinking and analysis.

- **Diversity and Mutual Respect Among Participants:** service activities promote understanding of diversity and mutual respect with others.

- **Strong Youth Voice:** youth are strongly involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning experience.

- **Mutually Collaborative Partnerships Between Students, Teachers, and Community:** learning is a collaborative effort and mutually beneficial to students, teachers, and the community.

- **Progress Monitoring and Evaluation:** the quality of implementation and progress toward goals are assessed.
• Duration and Intensity: the duration and intensity are sufficient to address community needs.

Contemporary researchers have advocated for more definitive service-learning guidelines such as those noted above in order to direct research and to establish clear goals and standards to improve quality of practice (Sigmon, 1994; Toole, 1992; Eyler & Giles, 1999, 2001; Billig, 2002, 2004). In short, high-quality service-learning projects consciously connect daily classroom instruction to real-world practice. That said, also essential for positive student outcomes is student reflection that promotes deep thinking and analysis of field experience (Conrad & Hedin, 1981/1982). Bringle’s (1999) best practices for service learning suggest that reflection must be intentional, related to the experience, and connected to particular learning objectives. Indeed there is some evidence to suggest that engaging in “effective and rigorous” reflection is the key to strengthen the quality of service learning (Eyler, 2002; Eyler & Giles, 1999). With this essential elements model in mind, high-quality service learning is a pedagogy that intentionally integrates classroom objectives with service activities through a well-planned structure and deliberate student reflection.

The K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (essential elements) provide a lens through which this study investigated the experience of the action (i.e., service), as well as students’ academic/cognitive and personal/social growth regarding consciousness and coursework. These essential elements are also the standards that were used for the school district and the teacher facilitator in this study. These essential elements helped the teacher implement high-quality programming and helped the researcher identify the specific elements that contributed the most meaning and purpose for student participants.
Service Learning: Viable 21st Century Pedagogy and Alternative to Traditional Education

Service learning has evolved over 30 years. It has been considered a viable alternative to traditional education, and today, effective 21st century skill pedagogy. From the mid to late 1990s to the early 21st century, service-learning advocacy and participation grew exponentially, both in higher education and in K-12 school education (Billig, 2000). Service learning emerged at the right time, according to Billig (2002) as a “powerful pedagogical alternative” to traditional education in the United States, as test scores declined, and as young people were less likely to vote or volunteer. These declines prompted many to perceive youth as being disengaged from school, community and society as a whole. Service learning to some degree, helped fill a void in traditional education by providing students the opportunity to “…gain a greater understanding of concepts [they were learning in the classroom] while they contributed to their communities” (Billig, 2002, p. 658). That is, service learning engaged students in the learning process and provided them with a sense of worth and purpose (Goodall, 2006).

To further illustrate this point, research indicates that there are many positive outcomes for student participants, schools, and communities involved in service learning (Billig, 2002). One comprehensive review of K-12 service learning (National Youth Leadership Council, 2004-2010) cites dozens of studies that detail the positive effects of service learning in several areas, such as academic achievement, social and personal development, civic engagement, career exploration, and resilience. Several studies cited within this thesis demonstrate that service learning can also develop a strong service ethic, a respect for diversity, a sense of efficacy, a more realistic sense of career possibilities, and a greater frequency of engagement in school and community (Billig, 2002).
Other positive outcomes included improvement in grade point average, increased understanding of course content, and more student engagement in the overall learning experience (Billig, 2002, 2006; Kaye, 2004; Pleasants, Stephens, Selph & Pfeiffer, 2004; Schaeffer, 2005; Strage, 2004). Further, research shows that students involved in high-quality service-learning programs portray greater self-confidence (Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Luchs, 1981) and in comparison to traditional school programs, high-quality service-learning student participants demonstrated “increases in social responsibility and moral reasoning” (Conetta & Sprinthall, 1978; Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Newman & Rutter, 1983; Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988, as cited in Bathelder & Root, 1994).

Further evidence to support service-learning’s viability as an effective 21st century pedagogy and alternative to traditional education includes its consistency in goal alignment with both state and national educational initiatives. Race to the Top (2000), a federal initiative that provides students with 21st century real-world readiness skills, is one such national example. A state-level example is Massachusetts’ Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2002), a partnership program between the commonwealth of Massachusetts and Partnership for 21st Century Skills, designed to integrate curriculum with 21st century skills and application. The implementation of high-quality service-learning programs aligned with such 21st century skills as those seen in these initiatives is an integral part of 21st century skill development (Goodall, 2011).

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that high-quality service learning offers a powerful alternative to traditional classroom instruction. Through inquiry-based instruction and real-world application reciprocity is fostered between students and teachers and between schools and community (Terry & Bohenberger, 2003). As such, students derive multiple benefits, not
the least of which is the effective development of 21st century skills (Berkas, 1997; Billig & Conrad, 1997; Billig, Jesse, Calvert, & Kleinman, 1999; Melchoir, 1999).

Of important significance to this research, service learning includes the expansion of the classroom to the larger community and the cooperation of communities and students working together to make projects “interdisciplinary, integrated and project-based” (Wagner, 2008, p. 64). High-quality service learning, in other words, has the potential to transcend student lives from the traditional boundaries of the classroom to the broader society, engaging students in real-world work and community (Boyer, 1983). As a matter of fact, because of service learning’s enhanced content and in-context learning, there is greater potential for personal development (leadership, communication, and teamwork skills), cognitive development (enhanced transfer of learning to new situations, problem solving, and critical thinking), community development (enhanced civic responsibility and community problem awareness), and life skills (leadership, self-direction, positive work ethic, and self-discipline).

Summary

This chapter reviewed the origins and history of service learning, the ways in which service learning has been defined in the literature, quality-of-practice guidelines (specifically the Essential Elements for Quality Practice), and the viability of service learning as a 21st century learning tool and alternative to traditional education.

Service learning appears to have considerable potential as a method by which to achieve K-12 goals and skills for 21st century education. Extensive research suggests that service-learning projects can be a worthwhile and powerful 21st century learning tool that connects knowledge and skills to real-world application and provides multiple student benefits, ranging
from academic and social enhancement to career and civic engagement. The literature also suggests that all service-learning experiences are not equal in quality. There is great variation in quality of implementation and, therefore, in student outcomes (Billig, 2009). Much of the literature reviewed compares service learning with traditional classroom pedagogy in order to gauge its effectiveness. Research shows that high-quality service-learning projects produce a broader community impact and the highest degree of learning because students are engaged in high-level reflection and synthesis (Terry & Bohnenberger, 2003). Additionally, educators at all levels report that a well-designed and implemented service-learning project can help address unmet community needs while simultaneously providing students an opportunity to gain academic knowledge and skill and real-world experience (Root, 1997).

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative, case study design to capture the student service-learning experience, including students’ behaviors, attitudes, perceptions, and feelings, as well as their engagement and interaction level during learning and service. This chapter describes the methodology used for this study. Specific sections describe the case study design, sample site and participants, procedures for recruiting participants, data collection and analysis, and protection of human subjects.

**Case Study Design**

A qualitative approach was used for this single case study. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research methods allow for an in-depth inquiry into participants’ experience because participants are situated in their natural environment and attempt to construct meaning of people and events involved in the experience related to a problem. In other words, qualitative
research allows for an inductive approach that focuses on “specific situations or people” (Maxwell, 2005) while also seeking participants’ perspectives, interpretations, or understanding of how they make sense of the physical or social context of their experience. Creswell (2009) outlines nine characteristics of qualitative research: (1) multiple sources of data are gathered such as interviews, observations and documents rather than one single data source; (2) data collection is conducted in participants’ natural environment; (3) researchers gather the information themselves rather than using other researchers’ pre-existing questionnaires or instruments; (4) inductive data analysis, which consists of building patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up and organizing data into a more comprehensive set of themes is employed; (5) the focus is on participants’ interpretation and understanding of the experience; (6) emergent design evolves as the researcher enters participants natural environment and begins to collect data; (7) a theoretical lens through which to view the study is used; (8) a form of interpretative inquiry is used by the researcher; and (9) a holistic or complex picture of the issue being studied is provided. All of these characteristics were incorporated into this study.

A case study is the practice-based research model that best fits the research problem of practice because, as Yin (2009) points out, a case study allows for an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). This approach is consistent with this study’s goal of gaining an in-depth understanding of the high-quality service-learning phenomenon, particularly how students are affected by the physical and social context. For this study, ascertaining the meaning of events and activities from the student perspective during their learning experience and in their natural environment.
helped provide deeper understanding and meaning of the high-quality service-learning process during this study (Creswell, 2009).

This approach focused on the processes that led to student outcomes rather than just focusing on student outcomes alone. Since qualitative research is process oriented, research questions are geared toward exploring the participants’ meaning of experience, events, and activities and discovering what interaction and environmental influences occurred during the processes. These process questions involved what Maxwell (2005) refers to as “situation-specific” phenomena. The questions invited an open-ended, inductive approach, allowing the researcher to discover (a) the meaning of service learning, (b) its impact on student participants, and (c) the participants’ lived experience during a high-quality service-learning process. These process-oriented questions seek clarity regarding the development of high-quality service-learning practices and specifically seek meaning from its participants. Thus the case study design is a logical choice for this study.

According to Yin (2009), a good case study relies on multiple sources of evidence that converge in a triangulating manner, with data collection and analysis guided by a theoretical proposition. This case study was guided by experiential learning theory, an active and interactive hands-on learning experience, and a diverse array of data collection materials (such as survey, focus groups and journal entry documents). These data sources allowed the researcher to learn more about the participants and their learning environments, both inside the classroom and in the community, and specifically the climate and conditions of these settings and the behavioral interactions between teacher and student, student and student, and student and community members, capturing the “whole” of the experience.
Similar to the whole of the experience is what Dewey (2007) termed the “continuity of experience,” meaning that classroom learning should be enhanced by demonstrating knowledge in a “real-life” context, applying classroom knowledge to the “real world” in the context of service to meet actual community needs (Neal, 2003). To observe students’ continuity of experience and gain more insight into the student experience, the researcher conducted focus groups and reviewed journal entries. In this way, the researcher ascertained students’ perceptions of what events and activities were most meaningful and purposeful for them, as well as what components of the their high-quality service-learning experience provided transferability of knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to the real world.

Site and Participants

For this case study, the research setting is a single site, Mountain View High School (name changed for confidentiality). Located within the rural northwest section of Massachusetts, Mountain View High School is an 8th-12th grade high school, part of a four-school district that also includes three K-7th grade elementary/middle schools. This site was selected for several reasons: the high quality of service-learning programming, the relatively long duration of the service-learning projects, the convenience of the location, and the reduced possibility of researcher bias (the researcher was not personally connected to this site).

The most important reason for selecting this site, however, was its distinction as part of a high-quality service-learning district. The district has received both national and state recognition for its high-quality service-learning projects. This distinction is based on quality programming and the district’s commitment to service learning, making service learning an integral part of the district’s vision and goals for 21st century learning skills. More specifically,
the district has a history of high-quality service-learning projects at all grade levels and incorporates service-learning projects based on national and state models of best practices for high-quality service-learning design. Additionally, the district’s service-learning programming implements curriculum-based, service-learning units, with student outcomes that are aligned with the Learning Standards of the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework. The district employs a full-time Service Learning Coordinator, which further demonstrates the district’s commitment to producing high-quality service-learning projects.

Another consideration in this site selection included duration of the service-learning project. Longer-term projects have shown greater student gains (Billig, 2002). For this study, the duration of this high-quality service-learning project was a year long, with the first half of the school year (Phase 1, September to December) dedicated to planning and the second half (Phase 2, February to May) as the actual service piece, consisting of formulating the problem, implementing the service, and reflection and evaluation. The design of this particular service-learning project was first successfully implemented last year as a pilot program (2011-2012). Because of the success during the first year, it was incorporated again this year (2012-2013) to include three separate classes of a 9th grade Honors English section with 41 students total.

The final considerations for this research site involved the close proximity (20 miles) to the researcher’s residence as well as the fact that the researcher had no previous or direct relationship or association with professional staff and teachers at the school or district involved in service learning, which as noted above, helps to reduce researcher bias.

Participant selection for this study followed the framework for case study designed by Yin (2009), known as purposeful sampling strategy. The goal of this strategy is to find
representativeness or typicality of settings, persons, or activities that can contribute to understanding the problem of practice. Purposeful sampling in this study allowed for an information-rich case that described, in detail, how students were affected by their high-quality service-learning experience. Specifically, purposeful sampling provided insight into what elements, events, and activities contributed to providing meaningful, purposeful, and real-world application opportunity for students.

Direct knowledge and insight into students’ lived experience was obtained through a variety of data collection sources, including focus groups (in which students shared in-depth insight into their high-quality service-learning experience), review of student participant journals (in which students shared their feelings, thoughts, and observations), and a survey of all student participants (in which they indicated the most meaningful and purposeful elements of their high-quality service-learning experience, as well as how they have changed from the beginning to the end of the project). The teacher facilitator also completed the same student focus group questions and survey in written form.

Through this method of data collection, the researcher was able to gain a better and more in-depth understanding of high-quality service learning from the students’ perspective. Students in all three classes of a 9th grade Honors English section (taught by the same teacher), between the ages of 13 and 15 years, participated in this project in varying degrees, as explained in the following pages. With the understanding that their participation was voluntary, all students were asked to complete the survey at the end of the service-learning project. Thirty-eight of the 41 students participating in this year-long, high-quality service-learning project completed the survey. Additionally, the researcher randomly reviewed three to five journal entries from each of
the three classes, and on the basis of the number of parental/student consent forms returned, selected groups of four to five students to participate in focus groups. Each focus group met once for approximately 50 minutes. To ensure student confidentiality, a numerical coding system was used in place of student names.

**Recruitment and Other Logistical Considerations**

The district superintendent’s approval to conduct this study was attached to Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) application. After formal IRB approval was received, the district coordinator of service-learning programming was contacted, and a letter was sent, inviting 41 students in three classes of a 9th grade Honors English section along with their supporting and coordinating teacher to participate in this study. The letter included an explanation of the purpose and significance of the study, a comprehensive description of the scope of student and teacher participation, the researcher’s plan for adhering to the highest standards of confidentiality, the focus group protocol, and a discussion of other ethical considerations (see Appendix A).

**Data Collection**

The case study design involved a wide variety of data sources in order for the researcher to build an in-depth picture of the case and to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon. Yin (2009) outlines six sources of evidence that are most commonly used in case studies: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. A good case study includes as many sources as possible (Yin, 2009). This study included three data sources: a survey, focus group interviews, and a review of journal entry documents.
Survey

The first data collection used for this case study was a survey. The survey was distributed to all student participants by the teacher and coordinator of this high-quality service-learning project after the completion of the project. This survey gathered descriptive data from 38 student participants and from the project-coordinating teacher. The survey gathered student and teacher opinions, perceptions, and attitudes regarding students’ high-quality service-learning experiences both in the classroom and during field work.

Structure of the survey. The survey, which was a modified version of several well-established surveys (National Clearing House and Lion Quest) used in prior service-learning research studies, consisted of Likert-scale items and two open-ended questions. Survey questions, including the open-ended questions, asked students for their opinions and insight on what elements of high-quality service learning provided the best opportunity for success, better understanding of coursework, and real-world connections, as well as their insights and descriptions of what 21st century skills were gained, what were the most meaningful events, and what personal growth and change may have occurred during their project (see Appendix B for complete survey). Emerging themes from similar responses were noted. The researcher also provided the classroom teacher with a written form of the same survey questions, including the two open-ended questions that allowed for more descriptive answers.

The two open-ended questions helped generate further detail not possible with closed-ended questions and gathered more descriptive information concerning how students were affected over the course of their high-quality service-learning project. For example, one open-ended question asked students, “In what ways do you feel you have changed during your high-
quality service-learning experience?” Responses to this open-ended question helped provide pertinent and specific information as to how students perceived their growth or development during their learning and service experience and what events or activities may have contributed to their growth.

The second open-ended question asked students, “What experiences allowed you the opportunity to best transfer what you learned in the classroom to the community setting?” Responses to this open-ended question provided insightful information about how students felt they were able to gain real-world opportunity and skills as well as connect what they learned in the classroom to a real-world application—both necessary skills for college and career success. All participation was voluntary, and all student names remained confidential.

Focus Groups

Focus groups allowed the researcher to collect information from a group of individuals, representative of the population, who had knowledge of the topic of interest (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In this case study, the student perspective was crucial to gaining a better understanding of the high-quality service-learning experience. All three focus groups were asked the same five questions below:

1. What were the most rewarding tasks, events or activities of your experience? How so?
   a. What, if anything, did you learn about yourself during the rewarding parts of your service-learning process?

2. What were the most challenging tasks of your experience? How so?
   a. What, if anything, did you learn about yourself during the challenging parts of your service-learning process?
3. What elements, activities or events of your service-learning experience provided the best opportunity for you to transfer the knowledge and skill you learned in the classroom to the real world environment? Please explain.

4. What, if any, new knowledge or skills did you learn during your service-learning project?

5. In what ways do you feel you have changed during your service-learning experience?

Each student participant in all three of the focus groups was given the opportunity to answer each question or the option to “pass.” On a few occasions, students choose to pass on certain questions and on several occasions students volunteered to answer and often elaborated on their descriptions or answers, sometimes when prompted by researcher’s follow-up question. Overall, students were able to provide valuable first-hand knowledge and insight into their experience that helped establish what specific components (activities and events) contributed to their learning experience. Students also provided descriptive and in-depth information regarding the activities and events that were most meaningful and purposeful and what components of their experience allowed for the opportunity to transfer classroom concepts to real-life application.

The number of focus groups was determined by the number of student/parent written consents returned for each of the three classes. For this case study, the researcher conducted student focus groups from three class sections consisting of 4-5 students each. A focus group structure had been established to help students feel comfortable in a group interview setting, and the researcher’s protocol included an agenda and ground rules for keeping participants engaged (Appendix C). Participation was voluntary. The project coordinating teacher also completed a written form of the same open-ended focus group questions, slightly modified to reflect the
teacher’s point of view and to provide an additional perspective of the lived experience of student participants during their high-quality service-learning project.

**Review of Journal Entry Documents**

The researcher also reviewed journal entry documents, including three to five randomly selected journal entries from students in each of the three classes. Journal entries were one example of critical reflection, one of the most important elements of a high-quality service-learning experience. According to Bringle and Hatcher (1999), reflection makes meaning of the service-learning experience through an “intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives” (p. 112). In other words, reflection helps connect the educational content with service activities to form deeper meaning. Critical reflection is a powerful source of student testimony and expression of individual feelings, thoughts and experiences associated with learning course content and applying it to service.

For this study, reflection in the form of journal entries allowed students an intentional opportunity for expression, directly related their service-learning experience to the real world, and related classroom concepts to real-world applications. The teacher coordinator for this service-learning project provided writing prompts for students that specifically focused on how they were affected by their high-quality service-learning experience. Some examples of such prompts include:

- Describe how you have been affected by your service-learning project. How has this project impacted you, personally? Consider: has it been a rewarding or challenging process, and if so why? What have been the highlights or obstacles of your experience?
• In what ways do you feel you have changed during this experience while applying learned classroom knowledge to real world problems?
• Have you learned to work cooperatively with others?
• Have you gained more respect for different opinions?
• What were the defining moments of this experience for you?
• What was the part of this experience that impacted you the most: community interaction, voice in planning and implementing, the actual end product? Something else?

Critical reflection and prompts such as this provided an expressive and internal examination that helped students intentionally share feelings, thoughts, insights and perceptions of their experience.

**Data Analysis**

As recommended by numerous researchers (Madison, 2005; Huberman & Miles, 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2007) a combination of strategies was used to analyze the data for this case study. The data analysis strategies included a review of journal entries, an analysis of student focus group transcripts and surveys, and a review of a written interview and survey with the coordinator and facilitator of the service-learning project.

The open-ended survey responses, the focus group audio transcripts and the journal entries were hand-coded and analyzed to identify common themes and patterns. Data analysis used an inductive approach involving a number of phases, as recommended by Creswell (2007) and also Yin (2009), specifically related to case study. The phases used for this study are outlined below.
Phase 1: data management. Yin (2009) recommends gathering data from a variety of sources and creating a database for organizing and documenting the data collected. The database should be developed to contain sufficient data so that other investigators can easily access and review evidence and draw an “independent conclusion about the case study” (Yin, 2009, p. 119). For this case study, information gathered from the surveys, focus group transcripts, and journal entries were organized, transformed into sentences and stories, and then stored in files, on index cards, and in computer files.

Survey Likert-type questions were rated 1-4 according to the most often recorded responses (1 representing the most responses, 2 representing the second most, and so on). To do this, the researcher first used a scatter plot to record the answers, with each dot corresponding to one response. Then the researcher totaled each possible response to a question and determined the order of responses from most common to least common. The researcher then color-coded the ratings to determine what elements of this high-quality service-learning experience students perceived to have contributed to their success in the learning process.

The data from the open-ended questions were analyzed and stored according to the procedures below in Phase 2.

Phase 2: reading and memoing. The researcher immersed herself in reading and “memoing” the documents and transcripts. Memoing means writing notes or memos (short phrases, ideas, or key concepts) within the margins of field notes or documents that are collected during reading or observing. Through reading and memoing, the researcher began to gain a sense of what the data meant and identified initial codes. Next, she identified keywords and
phrases that emerged from the open-ended survey questions, focus group transcripts, and journal entries.

**Phases 3-5: description, classification/coding, and interpretation.** Phases 3, 4, and 5 were interrelated, particularly important, and time consuming. In Phase 3, the researcher provided a narrative description of the case study, describing the high-quality service-learning project being studied and the context in which the case study took place.

**Coding.** In Phase 4, the researcher categorized the information, using codes to demarcate themes and patterns. According to Richards and Moorse (2007), coding is the initial process of “linking,” or leading researchers from the data collection process to an actual idea, and from the idea to all other data that may pertain to that same idea. This process is also referred to as codifying, when codes are applied and reapplied in order to qualify data, allowing data to be isolated, grouped, and regrouped, and re-linking ideas so that meaning and explanation can be merged into deeper understanding (Grbich, 2007). The analysis and coding process entails reviewing conversation with multiple stakeholders and actions during the process as well as interpretive reflections of conversation and meanings of data.

The coding cycle is broken into first and second cycles, according to Saldana (2013). The first cycle for this study involved utilizing a holistic coding approach or preparatory approach used only to decipher large amounts of data and before using a more detailed coding process. Next, a structural coding process was applied, developing a labeling and indexing mechanism to initially break down and categorize the large amounts of data used in this study. After that, comparable data sets used in this study such as open-ended survey and journal entry responses and focus group transcripts were examined for similarities, differences, and
relationships (Saldana, 2013). This coding strategy is specifically recommended for mixed-method studies, such as case studies that include both survey and focus group interviews. Labeling and indexing allows for the researcher to quickly access relevant or similar data from a larger data set (Macqueen, McLellan-Lemal, Bartholow & Milstein, 2008).

After labeling, indexing and examining large amounts of data, the second cycle coding method of pattern coding was applied to the same data. This process involved identifying and organizing similarly coded data and arranging it into smaller groups of themes or constructs and attributing meaning to it (Saldana, 2013). Pattern coding requires the researcher to explain or draw inferences from the evidence or reasoning found in the data, pulling together a large amount of information into a meaningful unit of analysis that ultimately identifies emergent themes, patterns of relationships, and formulating theoretical constructs and processes (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Finally, in Phase 5, the researcher interpreted this information. She translated the information into words, sentences, and stories geared toward a specific audience and reader. She also formed a larger meaning surrounding the events and situations observed, including the high-quality service-learning project and the participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to this interpreting process as “lessons learned,” and it can involve a researcher’s hunches, insights, and intuition (i.e., personal view or construct) (Creswell, 2007).
Phase 6: presenting the data. The final phase involved presenting the data, or packaging the information. This phase is important to provide an in-depth picture (or analysis) that supports the claims and that is consistent with the findings. This was achieved through text and tables that convey the findings for the intended audience. According to Creswell (2007), a thick, rich description of the study is necessary “to ensure findings will be transferrable between researcher and those being studied” (p. 204).

Trustworthiness/Reliability

In designing a study, it is important to establish “trustworthiness,” or reliability—meaning transferability and dependability of the findings to other settings or research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this case study, the researcher established trustworthiness by following Yin’s (2009) three principles of data collection: utilizing multiple sources of evidence, creating a case study database, and maintaining a chain of evidence in order to preserve validity, objectivity and credibility. Each of these principles will now be discussed in turn.

First, multiple sources of evidence were used for this study, including a survey, focus group transcripts, and document review. Consistent with using multiple sources of data, validity of this study is established through “rich, thick description” (Creswell, 2009, p. 191) of survey responses, focus group transcripts and journal entry responses. This principle allowed for data triangulation that provided corroborating evidence or converging lines of inquiry to help reduce potential threats to constructing validity.

Second, the researcher developed a case study database, which increased the study’s reliability. A case study database helps to store and organize information, which eventually becomes the basis of the case study report and includes case study notes, the researcher’s
observations and notes, case study documents relevant to the case, tabular material such as data charts, and narratives such as focus group transcripts (as used in this case) (Yin, 2009). Moreover, a case study database helps to increase reliability through detailing the steps involved and developing a “formable and presentable database” (p. 119) that provides enough data that the reader can formulate his or her own independent conclusions.

Third, the researcher maintained a chain of evidence, another mechanism that increased the reliability of the findings. All evidence components of the case study were recorded, including the case study report, database, citations to specific evidentiary sources, focus group interview protocol, focus group questions, and survey questions.

**Transferability**

Fraenkel & Wallen (2009) compare transferability in the qualitative domain to generalizability in the quantitative domain. Transferability can be applied to quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods research methods. Transferability is most relevant to qualitative research methods such as case study since it is an in-depth study of process and methods (Barnes, Conrad, Demont-Heinrich, Graziano, Kowalski, Neufeld, Samora and Palmquist, 1994-2012). Generalization refers to the degree to which one study’s results can be generalized to a larger population outside of the research setting, (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009), whereas, transferability in qualitative research is a process to which the degree of a reader of research can expect the results of a particular study to apply to the specifics of an environment or new situations, with new people. Readers of research can take specific research situations and compare it to the specifics of an environment or situation with which they are familiar (Barnes et al., 1994-2012). If the reader of research determines that there are enough similarities between
two research situations then it may be reasonable to infer that the results of the research would be the same or similar in their own research environment. In other words, researchers may “transfer” the results of a study to another context if a very detailed description of their research situation, process and methods used (Barnes et al., 1994-2012) are obvious, such as in this study. This case study could be transferred to other research environment if similar research situations were duplicated as outlined in this highly detailed description of conditions, procedures and research methods used.

**Viability**

According to Maxwell (2005), there are two additional possible validity threats to consider: a researcher’s bias and reactivity. Researcher bias involves the subjectivity of the researcher’s interpretations, and reactivity involves the possible researcher influence on the setting or individuals being studied. For this study, the researcher acknowledges inherent professional bias based on prior and extensive high-quality service-learning experiences as an educator, administrator, and author of state service-learning grants. The researcher also acknowledges that the positive impact and response of these firsthand service-learning experiences has influenced her perspective. The researcher was careful to be open to the findings of the study, including both negative and positive findings, and to fully disclose these findings in order to help reduce the inherent professional bias already mentioned. In regard to reactivity, the researcher took precautions to ensure that all information and findings, whether positive or negative, would be reported as objectively as possible.
Protection of Human Subjects

According to Yin (2009), studying a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context obligates the researcher to follow certain ethical practices similar to those in medical research. The goal of this research study was to learn how students are affected by their high-quality service-learning experience. To conduct a case study with “special care and sensitivity,” certain ethical factors were considered for this case study, including informed consent by students and parents. Informed consent documents outlined the nature of the case and formally sought the students’ volunteer participation. Student participants’ privacy and confidentiality was protected through de-identifying all student names, using a numerical coding system rather than names to identify students. Equally important to note is that students for this research were selected by virtue of their participation in a high-quality service-learning project. No students participating in this project were excluded on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, race, health, literacy level, or socioeconomic levels—all students participating in the high-quality, service learning project were invited to participate in this research. In recognition of the ethical standards maintained in this study design, the Northeastern University IRB granted approval for this study design.

Participation in this research project did not present any obvious risks to participants. This study documented student participants’ perceptions of their high-quality service-learning experience; it did not impose any treatment that could have negative consequences for student participants or the classroom teacher. All student survey and focus group subjects had written parental consent, were informed that their participation was voluntary, and were informed that at any time they could choose to stop or end their participation without penalty. No incentives
were offered to the focus group subjects except for an end-of-project pizza party, to which all participants were invited.

**Summary**

Participation in this case study did not place the well-being or rights of student participants at risk. In fact, students’ voice and direct involvement in this high-quality service-learning project contributed valuable programming information for teachers. Student insight into the phenomenon can translate into future quality outcomes for other students in areas such as academic, social/personal, civic, and career application and development. Student participants may have felt empowered by the contribution they made to high-quality service-learning research and to the programming at their own high school, their own district, and other high schools and districts.

**Chapter 4: Research Findings**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results and key findings of this case study. In the first section, the history of Mountain View Public Schools’ (MVPS’s) high-quality service-learning programming is presented. Specifically, MVPS’ national and state achievement awards and other forms of recognition are described, along with the program components that contribute to its high-quality service-learning status. Presented next are survey results from both teacher and student perspectives, which are followed by a discussion of emerging themes that were identified through a comprehensive and deliberate analysis of journal entries, focus group transcripts, and open-ended survey questions. The intention was for the student participants to describe in detail how they were affected by their high-quality service-learning experience and to
identify through their perceptions, the elements and activities of the process that contributed to high-quality learning and student outcomes in areas such as critical thinking, communication, career, teamwork, civic responsibility, global understanding and citizenship, and academic development and educational success. The final section reports a summary of key research results for this case study.

**History of High-Quality Service-learning Programming at Mountain View Public Schools**

Mountain View Public Schools have a 20-year history of service-learning programming that stems from a long tradition of community service in this rural area of western Massachusetts. In 1992, MVPS’ high school faculty organized a grassroots effort to incorporate service learning into their curriculum, beginning at the high school level and eventually expanding to including pre-K-12. On MVPS’s website, service learning is described as a teaching method and a way of learning that meets a wide variety of community needs while intentionally connecting academic skill and knowledge with real-world service activities. According to Mountain View Public School’s service-learning coordinator for the district and as listed on the district website, service learning is an effective strategy for teaching core subjects and for integrating other learning objectives, including 21st century skills, civic education, career exploration, workplace readiness, and social and emotional learning opportunities.

At the high school level, the practice and ethics of quality service-learning experiences continue to permeate the culture and curriculum of the case study school, as well as the MVPS district. The practice of quality service-learning has spread beyond the district and into surrounding districts and regions. During the 2011-2012 school year, more than 103 projects were supported in MVPS, with approximately 89% of the student population participating and 77
district teachers engaged in various service-learning projects. Over a 20-year period, Mountain View High School (MVHS) has repeated many successful projects. One such example is the Senior/Senior (citizen) Prom. It is a senior prom organized by Mountain View high school (student) seniors in two sociology classes for the senior citizens in their community. Its purpose is to help overcome stereotypes and barriers that sometimes exist between teenagers and elders in a community. The Senior (citizen) Prom has become a tradition in the community, serving approximately 75 elders each year and as of May 2013 has been held for 20 consecutive years at the high school. Another example is the service-learning project examined in this research study, which is a program repeated from last year. Next year, this project will become part of the curriculum for all freshman English students in this teacher’s classes.

While some projects are repeated with subsequent students, other projects change from year to year in response to changing and immediate community issues and needs, such as hunger, green initiatives, victims of recent disasters, and raising awareness about bullying and other social issues that impact the community’s socio-economic culture such as unemployment and teen pregnancy. Quality service-learning projects such as these have helped the MVPS district earn a “shining star” distinction among service-learning districts as recognition for exceptional projects and programming.
**Recognition for high-quality service learning.** In 1999, five years after receiving their first service-learning grant from Learn and Service America, Mountain View High School received its first recognition as a National Service-Learning Leader School from the Corporation for National and Community Service for its quality service-learning programming and projects. Mountain View High School representatives attended leadership conferences and award ceremonies in Washington D.C. on two occasions and distinguished senators, Ted Kennedy and Harris Woffard, presented the awards to school representatives. Subsequent accolades include the following:

- In 1999, MVHS presented at the National Service-Learning Conference in San Jose, California. MVHS has presented at similar conferences ever since.
- In 2000, Mountain View High School (MVHS) was named a Massachusetts Service-Learning Leader School by the Department of Education.
- In 2001, MVPS was featured in the publication Community Lessons: Promising Curriculum Practices. Three district projects were showcased.
- In 2002, the National Commission for Service-Learning Report, entitled Learning in Deed: The Power of Service-Learning for American Schools, referenced the MVPS service-learning program. MVPS was also one of three school systems featured in a film accompanying the Commission’s report. District projects included a kindergarten project with the area hospital and high school Spanish students teaching to elementary children.
- In 2003, in its re-accreditation report, the New England Association for School and Colleges recognized MVHS for its excellence in service-learning programming. The
report noted the “advancement of the school’s mission, its efficacy in teaching and learning, and as a central characteristic of positive school climate.”

- In 2006, MVPS won first place at the "Best of the Atlantic” Regional Service-Learning Showcase, as well as first place at the National Service-Learning Conference, for its exhibit “Education to Eradicate Terrorism: Afghanistan School Aid Project.”

- In 2007, the Massachusetts Department of Education Service-Learning Teacher Leader Award was presented to an MVHS teacher.

- In 2009 and 2010, MVHS programs were featured in several books, including Promising Practices; Kids Taking Action; and Lend a Hand: Exploring Service-Learning Through Children’s Literature, as well as in numerous magazines, newspapers, and print.

- In 2009, the MVHS principal received the Principal Leader Award from the Community Service-Learning Council to the Board of Education for Massachusetts.

- In 2010, the MVPS superintendent was named Massachusetts Service-Learning Superintendent Leader by the Community Service-Learning Council to the Board of Education, and also

- In 2010, 2012 respectively, the Community Service-Learning Council to the Board of Education selected two MVHS teachers with the Community Service-Learning Teacher Awards.

- Most recently, 2013, the Coordinator for MVPS district, received the Outstanding Service-Learning Practitioner Award from the Massachusetts Service Alliance.
Best practices demonstrated by MVPS. One of the essential elements of quality service-learning practice, as has been previously delineated, is collaboration with community partners. MVPS has partnered and collaborated with several area community organizations such as the Berkshire Food Project, the Growing Healthy Community Garden Program, the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, Habitat for Humanity, and the Hoosic River Rival Coalition. Illustrative of the importance of strong partnership is the partnership formed between MVPS service-learning program, Growing Healthy Community Garden Program and the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts. Over many years they have connected community gardening to curriculum (including; science, technology, art, math, English and family and consumer science) through teachers and students designing and installing gardens to grow healthy food, target community hunger, and help local people access healthy food options.

Another strong partnership formed is between the MVPS service-learning program and the four year area college and northern campus of the community college, launched in 1994, and formalization in 2000 after receiving the Community, Higher Education, School Partnership award for their collaboration. Today, MVPS continues to enjoy healthy and effective partnerships to advance quality service-learning involvement for students of all ages. Cumulating these partnerships in 2009, the partnership between MVPS and the four year area college and the northern campus of the community college was one of only eight partnerships in the country to be invited to the National Summit on P-16 Service Learning in Omaha, Nebraska. These effective partnerships, together with MVPS’ long and distinguished quality service-learning programming and national and state recognition of quality service-learning projects, have helped establish the MVPS district as a national and state service-learning leader school.
Commitment to quality practice. Mountain View Public Schools’ commitment to quality practice includes adherence to national and state best practices of high-quality service learning, as outlined in the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (see Chapter 2 of this thesis). Teachers develop and implement a curriculum based on service-learning units that are tied into the Learning Standards for the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and modeled after the standards put forth by national leaders in the service learning field, such as the National Youth Leadership Council, the National Service-Learning Partnership, the Corporation for National and Community, and the Catherine Berger Kaye and Kids Consortium. The K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (NYLC, 2008) address several factors that are used in this study as criteria for quality practice: meaningful service, links to curriculum, reflection, diversity, youth voice and leadership, partnerships, progress monitoring, duration, and intensity.

MVHS High-Quality Service-Learning Project Studied

The high-quality service-learning project that is the focus of this study began in September 2012 and ended in June 2013. It consisted of three phases. In Phase I of the project, which occurred over the first half of the school year, students explored a sense of identity of self, family and community. They spent time reflecting and journaling in the discovery process of “who they are.” They collected family artifacts and conducted interviews to learn more about their families and themselves. They explored and researched their community and their town to learn about their town’s history and their community today. They conducted their research in the town library, specifically the archives and local history sections, and they visited and gathered more information from the local Museum of Science and History and from Town Council.
chambers. Students also learned about their town from listening to the Mayor as well as local historians, all of whom visited the classroom as guest speakers.

During the community and self discovery parts of Phase I, a few student activities included a labeling exercise, designed to help students better understand who they are and what others thought of them, watching the film *Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes* to introduce bias, discrimination and labeling that occurs in society, and reviewing a poem entitled *Mask: Please Hear What I’m Not Saying* to help students understand that who people purport to be is often a mask to their true existence. These activities helped students brainstorm who they are, where their identity came from, how environment shapes identity and which identities are permanent and which identities they have the power to change.

Other activities such as interpreting quotes about identity from authors such as E. E. Cummings; creating shadow boxes that reflected their own identity; writing poems about themselves and the children who worked in their town mills 100 years ago; and gaining an understanding of the process and components of service learning such as reflection, investigation, and planning also contributed in helping students understand their own identities and the role or influence their own community and town’s identity may or may not have played in the process of forming their identity. In addition to learning about their family, community and self-identities, students also learned and acquired new research elements and skills, including lessons on citation, plagiarism, and research notes. Students’ research included working both in the classroom and in the community, learning firsthand about the town in which they live, and participating in activities that helped them to better understand themselves in relation to their community.
In Phase II, which occurred over the second half of the school year, students chose either to work alone or form small groups in order to assess what was learned about self and community. After assessing what was learned, students continued their research in the community, and surveyed and interacted with community members and peers to evaluate community needs and issues associated with their town. Through continued research and community interaction, students were responsible for narrowing their research and identifying one problem they would like to address in their community. The top four most frequently reported brainstorming ideas, as identified in student journal entries in February, were homelessness, teen pregnancy, teen boredom, and empty mill space. Phase II of the project also involved brainstorming potential solutions and researching their viability, affordability, and potential impact on the community, and concluding with a research paper related to the identity of their town.

Phase III, the final phase of the project, involved creating a proposal, slogan and logo for branding and marketing their town’s strength, and a concrete plan for implementation of a solution if adopted by town council. As supportive evidence to the students’ research paper, visual aids in the form of a PowerPoint, a slogan/logo design for their town and an oral presentation of their proposal were required. This proposal included delivering a PowerPoint to classmates, for the purposes of evaluation and feedback, writing an elevator speech, and rating the best student presentations to be presented to town council or the Chamber of Commerce. In rating student presentations, students each presented more than once, and to evaluate their peers, relied on the use of rubrics developed by the teacher and students, to decide which student PowerPoint presentations would be presented. Some examples of the final projects that were
presented to town council and the Chamber of Commerce included *Jobs for Teens, Teen Parent Education Center, Blast to the Past Road Race* (to raise money to help refurnish a historical theatre in town), and RAD (roller skating, rink, arcade, and dance club teen center).

All three phases led students through a yearlong, systematic, discovery process concerning their individual identity as well as their identity as members of a greater community. First, students researched, learned and shared about themselves, their families and their communities. Next, they determined their community’s strengths, challenges and hopes for the future. As the ultimate goal of the project and through student PowerPoint presentations, students considered the future of their town and how they might be part of their town’s future, making improvements and finding solutions.

**Data Collection**

For the current case study research, student impressions were collected in three ways. First, students completed a survey designed to solicit insight regarding the eight K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice and 21st century skill obtainment. Second, three focus groups were conducted, with randomly selected students from each of the three Honors English classes. Third, students’ journals were reviewed to provide insight into the process of the service-learning project and how students eventually generated a project idea that included planning, researching, implementing, and presenting their final project to community members. In addition to student impressions, teacher impressions were also collected through a written survey. The teacher completed a written form of the student survey, which included both closed ended and the open-ended questions, as well as focus group questions, with slight variations.
Survey. According to Yin (2009), survey is another type of interview, involving more structured questioning. For this case study, structured questions solicited opinions, perceptions, and attitudes regarding students’ high-quality service-learning experience. In this project, the survey contained both Likert-scale forced response questions as well as more descriptive open-ended questions. The survey was delivered to all three Honors English freshman classes at the end of their high-quality service-learning project. Out of a possible 41 students, 38 students returned parental/guardian consent forms to complete the survey.

The survey contained five sections as presented in Table 1. Section A included prompts for general information, such as student number (assigned by the teacher to conceal the students’ identity throughout the study), gender, class section and date. Sections B through E pertain to teacher and student insights and perceptions of the student experience. The two open-ended questions at the end of Section E, allowed for more detailed and descriptive responses from a larger representation of the student population and from the teacher. They were as follows:

1. What were the most meaningful events or activities of your high-quality service-learning experience?

2. What experiences allowed you the opportunity to best transfer what you had learned in the classroom to the community setting?

Each survey part was delineated with a section letter and a sub title description as shown in Table 1. Table 1 presents the survey sections alongside the research questions they address.
Table 1

Survey Sections and the Research Question Related to Survey Section

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Contents of Sections</th>
<th>Research Question Related to Survey Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section B &amp;</td>
<td>Elements of Quality Service-Learning Practice Make a Difference in Community And Self</td>
<td>Research Question Two: What do students view as the most meaningful and purposeful components of their high-quality service-learning experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section D, Question #13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section C &amp;</td>
<td>21st Century Skills Make a Difference in Community And Self</td>
<td>Research Question Three: What components of the high-quality service-learning process provided the best opportunities for students to transfer what they have learned in the classroom into real-world experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section D,</td>
<td>Make a Difference in Community And Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section D</td>
<td>Make a Difference in Community And Self</td>
<td>Research Question One: How do students describe their high-quality service-learning experiences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section E</td>
<td>Student Outcomes in Critical Thinking, Communication, Career, Teamwork, Civic responsibility, Global Understanding and Citizenship, and Academic Development and Educational Success</td>
<td>Research Question Four: In what ways do students feel they have changed during high-quality service-learning experience?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Focus groups.** According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), focus groups allow the researcher to collect information from a group of individuals, representative of the population and who have explicit knowledge of a specific topic or phenomena. Students participating in focus group discussions on this project were able to offer essential information, insights, perspectives, opinions and attitudes on a specific phenomenon that either contradicted or corroborated other sources of evidence. For this case study, the researcher conducted student focus groups from three class sections consisting of 4-5 students each, representative of each class section. In total,
there were 14 student focus group participants, which represented over one-third of the 38 students who participated in the research project. Table 2 shows the ratio of focus group size to class size for each of the groups.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Section</th>
<th>Students in Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>4 out of a possible 8 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>5 out of a possible 17 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>5 out of a possible 13 students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus groups were guided by pre-established questions, with some follow-up questions asked by the researcher to solicit more detail. The responses of the students reflected their individual and collective perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes concerning their service-learning project, specifically how they were affected and what elements they perceived to be the most valuable to the process itself. These student focus group discussions provided firsthand knowledge, and meaningful and practical insight into what constituted a high-quality service-learning experience for students, and helped to corroborate survey evidence.

Journal entry review. Document review of the critical reflections of students from randomly selected journal entries included a review of 14 student journals, as shown in Table 3. Review of journal entry documents was particularly pertinent to this case study, since critical reflection is deemed one of the essential elements that determine quality practice. As previously indicated, critical reflection also provides a powerful source of student testimony and detailed expression of individual feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

Table 3
Ratio of Student Journals to Class Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Section</th>
<th>Number of Student Journals Reviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>4 out of a possible 8 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>5 out of a possible 17 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>5 out of a possible 13 students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coding

Open-ended survey responses, focus group transcripts and the journal entries were hand-coded and analyzed for common themes and patterns, and then entered into this researcher’s secured database. A holistic coding approach was used for close examination of overall contents of the entire case and in an attempt to identify basic descriptions, themes, patterns and interpretations in the data (Dey, 1993). This approach allowed the researcher to synthesize a large amount of data (survey, focus groups, and journals) and chunk the text into broad topic areas to review later for more detailed examination. The researcher used an inductive data analysis approach and conducted a more in-depth analysis, involving continual reflection, analytical questioning, and memoing in an effort to gain better and deeper understanding of the data. Next, the researcher categorized the information, using two coding cycles to demarcate themes and patterns.

The coding cycle was broken down into first and second cycles as described in Chapter 3. First cycle consisted of labeling, indexing and examining large amounts of text. The second cycle involved identifying and organizing similarly coded data and arranging it into smaller groups of emergent themes and patterns of relationships, and formulating theoretical constructs and processes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In the following section, research findings will be presented followed by a discussion of emergent themes that were identified through this
deliberate analysis of open-ended survey questions, focus group transcripts and journal entry responses.

**Research Findings**

This findings section is organized by research questions. Specifically, following each research question, survey results are presented. Tables in this section display those responses most representative of the majority of students in order to highlight the most salient points in each survey section. These tables present the descriptive *statement*, which described a specific task or skill and asked students if [they felt] they had achieved or acquired it, along with the *number of students [percentages] indicating positive responses* (N = 38).

Following the survey data, themes established through a review of student open-ended questions, focus group transcripts and journal entry responses are presented. It is important to note that student prompts for journaling were similar in nature to the open-ended survey and focus group questions. Consequently, student responses were very similar and resulted in the same themes. As a result, themes are presented together.

Following themes, are direct student responses (quotes) from these data sources. These responses are representative of the majority of students. In some instances, a greater number of student responses were included because students provided more rich description and detailed responses in relationship to the theme. For other themes, only one or two student responses were included because they provided a general description of student responses that captured the overall and general feelings of all students without providing different or additional details.
At the end of each student section, the teacher’s responses are presented in an effort to provide either corroborating or contradicting evidence. If the teacher concurred with the student’s reflections, only a quick reference was made.

**Research Question One: How do students describe their high-quality service-learning experience?**

Responses in relationship to Research Question One were provided during completion of student survey’s *making a difference in community and self* section and also during student journaling and focus group discussions.

Making a difference in community and self, *how do you perceive yourself in relation to the statement?* A variety of four-point, Likert-scale items were asked in an effort to discern how students perceived themselves in relation to making a difference in their community. For example, *I encouraged others to work on community problems or I helped address problems in my community.* Student responses to these statements ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree.* The statements that received the most favorable student responses, representative of the majority of student participants, are presented in Table 4.
Table 4

*Student Responses for Making a Difference in Community Question, How do you perceive yourself in relation to the statement?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Number of Students indicating positive responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can make a difference in my neighborhood or town</td>
<td>36 (94%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students my age can do things to make the world better</td>
<td>35 (92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I helped address problems in my community</td>
<td>34 (89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel responsible for helping others</td>
<td>30 (78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I made a difference in my community</td>
<td>29 (76%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results indicated that students *agree* or *strongly agree* that at their age, they can *make a difference* in their neighborhood or town by helping others. In this particular section of the survey, student responses were overwhelmingly favorable, as outlined in Table 4, with only one or two students responding with *strongly disagree* or *disagree*. Overall, student responses indicated that the majority of students *strongly agree* that they *made a difference in their community* (94%) and that *students their age could do things to make the world better* (92%) as well as *address problems in their community* (89%), ultimately, feeling *responsible for helping others* (78%) and feeling they *made a difference in their community* (76%). The teacher’s responses corroborated these student results, with no distinct differences.

**Making a difference in community and self, how good did you become at the following skills or activities listed?** Table 5 presents the favorable responses of students to
another set of Likert-scale items asking students how good they felt they had become at certain skills or activities associated with a high-quality service-learning project. Student responses to these statements ranged from not good at all to excellent.

Table 5

Additional Student Responses for Making a Difference in Community and Self Question: How good did I become at the following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Number of Students indicating positive responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding information to solve problems</td>
<td>N=38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding what other people are trying to say</td>
<td>29 (76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designing and implementing a service-learning project</td>
<td>28 (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing consequences of actions</td>
<td>34 (89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using what I learned in the classroom</td>
<td>32 (84%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding resources to help me with my project</td>
<td>30 (78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solving problems</td>
<td>29 (76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding out more about the community and how it works</td>
<td>27 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplishing goals</td>
<td>26 (68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting others to listen to my ideas</td>
<td>24 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading a group</td>
<td>23 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking in front of a group of people</td>
<td>22 (57%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, in this cluster of statements, student perceived themselves as *fairly good* to *very good* at skills or activities, with most student responses falling in the *very good* category. The highest percentages (a combination of *very good* to *excellent*) were found in the areas of *finding information to solve problems* (76%) and *understanding what other people are trying to say* (73%).

Students appeared to evaluate themselves more critically than the teacher. As an example, when asked to evaluate themselves on *speaking in front of groups of people*, 26% of the students rated themselves as being *not good at all* in this area, whereas the teacher rated students as *very good*.

**Teacher responses.** Overall, the teacher’s responses corresponded with student responses, with the exception of three items, which are presented in the next paragraph. In terms of correspondence items, similar to student responses, the teacher rated most descriptive areas as *very good*, with an *excellent rating* in *finding out more about our community and how it works*. Less favorable, but still in line with student responses, the teacher rated as just *fairly good*: *finding resources*, *getting others to listen to their ideas*, and *using what they learned in the classroom to solve problems in their community*.

The three items on which teacher responses did not correspond with student responses were: *speaking in front of groups of people*, *finding out more about the community and how it works*, and *understanding what other people are trying to say*. On two items, the teacher’s ratings were more favorable than students. As noted above, on *speaking in front of groups of people*, 10 out of 38 or 26% of students rated themselves as being *not good at all*, whereas the teacher rated them as *very good*. Similarly, on *finding out more about the community and how it*
works, the teacher rated students as *excellent*, whereas students’ ratings divided between *fairly good* and *very good*. Conversely, the teacher rated students less favorably than they rated themselves on *understanding what other people are trying to say*, rating them as only *fairly good*, whereas students rated themselves as *very good to excellent*.

It appears, that in terms of *making a difference in their community and self*, students described their high-quality service-learning experience to be overwhelmingly favorable, and believed they made a strong difference in their community. Student responses, indicated that students [felt they] had made *a difference in their community and town, helped address community problems*, and that *students their age could do things to make the world better*. Additionally, students described their experience as becoming *very good to excellent* at many new skills such as *finding information to solve problems, accomplishing goals* and *seeing the consequences of actions* to name a few. In the next section, further detail and more in-depth insight and meaning than that which can be provided with survey data will be provided through the presentation of themes that emerged from journal entries and focus group discussions.

**Themes from journal entries and focus groups based on the question, how do students describe their high-quality service-learning experience?** At the end of the project, class journal entries were reviewed, and three separate focus group discussions were conducted. Student journal entries and focus group conversations provided more detailed description of students’ high-quality service-learning project. All student participants were asked through journal entry prompts and during focus group discussions to describe the most rewarding and the most challenging aspects of their experience. As described in the introduction, student journal
entry prompts and focus groups questions were very similar in nature and as a consequence, resulted in the same themes, which are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

*Themes from Journal Entries and Focus Groups Question: How Do Students Describe Their High-quality service-learning Experience?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Rewards or Highlights</strong></th>
<th><strong>Challenges or Obstacles that Became Strengths</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Greater community awareness</td>
<td>• Public speaking, presentations, and talking to unfamiliar people in community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Listening to and respecting others’ ideas and opinions</td>
<td>• Time management, scheduling and deadlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Making a difference and interacting in our community</td>
<td>• Researching and finding all the information and resources needed, as well as narrowing topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sense of accomplishment, satisfaction and ownership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Greater community awareness.** Many students commented on gaining a greater sense of community awareness during this project, specifically through their work researching, surveying, and interacting with the community. They described developing a sense of connection to their community and its problems, needs, and possible solutions. They described what appeared to be an eye-opening experience in their journal excerpts and during focus group conversations.

**Student journal entries as supporting evidence.** Several student journal entries echoed the general feeling of all students related to the theme of *greater community awareness* (note that girls are numbered G1- G26, and boys are numbered B1- B13):
• G13: This project has been very eventful and informative for me. I’ve learned much more about problems that our town struggles with… I have gained a much higher awareness of our town.

• B9: This project has definitely impacted my idea of our town… it was fun to think of ideas on how to change your own town. I am more aware of my community’s problems now that I have done this project because I had to try to evaluate all the problems in our town.

• G9: I’ve learned to appreciate the community I live in and look at all of the positives and try to think of ways to change the negatives. I have become more aware and thankful. I am more aware of my community and its larger issues…

• B11: This does make me feel more aware of my community problems because it made me dig deeper and research more in the life of our town.

• G25: This project has impacted me positively and made me more aware of my surroundings.

• B3: I am more aware of my community problems because I know now they are affecting my community.

**Student focus groups as supporting evidence.** Student focus group conversations included greater detail and description of their student experience than journal entries, given that discussion occurred between multiple students and the interviewer. Additionally, sometimes follow-up questions triggered additional details in student responses. One detail that emerged was that students expressed a feeling of gaining *more knowledge or awareness about their community*. Reflective of this feeling, one student summed up most students’ feelings by saying:
B1: “I think one thing that I really gained is that after doing the survey on what people think the biggest problems in the community are, I asked a lot of teens, and they all came to the same thing [conclusion]. A bunch of my classmates had the same results.”

Talking to people in their community and, in many cases, to people they did not know also generated a sense of community awareness among students, specifically in relation to their community’s problems, needs, and solutions. Talking to other people in their community was related to the common theme of *greater sense of community awareness* as illustrated below with comments from two students who succinctly summarized most students’ feelings:

- G13: Talking to people in the community and seeing what I could do to help them and help some of the issues that was around made me realize how much I actually enjoy being a little bit more social and helping people in any way, whatever they needed…
- G1: I really think talking with the people in the community helped. I really saw what people want changed in our community.

**Listening to and respecting the ideas and opinions of others.** Another common theme among student descriptions of their experience involved *listening to others, including respecting a difference in opinion*. All students who commented specifically on a difference of opinion reported it as a positive part of their experience. Students appeared to listen intently to others during the process and to be open to new ideas both while working in the community and while working in their individual groups.
**Student journal entries as supporting evidence.** A few student journal entries reflective of the larger theme of *listening to and respecting ideas and opinions of others*, described their experiences:

- G13: We all heard each other’s ideas with open ears and considered them despite differing opinions.
- G4: I guess I’ve gained more respect for other opinions because everyone should have a chance to say what they want.
- B1: Finally, I have indeed gained respect for others’ opinions, especially our groups.
- B11: I have also gained more respect for different opinions after seeing what I think are bad ideas turn out quite well.
- B13: …it can get better most of the time taking in others’ opinions.
- G25: I’ve gained more respect for others’ opinions because everybody thinks there is a different issue and different solutions.
- B3: I have gained more respect for different opinions because not everyone feels the same way about what should be considered problems about our town.
- G9: I have gained more respect for others. What they want and what they feel.

**Student focus groups as supporting evidence.** During focus group conversations, all students reported they gained *a sense of mutual respect for others and their opinions*, an acknowledgement that there are valid opinions beyond their own. A few comments representative of the theme *gaining respect for other opinions* included:

- G2: I think that when I surveyed people, it was an experience. I was able to figure out what they think would change our town to make it better, and if not better, than an
improvement. I thought it was not only an experience, but kind of fun to see what other people thought. Not just what I thought, but also my community and other people… their input mattered. I learned that other people’s opinions matter, so not only do mine or my friends’ but what other people have an opinion about, about our town, and how it is, and how they want to make it better.

- G13: The project I was working with definitely required a lot of surveying and talking to people. With that, it was really interesting to see the different perspectives and what I could do to affect them and how something as simple as this could really change things for them.

- G24: My rewarding experience would be going around asking friends and family members what they thought of my idea just because it’s nice to have everybody else’s opinion not just yours and ask yourself whether this is a good idea or bad idea.

**Making a difference and interacting in our community.** Students described their experience in terms of *making a difference* in their community and getting involved in their community as one of the rewarding parts of their experience.

**Student journal entries as supporting evidence.** Many student journal entries described students’ feeling of *making a difference* in their community, detailing feelings associated with their experience, as illustrated by these examples:

- B9: It’s what [G13] said but it’s what you do, you’re helping people out. You’ve picked a problem that was a big problem and you helped change it. You made that difference and it feels good getting involved and really helping people with that problem and [those] affected by it.
- B13: This project has made me realize that some things are indeed possible and can be done. I think it is a rewarding process because it makes me feel proud of myself for going this far to make a difference.

- G26: I have been affected by my project by seeing how my project may actually work. It has been exciting to think about… throughout the time I feel like I’ve become more interested in my project… coming closer to it each day makes it more interesting to me.

- G24: My project has affected me because it’s something I believe in, something very important personally.

- B3: It’s rewarding because if it does actually happen then I will have had a part in bettering my town.

**Student focus groups as supporting evidence.** Student focus group conversations also generated a sense of *making a difference* as students illustrate below, when they realized they made a difference:

- B1: I liked when we were actually doing our improvement part of the project, having to find the community partners, and talking to other people, with their input on our project.

- G1: I really think talking with people in the community helped. I really saw what people wanted changed in our community.

- G9: For me, the most rewarding thing throughout this project has been actually putting my project into action or trying to because I’ve always been emotionally
attached to this project that I’m trying to work on. If it goes through that would be really good.

**Sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, and ownership.** Students expressed a *sense of accomplishment and the satisfaction* of completing such a complicated project. This sense of accomplishment was evident in their journal entries and focus group dialogue.

**Student journal entries as supporting evidence.** One student journal entry summed up the *sense of accomplishment* felt by all students, and the realization that they could make their community better:

- G26: I feel we all learned that we can help the community and make it better even though we’re not part of town council.

**Student focus groups as supporting evidence.** Students elaborated during focus group conversation, on the *sense of accomplishment* they felt, describing a *feeling of satisfaction* for what this experience helped them to learn and a *sense of ownership* to go out and do more for their community in the future. The following comments are illustrative of feelings experienced by all students:

- G7: It was rewarding for me to go and talk to the mayor about the theater. It gave me an experience outside of the classroom. I liked the fact that I could go outside of my comfort zone and do something like that… I definitely can go out and be more comfortable with talking to the mayor and our town council about trying to improve the town.

- G1: Seeing that even though I’m a student, what I can do to help the community made me feel like I was more a part of what was going on. I learned that I can
actually do more than I thought, with being involved in my community. A lot of people my age think they can’t really make a difference and our opinion doesn’t really matter. From this, I’ve learned, by talking to the mayor and people around me, that people actually care what we are saying.

- G18: The most rewarding thing for me was hearing the response of people when I told them my idea and hearing how excited they were to finally have something to do in the community.

- B13: Instead of just the teacher giving directions what to do, it’s not like the teacher controlled [things] this time but you put your idea out there for her so she could help you with it. Overall, it’s more of your decision trying to help the society with your idea of what you think can happen because we have more to say in it and some people are scared to speak up a little bit even if they recognized a problem about what you can do to help [in society].

- B9: It was a feeling that what you do and all that hard work that you do in research and everything and looking up the facts and surveying people, finding the problems in your community. It you have a good pick, you could change your community. All that hard work, all your ideas that go into it, could really have an effect on the community and your idea could really happen. That idea of, ‘Okay, so I’m picking a problem. Here’s how I’m going to solve it and this could really work.

**Student challenges turn out to be rewards.** As reported in Table 6, students described several common challenges or obstacles during their service-learning process, such as *speechwriting, public speaking, delivering presentations to peers or community members and*
talking to and initiating conversation with community members they did not know; time management, scheduling and deadlines; and researching and finding all the information and then narrowing down their topic.

*Fear of public speaking, presentations and talking to unfamiliar people in community.*

One example reflective of this student challenge included G18’s description of her nervousness and getting choked up when first presenting in front of her peers: “… when I get in front of my peers the first time I ever did, I could barely even talk. I couldn’t finish my presentation or anything but now it’s rewarding because I can speak in front of somebody that I haven’t even met before.” G1 also summed up the nervousness she and her peers felt when speaking to people and the anxiety felt when interacting with the public (unfamiliar territory): “I get really nervous talking in front of people.” However, G1 also realized that talking to the Mayor and town council meant accomplishing her goals and discovered what overcoming her fear meant to the process: “I felt like I could actually do something when I talked to those people. They could put into action what I wanted to see.”

*Time management, scheduling and deadlines.* *Time management, scheduling, and meeting deadlines* were also commonly communicated themes among students’ descriptions of challenges associated with their experience. Two examples, representative of most students *time management, scheduling and deadline* challenges are expressed by students G9 and G13, describing how difficult it was to juggle a large amount of information and also at times, to meet deadlines. G9 stated:

For me, the most challenging part was getting started with this. Not because I didn’t know what I wanted to do but because it could have gone in so many
different directions and I wanted to make the most appealing things so it could actually happen. Another thing was keeping up with due dates because I feel I was very overwhelmed because there’s so much information that I wanted to get and so many things that I want to do but I didn’t know how to keep up with it.

G13 described similar feelings of being overwhelmed by a great deal of information and with deadlines:

The research could have been very overwhelming at certain points. There was a lot of things you had to think about or at least in my mind there was. I found there were so many things that I didn’t want to miss but there was so much to take in that it became overwhelming. You were also doing this project along—it wasn’t like we were devoting our whole time to this—you’re doing this along with other homework in other classes and homework in the same [this] class. We were doing a lot of different things. It was really independent, which in some way [was] a really good thing. At the same, it threw you out on your own, which was difficult to manage.

*Researching and finding all the information and resources, and narrowing the topic.*

Another common theme discussed among students was how they came to a mutually agreed upon topic, in other words, the *process of narrowing down all of the information* they had collected. B11 summed up the challenges of the process experienced by most students and how groups worked through such challenges, with the following description:

I think it was hard deciding what you want to do to solve a problem. Not only [finding] something that’s feasible and it can actually be done but something you
like because if you don’t really like what you are proposing, it’s going to be
dragging yourself along the whole time. You want to like what you’re doing so
it’s a fun project and not just another boring project… It was also hard finding
the people who want to do the same thing you like. My group had made a bunch
of things we could do in a list. We sorted through and edited some out and
picked the best one. That’s what we came up with.

All students related some obstacles that occurred through the process, describing those
hurdles as overwhelming, difficult, challenging, and even nerve wracking at times. However,
during further journal reflection or focus group conversation, students often reported that in the
end, these obstacles became positive and rewarding aspects of their experience as well. Three
examples of student descriptions of positive outcomes resulting from overcoming their fears and
challenges are from G2, G9 and G18. G2 said:

I would have to say, writing my speech was really hard. At first, I didn’t really
know what to say. For my project, I wanted to make a difference. I couldn’t
think of what to actually say, how to persuade the Mayor to make my project
actually work. Eventually, I did some thinking and drafted, and eventually
planned it out.

G18 also spoke of being nervous talking to people but then explained how rewarding
their conversations became to the process:

…I was nervous because I am outgoing but I get shy to go out to people and ask
them certain things… The most rewarding thing for me was hearing the responses
of people when I told them my idea mostly teenagers and hearing how excited they were for them to finally have something to do in the community…

And, like many other students, G2 felt that the *process of narrowing down data* was often a challenge but also turned out to be a reward:

> I think the hardest part was finding something that would appeal to everyone in the community…We took the biggest issues we saw with the different age groups, and then we put it together, kind of like, ‘What do teens like: How would we get jobs in? What were things little kids could do?’ The final result, we said, ‘We think a shopping center would be both [place for teens, kids and jobs]. That would be a place for teens to go, but it would also bring in jobs, and there might be things for younger kids, too.

G9 also explained that the most challenging part of the process was getting started with this process because the project could have gone in so many different directions and with the many deadlines, it often felt overwhelming at times with so much information to process. This was a common theme expressed by students. G9, in reflecting the thoughts of many students, concluded by saying: “It will teach me to dedicate my time to the more important things and really focus on getting things done. If I ever get a job where I have to meet really specific deadlines, I won’t be crunching for time.”

**Teacher responses.** The teacher corroborated the general themes found in student journal entries and focus group discussions. Much like what the students described, the teacher also described students as demonstrating they felt “more aware of problems in their community,” by the end of their project than they did in the beginning. Also similar to students’ descriptions,
the teacher reported students feeling a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, saying, “they feel they have a voice in the community and they feel more of a desire to be part of changing it for the better.”

The teacher also acknowledged similar obstacles that students reported as challenging them throughout the process such as time management, keeping track of all the information they learned and the research. The teacher indicated, “I think one challenge was keeping focused and not letting themselves get behind the eight ball.” She also reported that students expressed “challenges in terms of figuring out how they’d fund their proposal… and getting organizations to take them seriously.” She summed up students’ challenges by referring to lessons learned during the process: “some [students] learned the lesson of time management and sticking with something… some learned self-advocating and [to] take themselves seriously so that others would, too.”

Similar to students, the teacher described students’ experience as a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that helped them to gain a greater sense of awareness for their community. Equally important were the lessons they learned from working through time management, research and deadline challenges, turning perceived obstacles into rewards as described above. In this next section, more detail about students’ experience will be learned, specifically what students view as the most meaningful and purposeful components of their experience will be discussed.

Research Question Two: What do students view as the most meaningful and purposeful components of their high-quality service-learning experience?
Responses in relationship to Research Question Two were for the most part provided by survey questions that specifically asked students what they felt were the essential elements of quality service learning. In this case, student responses directly indicated what they believed were the most important essential elements of quality practice, which is a key determinant of quality service-learning practice and student outcome. To further answer research question two, responses were also examined from another survey question, which asked students which learning and service activities were most meaningful and provided the greatest personal satisfaction; survey open-ended question one, which asked students what were the most meaningful events or activities of their experience; and, student’s journal entry responses, which were prompted by asking them to describe the defining moments of their experience.

**Essential elements of quality practice: Which essential elements do you feel were most important and helpful during the course of your high-quality service-learning experience?**

For example, students were asked questions like, what if any, elements helped you to gain a better connection to your community or what part of the experience helped you to gain greater knowledge about career and the workplace? Essential elements response choices included: meaningful service activities; curriculum connections to real world practice; reflection of my experience; diversity, mutual respect and getting along with others; my voice in planning and implementing; partnerships formed with peers and community members; assessing/evaluation of my own progress; and duration and intensity. (A complete explanation of the essential elements for K-12 quality practice was provided in Chapter 2). Student responses specifically indicating the top essential elements chosen by the majority of student participants (highest percentages) and in relation to each statement are presented in Table 7.
Table 7

*Student Responses to Question: Which Essential Elements Were Most Important and Contributed or Helped During the Service-Learning Experience?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Essential Elements Most Important that contributed or helped during service learning experience</th>
<th>Number of Students indicating positive responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Success of your service-learning project</td>
<td>my voice, duration and intensity, partnerships</td>
<td>29 (76%), 28 (73%), 24 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain a better understanding of classroom concepts</td>
<td>diversity, mutual respect, curriculum connections</td>
<td>25 (65%), 21 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make curriculum connections with real world environment skills and application</td>
<td>curriculum connection, diversity, mutual respect, partnerships</td>
<td>25 (65%), 21 (55%), 19 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain a better connection to your community</td>
<td>partnerships, meaningful service activities</td>
<td>22 (57%), 19 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributed to you feeling more empowered</td>
<td>my voice, assessing/evaluation</td>
<td>29 (76%), 18 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped you gain more respect for others</td>
<td>diversity, mutual respect, partnerships</td>
<td>30 (78%), 27 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped you gain greater knowledge about career and the workplace</td>
<td>curriculum connections, partnerships</td>
<td>23 (60%), 20 (52%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results indicated that the majority of student participants considered all eight elements as *very important* during their high-quality service-learning process, with *partnerships formed with peers and community* consistently ranking in the highest percentages (between 50%-63%) for the statement listed in Table 7. *Diversity and mutual respect; voice in planning and implementation; curriculum connections to real world practice, assessment/evaluation of own progress; and duration and intensity* respectively ranked closely behind *partnerships*, receiving the highest
student majorities consistently, with student percentages ranging from 50% to as high as 78% in response to some statements.

**Essential elements of quality practice: Which elements were most important to you while completing your service-learning project?** One additional question asked students which of the following elements were most important to completing their service-learning projects: prep time, student voice, involvement level, clear academic goals connected to service-learning activities, service-learning activities re-enforcing student learning through real-world application, activities addressing real-world problems and issues, reflection activities helping to make deeper connections, working with peers and community members toward a common goal, responsibility for others and my community, and self-evaluation. Student response choices ranged from not important to very important. (These essential elements are similar but more descriptive of the essential elements of practice [detailed in chapter 2]). The statements that received the most favorable student responses of important to very important, representative of the majority of student participant are presented in Table 8.
Table 8

*Student Responses to Question: Which Elements Were Most Important To You While Completing Your Service-Learning Project?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Number of Students indicating positive responses N = 38</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involvement and role in project</td>
<td>33 (87%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student voice in planning and implementation of project</td>
<td>33 (87%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of prep time for this project</td>
<td>29 (76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with peers and community members toward a common goal</td>
<td>28 (74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-evaluation</td>
<td>28 (74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear academic goals connected to service learning activities</td>
<td>26 (68%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results indicate that student responses most representative of the majority of students to the question: which elements were *most important* to them while completing their project, were: *student involvement and role in this project* (87%), *their voice in planning and implementation* (87%), and the *amount of prep time for this project* (76%). Students also considered *working with peers and community members towards a common goal (partnerships)* (74%), *self-evaluation* (74%) and *clear academic goals connected to service learning activities* (68%) as *important* elements during their experience.

**Teacher responses.** Overall, the teacher’s responses corresponded with student responses, indicating all elements were *important* to the process or to completing the project with
exceptions discussed below. For example, corroborating student responses, the teacher considered partnerships with peers and community members, student’s voice and assessment and evaluation to be most important elements. The teacher also noted that while she believed prep time was an important element needed during completion of the project, she also felt that students would have preferred more prep time than that which was provided.

Contradicting student responses, however, were duration and intensity. While students rated this element as important, the teacher did not include it in any of her responses. Further, whereas the teacher considered meaningful service activities and reflection of experience as most important elements, the students ranked these elements as important, not most important.

Making a difference in community and self: What learning and service activities do you feel were most meaningful and provided the greatest personal satisfaction? While most student responses indicated that every activity listed was meaningful and personally satisfying, Table 9 presents the responses most representative of the majority of student participants (student percentages).

Table 9
Student Responses to Question: Which Learning And Service Activities Were Most Meaningful And Provided The Greatest Personal Satisfaction?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Number of Students indicating positive responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparing and planning for my project</td>
<td>32 (84%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working in the classroom environment with my peers</td>
<td>24 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on my community</td>
<td>24 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities working in the community with new people and my classmates</td>
<td>22 (57%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results indicated that preparing and planning for their project provided the most meaningful and personal satisfaction for the most students (84%). Working in the classroom with peers, researching their community (63%), and activities working in the community with new people and classmates (57%) were also very meaningful and personally satisfying to a majority of students.

**Teacher responses.** The teacher’s responses corresponded with student responses in the areas of preparing and planning for project and working in the classroom environment with peers. However, the teacher’s responses did not correspond with student responses in terms of research on [their] community and activities working in the community with new people and classmates. The teacher did not view research on [their] community and activities working in the community with new people or classmates as important as the first two areas. Additionally, the teacher responded that she believed learning about themselves, learning about themselves in connection to their community, project work and community speakers were also very meaningful and personally satisfying activities for students, whereas students themselves, did not.

It appears that students believed that all essential elements of quality practice were very important during their high-quality service-learning experience, with partnerships with peers and community members considered as the most important element overall during their service-learning experience, and their involvement and roles, voice and prep time reported as very important components while completing the project. Students described the most meaningful and personally satisfying elements of their experience as preparing and planning for their project, with working in the classroom environment with peers, in the community with new
people and their peers and the research on their community as a close second and equally gratifying.

In the next section, further detail and more in-depth insight and meaning than that which can be provided with survey data is provided through the presentation of themes that emerged from journal entry prompts of what were the most defining or meaningful components of your experience and survey question one, which asked students, what were the most meaningful events and activities of their experience.

Themes from journal entry prompts: What were the most defining or meaningful components of your experience and survey, question one, what were the most meaningful events and activities of your experience? Three themes emerged from the data in response to the journal prompt: What were the most defining or meaningful components of your experience question, and survey question, what were the most meaningful events and activities of your experience. As previously indicated, student prompts for journaling were similar in nature to survey question one, consequently, student responses were very similar and resulted in the same themes.
Table 10

Themes From Student Responses to Question: What Were The Most Defining Or Meaningful Components Of Your Experience And What Were The Most Meaningful Events And Activities Of Your Experience?

| Theme 1:  | Sense of teamwork/collaboration |
| Theme 2:  | Community interaction/involvement |
| Theme 3:  | Making a difference in their own community through finding solutions to community |

Teamwork, community interaction/involvement and making a difference through finding solutions. Students described a strong connection to their community, a feeling of working together toward a common goal, and the enjoyment of community interaction and involvement with community members, peers and townspeople. These separate themes are interrelated and often clumped together in student descriptions of their experience, as described in detail below.

Student journal entries as supporting evidence. For this journal entry, many students expressed feelings of surprise at their ability to accomplish such a huge undertaking, and completion of this project. Students described feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction that included collaboration during group work, interaction and involvement in their community, working through challenges and finding solutions, and consequently, having an impact on their community. While a number of different phrases were used, students’ descriptions of their
defining and meaningful experiences were a reflection of just a few overall themes. Most students described the most defining moments of their experience similar to these feelings expressed by their classmates:

- **G1:** Working with different people and talking to people in the community. Getting to know more about our town. Also, working on skills everyday. It is a cool thing to see that we have a voice in the town. I think the part that impact[ed] me the most was the community interaction because I am kind of shy and don’t really like talking in front of people. So it made a big impact on me having to step out of my comfort zone.

- **B1:** I feel that the most defining moments of this project are every time we collaborate. When we’re all in the same place, at the same time creating new ideas.

Students often described a sense of surprise that they were proposing and perhaps actually implementing such a big community project. Student project proposals were not small scale community fixes but rather projects consisting of significant proposals to change, improve, or aid an existing or new town-wide project. Many students expressed a sense of almost disbelief or surprise that they were able to accomplish what appeared to be nearly impossible for a ninth grader to achieve. For example, G13 and G26 summed up this general feeling of surprise:

- **G13:** I found it amazing that I, a ninth grader, could have such an impact on the community. Coming up with new ideas to get people interested and solving problems really was a fun experience.

- **G26:** We started with several ideas that seemed [well] thought out to us but confusing and unorganized to others. This memory stands out the most because that
was our point in time where we struggled the most. The end product impacted me the most because I never realized that we could pull together such an idea. I didn’t think we would come this far.

Most students indicated that *community interaction* and *making a difference in their community* were also defining moments of their projects as represented by these student expressions:

- **B9:** I think the end product or proposal impacted me the most because once all the ideas came together it was a fun project and it was enjoyable… presenting to the town council will probably stand out the most because that is an experience for me and it is cool to be to present something on a town-wide scale.

- **G9:** I realized how much I really cared about this project. The overall idea has affected me for many years, it is now very important for me to put this in action… struggling to find the right way to present and deadlines taught me a lot of things [such] as perseverance.

- **B3:** … giving my presentation because for me it’s the most significant and important part of the project…having a voice in planning and implementing.

- **G24:** The memories that will stand out the most will be my goal to make it happen and the passion I want for it to happen because I will get the satisfaction of just helping others, making our town a better place.

- **B6:** … seeing everything come together. Just from when we started in September to where we are now is what really is my favorite [part of this experience].

*Student responses to question one as supporting evidence.* In their open-ended survey responses to question one, students listed specific events or activities that they perceived to be
the most meaningful components of their own service-learning project. Some events or activities that students most regularly mentioned were *surveying community members, talking with people in the community, helping teens in their community, filling wasted mill space, fulfilling a need for jobs and entertainment, seeing community speakers, visiting different places such as their library and historical sites in their community* (to learn more about their town), *researching, giving their PowerPoint presentation, and public speaking*.

These responses corroborate responses to questions asked about *essential elements of quality practice and making a difference in community*. Student responses corresponded with the same important elements as reported in student surveys, such as *student voice and involvement/role in planning and implementing project*, *developing working partnerships with others (peers and community members)*, and *curriculum connection to real-world activities*. While student responses initially appear to be divergent, taken together, in relationship to the *most meaningful and defining components of their project*, these responses could be grouped under the general themes of *teamwork/collaboration, community interaction/involvement* and *making a difference in my own community*.

Students were self-reflective in their responses to question one as they expressed a feeling of almost surprise associated with completing this project and undertaking such a huge task. Below are several responses associated with the general themes, as echoed by most students:

- **G1**: Working with classmates and people in the community. It helped me see what people felt was wrong and how I had a chance to fix it.
- **G5**: To be able to work together as a team to make our project what it could be.
• B3: …finding a problem and figuring out how to fix it… feeling like I am contributing to the community.

• G20: Figuring out how to solve and overcome the problems that we faced and listening to others in our community about what they have to say and how things can be accomplished.

• G25: The most meaningful [part] was realizing instead of complaining about something in the community you can go out and help change and better it.

• G26: I feel like the most meaningful part of the experience was coming to the end and realizing that we can make a difference and make our project happen. We can help make the community better.

**Teacher responses.** The teacher responses corresponded with student themes of teamwork, community interaction/involvement and finding solutions to community problems and making a difference. For example, the teacher described the most meaningful components of the students’ experience as developing connections to the community through researching local history and interacting with community members like the Mayor who made them feel special and important, having autonomy to decide what problems to address in a group and becoming empowered through owning the responsibility of identifying and solving problems in their own community, all actions demonstrative of the general themes expressed by students.

In terms of the most meaningful and purposeful components of students’ high-quality service-learning experience, students believed that partnerships formed with peers and the community was the most important component, and that diversity and mutual respect, student voice in planning and implementation, curriculum connections to real world practice,
assessment and evaluation of progress and duration and intensity of project were also very important components to students. Additionally, students expressed that their involvement, role and voice in planning and implementing this project, along with prep time were most important to completing their project. Student responses indicated that components such as working with peers and community members toward a common goal and clear academic goals connected to service-learning activities, also helped contribute to the completion of their projects, although not to the same degree as previously mentioned components.

Student responses indicated that service-learning activities involving preparing and planning for their project, working in the classroom and in the community with their peers and community members, and researching provided the greatest meaning and personal satisfaction for them. Student responses indicated the most defining moments of their experiences were directly related to teamwork/collaboration, community interaction and involvement, and making a difference in their own community through finding solutions to community problems. Students indicated that all of these elements and activities contributed to their overall meaningful and defining moments of their experience, with some carrying a greater importance to the process.

In this next section, the components of students’ experience that reportedly provided the best opportunities for them to transfer what they learned in the classroom into real world experiences will be discussed.

**Research Question Three:** What components of the high-quality service-learning process provided the best opportunities for students to transfer what they have learned in the classroom into their real-world experiences?
Responses in relationship to Research Question Three were provided during the completion of student survey, specifically questions pertaining to twenty-first century skills as well as student reflection experiences, asking which reflection activities provided the most meaning to what [students] learned and what they experienced in the community. Focus group transcripts and survey question two were also examined in relation to question two, which specifically asked students what experiences allowed them the opportunity to best transfer what they learned in the classroom to the community setting.

Twenty-first century learning skills: What, if any, new 21st century skills do you believe you have gained during [your service-learning] experience? How important is each skill to you and to your future? Student responses to these statements ranged from not at all important to extremely important. Items receiving the most favorable student response and representative of the majority of student participants are presented in Table 11. Twenty-first century skills that the student majority believed they did not acquire are not listed in the table.
Table 11

Student Responses to Question: *What If Any, New 21st Century Skills Have You Gained Through This Experience? Rate The Degree Of Importance Of Each Skill To You And Your Future?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>21st Century Skills acquired</th>
<th>Of future importance (N=38)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration and Teamwork</td>
<td>28 (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity and Imagination</td>
<td>26 (68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>31 (81%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Preparation Skill</td>
<td>30 (78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>32 (84%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>32 (84%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral and Written Communication</td>
<td>29 (76%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity</td>
<td>28 (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>25 (65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility and Adaptability</td>
<td>28 (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>30 (78%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results in this section of the survey indicated that: 1) most students felt they had acquired approximately half of the twenty 21st century skills, and 2) most students responded that each skill was *very* or *extremely important*, thereby indicating the degree to which students felt these skills were important to them in the future. Other skills, such as *initiative, social responsibility, ethics, and information analysis*, are not shown, as these items were reported by only half of the
students. Those students who rated these skills however, rated them as *very* important to their futures.

**Teacher responses.** The teacher’s responses corroborated student responses in almost every category. There were no significant differences noted in this section between the teacher and student responses, suggesting that students did indeed acquire more than half of the 21st century skills listed. Both teacher and students believed that most of the skills listed were important to students and their future.

**Making a difference in community and self, identifying the survey’s reflection experiences:** *What activities provided students with the most meaningful connection learned in the classroom and real-world application?* A set of items regarding the extent to which students feel they are making a difference asked about students’ reflection experiences. This question was geared towards discovering which activities provided students with the most meaningful connections between concepts learned in the classroom and real-world application. Students and their teacher responded to the following question: *What reflection activities, such as class discussion, journal entries, class work, class projects, and research, provided the most meaning to what you [students] learned and what you [they] experienced in the community?* For this question, students noted that all activities were meaningful. However, the majority of students responded that class discussion, research, and class projects provided the most meaning, whereas, the teacher responded that journal entries and class discussion provided the most meaningful connections.

It appears that in terms of 21st century skills students believed that they acquired approximately half of the 21st century learning skills outlined and that each of the 21st century
skills were considered important to them and their future. The teacher’s responses corresponded with students’ responses. In terms of reflection activities, students indicated through class discussions, researching and class project work that they were able to make the most meaningful connections between what they had learned in the classroom and how they applied what was learned to community service activities. In this case, the teacher’s responses were different. She reported that through journal entries and class discussion students were able to make the most meaningful connections. In the next section, further detail and more in-depth insight and meaning than that which can be provided with survey data will be provided through the presentation of themes that emerged from focus group transcripts and the open-ended survey question.

Survey question two and focus group transcripts questions: What events or activities provided for real skill application and what, if any, new skills did they learn during their high-quality service-learning experience? Responses in relation to question two were provided by survey question two and during focus group discussion. Because a similar question was asked for survey question two and during focus group discussions, similar themes were identified after a review of the transcripts. Table 12 presents the themes most represented by a majority of student participants.
Table 12

Themes From Survey Question 2 and Focus Groups: What Events Or Activities Provided For Real Skill Application?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Researching, Surveying/Interviewing</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Time management</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Writing and delivering speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Preparing and presenting</td>
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<td>• PowerPoint</td>
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</table>

Survey question two: What experiences allowed you [students] the opportunity to best transfer what you had learned in the classroom to the community setting? Students who responded listed a skill set associated with the process of their high-quality service-learning project. For example, students indicated that they had learned research and surveying skills in the classroom and then took those skills and applied them to gathering information about their project.

Through a variety of ways—such as public speakers visiting the classroom; students interacting with people in the community; utilizing student skills; and accessing public resources such as town hall, library, and the local museum—students gathered more information and learned about their town and its problems. Students reported that they gained both writing skills and speaking skills that were necessary for real-world application when interviewing and surveying community members, delivering their persuasive speeches, and giving PowerPoint
presentations. Students also identified working collaboratively with their groups and time management as important skills for them in real life.

Most students made a connection between the skills they learned or developed in the classroom and applying those skills in a real-world setting. Many students discussed the process for their high-quality service-learning project, specifically discussing the opportunities that allowed for learning new skills—such as researching, surveying, interviewing, managing time, writing, and presenting—and then applying those skills to a specific course of action or an event. For example, students’ researching skills led to community interactions and involvement with different people in their town. Through surveying and interviewing people, students discovered what community issues and problems needed to be addressed. Students also learned to manage their time so that they could complete all aspects of their project and meet deadlines. Next, through students’ newly acquired writing, public speaking, and presentation skills, they addressed and attempted to solve a major community problem.

The accumulation of these new skills became evident during the service-learning process, especially during students’ final PowerPoint presentations, when a variety of their newly acquired skills were showcased. These skills included writing and speaking, and preparing and delivering a presentation. Each skill led to the development of other new skills. For example, researching led to the development of surveying and interviewing skills, which in turn supported newly developed skills such as community interaction and involvement.

Student focus groups as supporting evidence. During focus group discussions, students shared how these different events and activities provided for real skill application such as interacting with the community in order to conduct research. Below are student summations,
representative of how most students explained each event or activity leading to real world application in their community.

Beginning with *researching* their community, student G1, related the value of research during focus groups:

In school you always research things. I think that really definitely transferred over to the community setting. We had to research what people wanted, and how we could change it, and the history and everything. What you normally take in the classroom, I applied to my community. It was cool, because it was actually something that impacted you. It wasn’t just a project on something.

Through *researching*, students gained new *surveying and interviewing skills* in the classroom that later transferred into the community as they began to discover through *community interaction* what community problems needed to be addressed. For example, G7 said:

… talking to the Mayor about the theatre… gave me an experience outside of the classroom. I liked the fact that I could go outside my comfort zone, and do something like that. I learned that I definitely can go out and be more comfortable with talking to our mayor and town council about trying to improve the town.

When asked if that was a skill she normally would have developed in a regular classroom, this student replied, “No, definitely not. I don’t think [so] just because you know the people in the classroom, that you wouldn’t be able to go outside of your comfort zone, and actually be able to talk to someone [you didn’t know]. When further asked if she thought this
skill would help in real life, the student responded, “I think it’s going to help me because if I go for a job interview, I’ll be able to be more comfortable around the person who I’m talking to, and not get nervous.”

B1 and G1 echoed similar thoughts, illustrative of many of the students, as they spoke of experiences outside of the classroom and their level of comfort when interacting with new people in the community:

- B1: I like community interactions and finding our community partners and talking with other people to get their input into our project…This was the first time we’ve ever done anything like this, especially doing something this real-world that could actually change the place.
- G1: It wasn’t people I knew or things like that. It wasn’t stuff I was really used to. It definitely was a new experience.

When asked if she felt more like a student or perhaps someone’s peer at work, G1 responded:

I think more like a peer [at work]. My idea was to put in a shopping center.

Seeing that even though I’m a student, what I can do to help the community made me feel like I was more a part of what was going on.

Regarding surveying and interviewing people, G2 noted, “I think that when I surveyed people, it was an experience. I was able to figure out what they think would change our town to make it better, and if not better, then an improvement.”

All of this preparation required time management and meeting deadlines, as G9 and B9 explained:
• G9: It will teach me to dedicate my time to the more important things and really focus on getting things done. If I ever get a job where I have to meet really specific deadlines, I won’t be crunching for time.

• B9: Personally for me is juggling my time all the better. That’s the good thing about this kind of project … once we got pretty much crunch time like you guys started writing your paper. You got to do this. It becomes a lot easier because once you had all the facts and research, and it was pretty smooth transition into … the paper and PowerPoint presentation came easy after you managed all your time …

Other students spoke of their first experience with public speaking and presenting, as well as the preparation for it. For example, G18 described the voice warm-up exercises that she had learned in class before presenting to the public:

Our teacher would make us go through these weird warm-up things [exercises] where we do different things with our voice and our body and [it] teaches all these things like to breathe and how we stand, called actor’s neutral… in the future I know that if I get to present to the town council that I would have to be thinking about the things that our teacher taught us about standing right, your voice is warmed up, and be comfortable in the situation.

Other students like G13, B9 and B6 added the following:

• G13: like [G18] had said with the presenting skills, but me it was kind of more… I never really feel nervous when I have to talk in front people but I tend to kind of look nervous because I shift my weight a lot. I was thinking a lot about how I present to myself a little bit more
outwardly. That became really big when talking to people up in the higher levels that I needed to talk to make things work in my project… when it came time to talk to them, I had little more thought as to how to look a little bit more professional… yes, I want this to happen not [because] I have to do this for a school project kind of thing… then talking to people every day with the surveys and with their opinions and with their ideas and that too it made it seem like I knew what I was doing not I had to… definitely makes it easier with college and stuff and job opportunities. When you have to give a presentation or go for any interview or even if you’re talking to someone about work or about what you do for a living. It makes you seem like you know what you’re talking about when you know how to present yourself, you know how to go about saying things. It makes them more aware that you’re not telling them false information and making it up.

- **B9:** Then you take a little breath to regroup yourself and then focus back into the presentation. It help me bring myself back into the point I was trying to make… now I know when I present or even write a paper, really anything that you need to do big for life… don’t go so fast and if you need to you can take a little break and regroup yourself and bring back and focus your ideas on what you want to get your point across.

- **B6:** The most rewarding part [of the project] was trying to take my project and connect it to real-life situations, connecting it towards teenagers… definitely more
with writing a speech where I’d use different forms of appeals and ethos, definitely learning about that in class definitely helped me write my speech. Showing how my project could not help one type of people but the different view of people.

With regard to speech writing (both the technical aspects and actual delivery), G7 stated, “We learned about pathos, logos and egos. It definitely helped me in my speech. It made me think of the logical appeal, the emotional appeal.” When asked if these skills would help in a work or college setting, this student replied:

I think it will help me in a college setting because they’re looking for that college-level skill. I think it is a college-level skill… some tactical devices…when I am writing. I’ll know what that is. It will make my writing look better.

Other students concurred with this line of thinking, noting:

- G2: When we go into the real world, we might need these types of things we learned in the class, like how to be persuasive with our appeals and stuff we know, so that when we go to college, and maybe even jobs, we’ll already know how to be persuasive and how to learn these things and know these things. That’s an important skill… to be persuasive. In class, we learned how to be persuasive and use different methods to try and persuade people for what we want to do. I think that from learning that in class, I was able to be persuasive, persuading the mayor and everyone to actually go along with my idea. Maybe not, if they can’t actually make it happen, take it into consideration.
• G13: … definitely makes it easier with college and job opportunities. When you have to give a presentation or go for an interview or even if you’re talking to someone about work or about what you do for a living.

• B11: … we learned about speeches and we looked at one [in] particular—I Have a Dream, by Martin Luther King. We studied and looked at how powerful his words were and his word choices and how they made such a powerful impact on people. Using these skills that he used into our speeches helped us sound a lot better in the presentations. It made us sound more intelligent and it made our idea actually sound pretty good…. It wasn’t just public speaking but it was the syntactical devices he used, which were very powerful. Being a good public speaker is always good because you’re always going to have that time in life when you’re going to need to speak up and you might be going on speaking but you’ll be confident about it and you’ll sound smart.

It appears that in terms of skills that best provided opportunity for students to transfer classroom knowledge to the real world setting, skills such as collaboration and teamwork, creativity and imagination, problem solving, planning and preparation, and critical thinking to name a few, contributed to this process. In addition, specific events or activities that provided opportunity for students to transfer classroom knowledge to the real world setting and in direct relation to students’ service-learning projects, researching, surveying, interviewing, managing timelines, writing and delivering speech, preparing and delivering, and PowerPoint presentations contributed to this process. In the last section, the ways that students felt they had changed during their high-quality service-learning experience will be discussed.
Research Question Four: In what ways do students feel they have changed during their high-quality service-learning experience?

Responses in relationship to Research Question Four were provided during completion of student survey’s student outcome questions and also during focus group discussions.

Student outcome: To what degree do you feel you achieved the listed learning outcome? Several learning outcomes were presented to students in the areas of critical thinking, communication, career and teamwork, civic responsibility, global understanding and citizenship, academic development and educational success. Response choices, comprising the degree to which students perceived they had achieved each of these outcomes, were on a four point Likert-scale ranging from not at all to definitely. Statements receiving the most favorable student responses and representative of the majority of student participants are presented in Table 13.
The majority of student participants rated most learning outcomes – including communication, critical thinking, career and teamwork, civic responsibility, and academic development and educational success – as either moderately or definitely. Indeed, global understanding and citizenship was the only outcome in
which student responses ran the gamut, from *not at all* to *definitely*. In other words, it was the only learning outcome that some students felt they did not achieve.

**Teacher responses.** The teacher’s responses corroborated student responses on all but two learning outcomes, *evaluate information for possible bias* and *global understanding in relation to understanding different cultures and different perspectives on international issues*. The teacher gave ratings of *not at all* or *somewhat achieved* in these areas. In the next section, further detail and more in-depth insight and meaning will be provided through the presentation of themes that emerged from student focus group discussions.

**Themes from focus groups based on question:** *In what ways did [students] feel they had changed during their service-learning experience?* Table 14 presents the themes that evolved from the majority of student responses.

Table 14
*Themes From Focus Group Question: How Have Students Changed During Their Service-Learning Experience?*

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<thead>
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<th>Student Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Communication and confidence skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Commitment to community</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Self-satisfaction due to accomplishment</td>
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**Student focus group supporting evidence.** Student focus group discussions are in line with student survey responses. Three recurring themes emerged—increased *communication and confidence, commitment to community, and sense of self-satisfaction due to accomplishment*
despite the challenges of this large scale project. One or two student responses summed up the most common feelings experienced by students in relation to each theme.

**Communication and confidence skills.** Students discussed increased confidence in themselves and their abilities. This theme was consistent with survey responses regarding student outcomes, in which most students indicated that their *communication skills definitely increased from the beginning to the end of their project*. Most students reported having gained better communication skills during their experience and, consequently, a greater comfort level when public speaking and interacting with community members and unfamiliar people. For example, G7 shared in relation to the commonly expressed theme of *confidence* as reported by many students:

> I feel like I’ve changed a lot from last year. My last year’s Honors English class, we didn’t do any service learning or anything like learning the logos and the pathos. I feel like I definitely have learned a lot more, and I’ve definitely become more confident.

When asked to describe herself from the beginning of the year to the end, this student replied, “I definitely see change. I’ve definitely become more confident and more wanting to go out in the community and trying to get something to actually happen.”

**Commitment to community.** A majority of students responded positively to civic responsibility as a learning outcome. *Commitment to community* was a recurring theme during focus group conversations. Students described wanting to improve or change their community, neighborhood, or town, which they reportedly felt was needed. They were committed to accomplishing their community goals and project, and through their academic pursuits and real
world application, they were able to learn more about their community, its challenges and its people. The more they learned through community interaction, the more they became concerned about local community issues and believed they can have a positive impact on local social problems. G2 and B1 for example, expressed feelings common to most students in relation to their community involvement and interaction and how they changed during the experience. G2: “I think that I’ve changed from last year until now, because I feel more involved and more mature, that I actually want to make a difference [in my community].” When asked if maturity came through the natural growth process, or being introduced to service-learning opportunities, or perhaps, a combination of the two, G2 answered:

I think the natural growth [process] and the learning opportunity… [last year] I wasn’t really focused… now that I was introduced to this project, I feel more involved, and that if I actually try hard enough, I can make a difference, or an improvement.

B1 spoke of the personal growth he gained from the service-learning process that echoed many of his classmates responses:

I think one way that I’ve changed is that I was a lot quieter towards the beginning of the project and the beginning of the school year…. After interviewing the mayor and doing surveys and getting my voice more out there in the community, I think I’ve been less quiet.

**Sense of self-satisfaction due to accomplishment.** Students often associated a sense of self-satisfaction to accomplishment. They frequently referenced their ability to make a difference in their community. When asked to describe the feeling of self-satisfaction from the
beginning of the project until the end, B1 elaborated by describing feelings that were echoed by most students: “I think it’s definitely a level of confidence. That satisfaction, looking back and being like, ‘Yeah, I’ve been doing this all.’ It’s definitely changed me, that whole feeling you get [from accomplishment].”

Students were then asked questions in relation to service learning opportunities within schools. The first follow-up question asked was if they would prefer to have more service-learning opportunities within the school curriculum. Several students responded with mixed feelings. They had a sense of accomplishment and of trepidation with the enormity of the project as summarized below:

- B1: I don’t know if I would continue [this project] just because I don’t feel like it’s [it’s doable, realistic to some degree]… because I am only 14, [and with a project of this magnitude] I feel like a lot of people wouldn’t take me seriously.
- G7: I feel like we needed to have [complete a project like this, in later years in high school], to do it for our first year, to go and help someone in the community, [perhaps not something so big and] not just do it ourselves. I feel like, I get that we’re 14, and we have big responsibilities, but I feel like we needed to have a run-through first [more direction and help], and [then] actually go and help somebody.

When the interviewer clarified the question (“I don’t mean this project specifically, but any kind of service learning project”), B1 replied:

Yes, I think so. To do it with school would be cool. I would be able to put [it] on a college resume and then you’ll be like, “Yeah, I did this service learning and this service learning”…. It would be a nice thing [experience] to have.
Some students vacillated between a feeling of satisfaction with what they had accomplished and struggling with the magnitude of the project’s process. While the proposed project did not require actual implementation because of the large scale of some projects, G7 again reiterated what many students felt that the project proposed was too big of a project for 14-year-olds to accomplish:

Yes, instead of running it by ourselves, [help from others would have been important] since we’re just 14. I get we’ll have the mayor and town council on board with us, but we’re doing it [completing the project and work] by ourselves. I feel like that’s more [appropriate] if we were in college, I could take on a project like that.

The interviewer clarified the question, noting that the question was referring to more than the project itself or that which was being proposed, it was about the process of completing the project. It was during this clarification that G7 replied, “I definitely surprised myself. I didn’t think I could go out and make phone calls to these businesses. Before, I’d be too scared to call the pizza place. Now I’m like, I can order a pizza whenever I want.” This example of an aha moment led other students to speak of the individual growth they felt:

- G1: I definitely feel like I’ve changed, since the beginning of this project to now.

Agreeing with B1, at the beginning, we were really quiet and we didn’t talk much [or feel comfortable interacting with community members and businesses]. I never really liked making phone calls or talking with people. I’ve had to talk to contractors, the mayor, because I need[ed] those people to help me along the way. I feel like I’m not as shy as I used to be.
• G13: With this project, I realized that it’s okay to express your ideas because other people might like your idea as well. It was good to get the idea [solutions and project proposal] and out there and see what other people thought of it. It reassured me.

• G25: I think that we learned more about community than we knew before because when you’re in school, you don’t really learn about our town. You just learn about other things like math and English. When we went out [in the community] I spoke with the mayor, but when we were talking to him he told us things that we didn’t know about our town that was happening.

• G9: I feel like I’ve become more motivated to want to change things and I have more confidence in myself that I can actually make things happen instead of not doing anything and done worrying about [completing] it [the project] last minute.

When asked if she ever imagined that in ninth grade she would be placed in a situation where she had to overcome time challenges and deadlines, G9 replied, “Definitely not in ninth grade. I wouldn’t think that I’d have to do that [learn that skill to this degree] as a freshman but I’m glad, it’s going to make everything easier [since I obtained this skill] as I get older.”

Summary

Findings presented above were compiled from survey results, both closed and open-ended questions, as well as student focus group transcripts and student journal entries. Focus groups were conducted with students from all three Honors English classes participating in this high-quality service-learning project. Students and the teacher’s responses included in-depth and often personal insights, opinions, feelings, and perspectives regarding their service-learning experience.
For over 20 years, Mountain View Public Schools’ tradition of high-quality service-learning programming has been well documented. The district is state and nationally recognized as an exceptional service-learning leader school district, earning this distinction within five years of its first service-learning project. In 2012, 89% of the student population and 77 district teachers participated in more than 103 service-learning projects. As standard practice for this district, Mount View High School District incorporates the essential elements associated with quality K-12 service-learning practice and programming.

This case study was conducted in an effort to determine how students perceived they were affected by their high-quality service-learning experience. As Mountain View Public Schools continues to implement the practice of high-quality service learning, and as other school districts consider incorporating high-quality service-learning practice, the findings of this study can help teachers and districts plan and implement quality service-learning projects.

Through exploring the student perspective, much was learned. Students described their overall service-learning experience as both rewarding and challenging because of the enormity of the project. Most students believed that students their age could make a difference in their town, make the world better, address problems in their community and feel responsible for helping others. Regarding their project, students believed that they became good at finding information about their community and its needs, helping to solve the community’s problems, designing and implementing a service-learning project, seeing the consequences of actions, understanding what other people were trying to say, using what was learned in the classroom, accomplishing goals, leading a group, getting others to listen to their ideas, and speaking in front of a group.
Recurring themes that emerged when the students described their high-quality service-learning experience included greater community awareness, listening to and respecting others’ ideas and opinions, making a difference in their community, and a sense of accomplishment/satisfaction because of the complexity of their challenges in planning such a large-scale project. Challenges described by most students included speech writing; fear of public speaking and interacting with unfamiliar community members and people; time management, including scheduling and meeting deadlines; finding (researching) all the information needed to complete the project; and narrowing down the topic (community issue) to find solutions.

All eight essential elements for quality practice in a K-12 setting were present and were identified as very important to the process of service learning: meaningful service, linking the curriculum to service-learning activities, critical reflection, diversity and mutual respect, youth voice, partnerships, progress monitoring, and duration and intensity of project. Students also noted the importance of critical reflection, such as the reflection they completed during journal entries and class discussion. The essential elements representative of the majority of student responses, in order of greatest majority, include the following: (1) partnerships with peers and community members (collaboration, mutual benefit to participants and community); (2) diversity (mutual respect for others) and youth voice (in planning and implementation); and (3) curriculum connection (to service activities), progress monitoring (assessment and evaluation), and duration and intensity (of project).

Students indicated that their involvement and roles, student voice in planning and implementation, and preparation time were very important to the service-learning process. The
most frequent student responses that were specifically related to the most meaningful and personally satisfying service-learning activities included preparing and planning for their project, working in the classroom environment with their peers, researching their community and working in the community with new people as well as their classmates.

The majority of students believed they had acquired approximately half of the student outcome (21st century) skills listed in the areas of communication, critical thinking, career and teamwork, civic responsibility, academic development, and educational success. Specific 21st century skills that students believed they acquired included collaboration, teamwork, creativity and imagination, problem solving, decision making, planning and preparation, and oral and written communication to name a few. The specific events or activities that provided for real skill application included researching, surveying/interviewing, managing timelines, writing and delivering speeches, and preparing and delivering their PowerPoint presentations.

Students perceived that they changed from the beginning to the end of their project in terms of their level of commitment to the community, their confidence and communication skills, and a sense of self-satisfaction because of the enormity of their project and that they completed it.

As per the discussion of the literature in previous chapters, it is evident that the incorporation of the essential elements of quality practice is one primary determinant of high-quality service-learning practice. The research clearly demonstrates that the absence of such essential elements compromises the quality of service-learning practice along with the degree of positive student outcomes. Also, the clear intentionality to integrate classroom knowledge and skill with real world service activity application and to make connections through critical
reflection is essential to providing a high-quality service-learning opportunity for students. The absence of either of these components can compromise the effectiveness of service-learning as a 21st century pedagogical tool and the overall success of the project. Results presented in this chapter which have sought to answer the overarching question: How were students affected by their high quality service-learning experience, are in line with findings in the literature which will be presented in chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

Summary/Recap

The skills that were needed for college and career in the 20th century are not the same skill set needed for the 21st century. Over the past two decades, changes in the economy, jobs, and businesses call for multidimensional abilities. Successful employees are able to think, analyze, reason, problem solve, communicate, and be self-directed and computer and technology savvy (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009, 2008). Most high school curriculum to date however, remains rooted in the twentieth century. As a consequence, students are not being adequately prepared with the new skills needed to be successful for today’s career and college expectations (Wagner, 2010). Simply put, standards, assessments, course requirements, and high school curriculum overall are not aligned with what is needed for high school students to acquire the necessary skills to succeed in college and career.

Today’s high school curriculum is, for the most part, content-driven and stymied by teaching that emphasizes a combination of fact memorization and multiple-choice testing (Wagner, 2010). Multiple choice tests such as those frequently administered in Advanced Placement (AP) courses do not require research papers and interdisciplinary work, which would
involve reasoning and application of knowledge learned to real-world settings. This may be acceptable for state assessment tests such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), which reinforce memorization and only measures to tenth-grade level knowledge and skills (Wagner, 2010), but it becomes problematic beyond high school. Indeed, in a national poll, 65% of college professors do not believe high school education prepares students properly or adequately for college, believing instead that too many topics are taught and not enough essential knowledge and skills for college preparedness are acquired (ACT, 2007a).

The same is true for career readiness, with recent studies indicating that the skills needed to be successful in college are similar to those skills needed to obtain high-paying jobs (ACT, 2006b; America Diploma Project, 2004). In a report that surveyed 400 new employers, results indicated that nearly 50% of high school graduates were “deficient” in their preparation for the workplace and less than 25% of recent college graduates had the work readiness needed in today’s workplace (The Conference Board, 2006). These are troubling statistics since an estimated 85% of 21st century jobs and nearly 90% of the fastest-growing and best-paying jobs will require some postsecondary education (Business-Higher Education Forum, 2003; U.S. Department of Labor, 2008).

Clearly, evidence above points to a strong disconnect between the knowledge and skills students are learning in today’s high school classrooms and the knowledge and skills needed for success in today’s real-world environment of college and career (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Partnership for 21st Century, 2012; Wagner, 2008). Better alignment between that which students are taught in high schools and the requisite skills needed to be successful in college and to meet employers’ expectations needs to occur if the United States is to adequately
participate in the 21st century job market (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). Classroom content must be rigorous, and students must learn to apply knowledge and skills to new situations in real-world settings. Opportunities for such learning are provided by 21st century, high-quality service-learning projects (Alliance for Education, 2007).

Service learning is one promising 21st century instructional tool that can help connect classroom concepts with real-world purpose and application, as evidenced in this study. Its presence in K-12 education has spanned three decades, and today it is viewed as an important component of K-12 educational reform and 21st century preparedness (Goddall, 2011; Salpeter, 2008; Bradley, 2010; Singham, 2005). A growing body of evidence demonstrates that students engaged in high-quality service learning learn to think critically, collaborate, and problem solve, all of which are 21st century skills needed for success in college and career (Guilfoile & Ryan, 2013).

Despite the extent to which high-quality service-learning pedagogy has yielded a wide range of positive student outcomes, including the 21st century skill set needed, it has not earned credibility as a proven learning strategy. As evidenced in the literature, this is based on unclear delineation of what constitutes high-quality service-learning programming and also that there are no universally accepted guidelines. Consequently, there has been great variation in quality of practice and limited empirical research on high-quality service-learning projects. The purpose of this study was to help fill this gap through an investigation of a well-established, high-quality service-learning project.

This qualitative study focused on a specific school district that has a 20-year history of high-quality service-learning practice and programming. Mountain View’s high-quality
programming distinction was determined by its incorporation of the essential elements of K-12 quality practice standards (NYLC, 1999), which resulted in national and state recognition of consistent, quality service-learning projects and programming. Mountain View Public Schools have been state and nationally recognized as national service-learning leader schools for the past 15 years, making Mountain View High School an ideal site to conduct empirical research on a high-quality service-learning practice. To date very limited empirical research has been conducted on well-established, high-quality service-learning programs; consequently, there have been discrepancies in the literature as to (1) what constitutes quality service-learning practice and (2) what are the most important components of quality service-learning practice from the student perspective. Such research is needed in order that high-quality service-learning pedagogy receives recognition as a viable 21st learning strategy, and school districts can launch successful service-learning programs.

As the literature purports in earlier chapters, student gains and positive student impact found in successful-learning projects depends largely on the quality of the experience (Billig, 2002). Indeed, it is high-quality service-learning projects, defined by a clear intentionality to incorporate the essential elements of quality practice standards that have been shown to provide substantial student benefits. On the other hand, community service projects and low-quality service learning projects – defined as poorly executed with limited use of essential elements – provide varying degrees of quality and student impact (Billig, 2002). Research demonstrates that when best practices for service-learning are not followed, student outcomes may be less positive (National Youth Leadership Council, 2010).
Conversely, research indicates that rewards can be positive when standards for best service-learning practices are followed, as in a high-quality service-learning experience in which students can develop real-life skills, including complex problem solving and communication skills and the ability to connect information and knowledge with real-world situations (Terry & Bohenberger, 2003), skills required for college and career success. For this research study, standards for quality service-learning practices (NYCL, 1999) were incorporated and followed throughout the project, making Mountain View Public Schools an exceptional research site to study quality service-learning practice.

This chapter is organized into the following five sections: 1) discussion of key results, 2) discussion of findings as interpreted through the lens of the theoretical framework and the literature, 3) limitations, 4) significance of the study, and 5) recommendations for future studies. Finally, at the end, I present my own personal reflections and lessons learned.

**Discussion of Key Results**

As noted previously, results that have been presented have sought to answer the overarching question: *How are students affected by their high-quality service-learning experience*, through student and teacher surveys and open-ended questions as well as information collected from student focus groups, teacher responses to focus group questions, and student journal entries. They also helped to answer the sub questions presented below:

- How do students describe their high-quality service-learning experiences?
- What do students view as the most meaningful and purposeful components of their high-quality service-learning experience?
What components of the high-quality service-learning process provided the best opportunities for students to transfer what they have learned in the classroom into real-world experiences?

In what ways do students feel they have changed during their high-quality service-learning experience?

Themes

The themes that emerged from the multiple data sources, in which students’ feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and insights most regularly associated with how they were affected by their experience of high-quality service learning were described in Chapter Four. Five themes were identified:

- Feeling of increased student involvement and interaction with peers and community
- Sense of teamwork, cooperation, and collaboration
- Feeling of greater community awareness/involvement
- Sense of accomplishment/satisfaction
- Feeling of making a difference

Noted themes are the most essential elements, events, or activities representative of the majority of students and those which students deemed as the most important, meaningful and defining for them during their experience. Each of these themes is interconnected, with the development of one theme often leading to the development of another. For example, student involvement and interaction with class/teammates and community members helped students develop a spirit of teamwork, cooperation, and collaboration toward a common purpose. Through this common purpose of working together toward a common goal (which involved
researching, surveying, and interacting with others), students were able to develop a feeling of greater awareness regarding their community’s problems, needs and possible solutions. From this newly developed community awareness, involvement, and collaboration, students gained a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction associated with their collective work toward improving their community. Ultimately, this sense of accomplishment and satisfaction helped students to achieve a sense of making a difference in their own community. Each of the five themes will be discussed individually.

**Feeling of increased student involvement and interaction with peers and community.** A feeling of increased student interaction and involvement with their community were consistent themes that emerged from survey responses as well as journal entry documentation and focus group transcripts. Students reported partnerships with peers and community members as the most essential element of their high-quality service-learning experience. Through community interaction students reported developing an understanding of what other people were trying to say and finding out more about the community and how it works. The value of interaction and involvement was strongly evidenced, with 74% of the students indicating that working with peers and community members toward a common goal was one of the most important elements of the process during their project. Moreover, most students agreed that one of the most meaningful and personally satisfying service-learning activities of their experience was researching their community and working in the community with new people. Students also shared that it was their community involvement and interaction during researching, surveying and interviewing community residents that provided opportunities for real-world application of skill and knowledge learned in the classroom. To summarize students’
feelings about the value of interaction, B1 noted, “I like community interactions and finding our community partners and talking with other people to get their input into our project… This was the first time we’ve ever done anything like this…” For many students, it was apparent that this service-learning project was the first time they were afforded the opportunity to apply what they had learned in the classroom to the real world, and they appeared to both enjoy and appreciate their interactions with their peers and community members.

**Sense of teamwork, cooperation, and collaboration.** *Partnerships* with teammates and community members were often repeated in numerous ways throughout this case study. Students reported in surveys and expressed in their journal entries and focus group discussions that *partnerships* were the most essential element of their service-learning experience and that *teamwork, cooperation, and collaboration* were important to the completion and success of the project as they worked toward a common goal. Through *teamwork*, students *collaborated and collectively* worked through challenges, with many students reporting the challenges they faced during their experience, such as *public speaking, time management and researching* as also becoming some of the most rewarding parts of their learning experience.

Students also expressed that *collectively working with their peers* on this project was *most meaningful and personally satisfying*, describing the *collaboration and cooperation* among teams as a feeling of team spirit indicating, “We are all in this together.” The teacher described this same team spirit as a feeling of *empowerment* that led to a general feeling of *personal satisfaction and meaning* for students. The importance and feeling of student *empowerment* was evidenced by students’ survey response, with over 76% of the students indicating that their *student voice* contributed to feeling more *empowered* during their experience.
Feelings of empowerment were further evidenced during focus group discussions in which students described the extent to which they were surprised that, they were given so much freedom and independence to make their own project decisions, they had a strong voice in student planning and implementation and, they were responsible for their own time management. Students reported feelings of empowerment stemming from their ability to work together and through problems such as scheduling and narrowing down topics. Meeting regularly as a group required coordinating individual student schedules, working with students in other class sections and around other student afterschool obligations such as sports. Narrowing down their topics involved extensive community research, interviews and surveys, arriving at group consensus as to what community problem they wanted to address and then organizing their information into a convincing speech and PowerPoint presentation. It was through working together and through obstacles such as these that students gained a sense of empowerment and autonomy that they found personally satisfying.

In addition to students experiencing feelings of empowerment, the majority of students ranked collaboration and teamwork, creativity, imagination, problem solving, decision making, planning and preparation, critical thinking, oral and written communication, and productivity as extremely important and as 21st century skills acquired during their experience. Summing up the group work experience experienced by many students, B1 noted: “…the most defining moments of this project are every time we collaborate… when we’re all in the same place, at the same time creating new ideas.” It appeared that students recognized the importance of collaboration and teamwork to the success of their projects and felt that this experience helped them to acquire skills they will need for their future. Additionally, students indicated that they
were given much freedom and independence to plan and implement their projects and consequently, often found themselves overwhelmed with challenges such as *time management* and *speech writing*. To their credit, students also reported these same challenges as some of the most rewarding aspects of their experience, noting they worked through obstacles and successfully completed their project because of their group’s perseverance and having to figure out things on their own.

**Feeling of greater community awareness/involvement.** Through student *involvement* as a team and individually while *researching, surveying, and assessing community needs* and *finding appropriate solutions*, students developed a *greater awareness of their community*. Students reported learning from their interactions with guest speakers such as the Mayor and town historians who visited their classroom, or with community members with whom students visited, such as those on the town council. Students commented that through these project elements and activities, they listened and developed a *better understanding of, and mutual respect for, other people’s opinions*. By viewing community problems and needs through others’ eyes, students acknowledged that other opinions existed besides their own. Sometimes people shared similar opinions, and other times people had new ideas, which students found valuable, despite these ideas not being their own.

Overall, students agreed that this process helped them to gain a *better understanding of their community as a whole, and its needs and problems* through developing skills of *listening to what other people were saying* and *finding information to solve problems*. Explaining the feelings of her peers, G13 said: “This project has been very eventful and informative… I’ve learned much more about problems that our town struggles with… I have gained a much higher
awareness of our town.” It appeared that through more active involvement and interaction in their community, students gained a greater sense of community awareness that helped them to better understand other perspectives as well as learn about their own community problems and needs. Many students were genuinely affected by what they learned about their community’s problems and needs, with over 78% of the students reporting that they felt responsible for helping others and over 71% of students indicating that they intend to volunteer in their community throughout their life. Indeed, many students related their investigation into their community’s problems as an eye-opening experience, resulting in a need to help and improve their town. As indicated by these student survey responses and student discussions, students appeared to gain a genuine sense of responsibility and commitment to help their community now and in the future.

**Sense of accomplishment/satisfaction.** Most students expressed feelings of disbelief that they were able to accomplish this huge project as a team. Because of the enormity of the project and the amount of preparation required, as well as the autonomy and responsibility they were given, students expressed surprise at their ability to persevere and accomplish the task of researching such a large and complicated project. They found the following activities somewhat intimidating as previously mentioned: researching, surveying community members, interacting with politicians (mayor and town council members) and town historians, writing and delivering a speech, and developing solutions and presenting a PowerPoint proposal to the town council (or) Chamber of Commerce. Students expressed their trepidation regarding attacking a problem of such magnitude, but also commented on their surprise and delight at their accomplishment. The majority of students expressed how they could not believe their projects were possible until the
end of the process. For example, G12 and G24 described both surprise and satisfaction in accomplishing such a huge project:

- G12: The end project impacted me the most because I never realized that we could pull together such an [big] idea… I didn’t think we would come this far.
- G24: The memories that will stand out the most will be my goal to make it happen and the passion I want for it to happen because I will get the satisfaction of just helping others, making our town a better place.

Students’ sense of accomplishment and satisfaction associated with the successful completion of their project also appeared to generate what can be described as a sense of altruism. Altruism was evident in student descriptions as indicated above, through gaining personal satisfaction from helping others and in making their town a better place. Student survey responses also indicated a sense of altruism, with 89% percent of students reporting that they would encourage others to work on community problems and over 92% of the students believing that students their age can do things to make the world better, indicating an overwhelming desire to selflessly contribute to their community and the world.

**Feeling of making a difference.** All students reported making a difference in their community as one of the primary ways they were affected by their high-quality service-learning experience. Students overwhelmingly reported: they believed they can make a difference in their neighborhood or town, students their age can do things to make the world better, they helped address problems in their own community and felt responsible for helping others and making a difference in their own community. As previously reported, most students indicated that they intend to volunteer or be involved in community throughout life and will encourage others to
work on community problems. Students also reported believing they had developed skills to find information and solve problems in their community and described the feeling of getting involved in their community and making a difference. Learning these skills and having this feeling were reportedly the most rewarding benefits associated with students’ experience. For example, G26 summarized the feeling of making a difference: “I feel like the most meaningful part of the experience was coming to the end and realizing that we can make a difference and make our project happen. We can help make the community better.” It was evident in responses that students were profoundly affected by their experience, feeling that they made a positive impact in their community and that they would continue to volunteer in the future.

Along with the noted themes above, students and their teacher identified the most important components, events, and activities of students’ experience, which included the following:

- **Student involvement** in the project, including having a role and voice in planning, and implementation
- **Diversity and mutual respect for others**, including respecting difference in opinions
- **Partnerships**, including working with peers and community members
- **Curriculum connections**, including time management, researching, surveying, interviewing, speech writing, and PowerPoint delivery

It is important to note that the above elements comprise four of the eight essential elements of K-12 quality practice (NYLC, 1999). Obtaining student’s perspectives of what they consider to be the most important elements provides greater insights and increases understanding of what students feel is most important for developing purposeful, meaningful, and relevant
high-quality service-learning projects. Each of the four essential elements is now described individually below.

**Student involvement in the project, including having a role and voice in planning, and implementation.** Students described a sense of *ownership and involvement* in this project that led to *making a difference*. Students reported believing that having a *strong voice* and being given the opportunity and responsibility to develop and implement a project of their own was both an enormous undertaking and a very rewarding experience at the same time. They further expressed that feeling as though they had *made a difference* in their community, made their experience all worthwhile. For example, B9 and B13 explained the following:

- B9: You’ve picked a problem that was a big problem and you helped change it. You made that difference and it feels good getting involved and really helping people with that problem and [those] affected by it.
- B13: This project has made me realize that some things are indeed possible and can be done. I think it is a rewarding process because it makes me feel proud of myself for going this far to make a difference.

It appeared that *student involvement*, specifically having a *voice in planning and implementing* their projects provided students with the opportunity to be actively involved in their learning and to develop a sense of ownership of their project. This resulted in many positive gains for their community. Students also described a sense of satisfaction in having contributed to making their community a better place.

**Diversity and mutual respect for others, including respect for difference in opinions.** There was a general consensus among students, especially in the focus group discussions and
journal entries, that they had gained new respect for *diversity* and *differences in opinion*. Through *listening to others’ opinions* and *understanding what they had to say*, students gained a new appreciation and *respect for difference in opinions*, which in turn led to *gaining more respect for others* in general. Summarizing many students’ feelings, students G13 and B11 stated:

- G13: We all heard each others’ ideas with open ears and considered them despite differing opinions.
- B11: I have also gained more respect for different opinions after seeing what I think are bad ideas turn out quite well.

It appeared that throughout this process, students developed a new sense of respect for others with differing opinions and interestingly, instead of being closed minded, it opened their eyes to new ideas, possibilities and perspectives. In the end, it was listening to the ideas of others and the incorporation of the views of others that directly contributed to the success of their projects.

**Partnerships, including working with peers and community members.** *Partnerships, interacting with peers and community members* was viewed by the majority of students as the most essential element of their high-quality service-learning experience. According to all data sources, both open- and closed-ended survey responses, focus group transcripts, and journal entries, students consistently noted their satisfaction with, and the importance of, working with their peers and community members throughout their experience. Students viewed *partnerships* as a component that helped them to gain *a better connection to their community, more respect for others, and greater knowledge about career and the workplace* to name a few things.
Equally important, over 74% of the students reported that working with peers and community members toward a common goal was most important while completing their projects was one of the most meaningful and personally satisfying activities of their experience. Collaboration and teamwork were ranked as the most important 21st century skill that students believed they had acquired during their experience. It is apparent, according to the evidence presented above, that unequivocally, students found their partnerships and working with one another most gratifying and rewarding. They shared a common purpose: to improve their community and successfully complete their projects.

Curriculum connections, including time management, researching, surveying, interviewing, speech writing, and PowerPoint delivery. Students repeatedly reported that curricular connections were made through developing knowledge and skills in the classroom in areas such as time management, researching, surveying, interviewing, speech writing, and PowerPoint delivery and then transferring these skills into the real-world environment during their interactions with community members and presentations before community audiences. Interestingly, many of these skills and activities were also reported as the most challenging and rewarding components of their experience.

Students also reported that curricular connections helped them to gain a better understanding of classroom concepts, and to gain greater knowledge about career and workplace. More specifically, through critical reflection, students indicated that reflection activities such as class discussion, research, class projects, class work, and journal entries all provided meaning to what they had learned in the classroom and what they experienced in the community. In other words, all of these activities helped students make curriculum connections
with real-world practice. Student G9 expressed the importance of transferring skills learned in the classroom to the real world, as reportedly felt by many students.

In relation to developing *time management skills*, she stated, “It will teach me to dedicate my time to the more important things and really focus on getting things done. If I ever get a job where I have to meet really specific deadlines, I won’t be crunching for time.” Through making curriculum connections, students appeared to effectively connect and transfer what they learned in the classroom to a real world environment. In doing so, they appeared to gain a better understanding of how classroom skills and knowledge can transfer into real life situations. This provided students greater meaning, relevancy and purpose while learning. Making these higher learning connections and having the ability to transfer what is learned to a real world context, is one of the primary goals of high-quality service-learning, which students in this study appeared to achieve.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

Experiential learning theory was used as the theoretical framework for this study. Experiential learning is the process of making meaning from direct experience. It is the process of connecting meaningful and relevant life experiences with academic learning, which can result in changes that help students gain useful skills that prepare them to be successful in life (Dewey, 1938, 1997, 2007) and as such, was an appropriate lens through which to investigate the overall scope of student learning and how students were affected during a real world service-learning experience.

According to Dewey (1938, 1997), all learning depends on the quality of the experience. In order for an experience to be educative, it must lead to the outside world since real world
experiences allow for the transfer of knowledge to new situations. Consistent with experiential learning and Dewey’s views that learning depends on the quality of the experience, this high-quality service-learning project led to an overwhelmingly positive and quality student learning experience, given its provisions for real world application opportunities. As a result of their real world experiences, students developed many new 21st century skills required for success in today’s society, such as problem solving, oral and written communication, collaboration and teamwork, civic literacy and citizenship, and social responsibility and ethics. Development of these new skills was attained through this high-quality service-learning opportunity of authentic, hands-on learning whereby students were offered a balance of knowledge and experience that allowed them to meet both individual and societal needs concurrently. Students appeared to attain their potential as learners and as contributing members to their community.

Two important elements of experiential learning theory, the social-learning component and real-world context, are also essential and primary determinants of quality service-learning practice. For this case study, salient components of experiential learning that were examined were: the transference of factual knowledge to real-world application, inquiry-based learning, and cultivation of the learning environment, each of which is discussed in greater detail, as they relate to this study’s findings.

**Transference of factual knowledge to real-world application.** High-quality service-learning practice is a process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience—transferring learning from past experience and building new skills to improve understanding (Starnes, Paris, & Stevens, 1999). Transferring knowledge already obtained to a new or similar situation helps build and improve understanding for the learner. As evidenced in
the experiential learning theoretical model used for service learning (Kolb, Figure 1, Chapter 1), in which learning is seen as a continuous process of moving between the modes of concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation and active experimentation, participants in this study moved through the different stages of service-learning experience and development.

First, students began with hands-on, concrete learning experiences in which they researched both their town’s identity and their own personal identity, recalling past experiences and history through creating posters and identity boxes. Next, through class discussions, journal writing, class work, and research, students began to participate in reflective observation. In this stage, students reviewed and reflected on what they learned, making connections between their classroom learning and the real world application of those skills.

After reflecting, students moved through abstract conceptualization, whereby students discussed the perceived problems and needs of their community learned through surveying community members and peers, interviewing town officials or community members, or creating items such as shadow boxes or posters depicting the history of their town. Students took what they learned from these discussions and shared ideas as to how to find possible solutions, formulating the main concepts of their projects. Finally, through active experimentation, students tried out what they learned, putting their plan into action and producing their end product, including a new town logo, slogan and solutions to improve their town. Students presented their plan first in front of their peers and later, a select few presented their plan to either members of the town council or Chamber of Commerce.
In the end, student participants were able to cycle through the process, connecting abstract ideas of their learning and project to concrete learning opportunities through active student reflection and real world application. In short, Kolb’s model helped to explain the process of service learning that took place during this research study as a form of experiential learning, through students processing real-life scenarios, analyzing course content through real-life situations and developing a more in-depth understanding between the two as they moved through the different stages as described above.

As previously mentioned, the active student reflection component provided in this case study helped students better understand the interdependency that exists between them and their environment. Through active reflection such as journaling and class discussion, students were able to connect their knowledge to real life community situations and better understand why a certain skill was important and how they should apply it in a real life context. Participants agreed that making these connections helped add greater meaning and relevancy to their learning. For example, students discussed making connections between learning and application as they described the importance of being able to deliver presentations and speak in front of groups.

Students described their preparation in detail from voice control and breathing exercises to understanding how to use the power of speech to effectively communicate through an elevator speech in order to make their point in a short period of time. Time management was another example of how students understood the connection between knowledge and application. Students discussed how they understood the importance of finding the time, making time to meet as a group and accomplishing project requirements. This evidence demonstrates that applying
what was learned to their community projects helped increase students’ understanding of curriculum, added meaning and relevancy to their learning, and helped them to better understand how those skills could be transferred later to a college or work setting when meeting deadlines or preparing for a big topic presentation.

**Inquiry-based learning fostering student growth and development.** Experiential learning theory incorporates Dewey’s view that an inquiry-based learning approach is needed to be educative or (1) generate interest in the learner; (2) become intrinsically worthwhile to the learner; (3) present problems that awaken new curiosity and create a demand for information; and (4) foster development over time (Giles & Eyler, 1994). In short, all genuine education comes through experience and learning occurs through social interaction in the real-world context (Dewey, 1938, 1997, 2007). Through an experiential learning theory lens, findings from this research helped to explain the learning benefits and value of service learning for students. Specifically, findings illustrate how high-quality service learning enhanced and connected academic learning through meaningful and relevant real-world (service) experiences and social interactions provided during this project. These findings also demonstrate how student involvement and engagement provided greater meaning and satisfaction to students’ learning experience as evidenced in student journals and focus groups.

Students described the scope of their learning experience, including how they were affected by a quality learning experience, and what elements provided the most meaning, purpose, and relevancy for them. Students reported that the essential elements of a high-quality service-learning programming—such as student involvement; having a strong voice and role in planning, preparation, and implementing; respecting differences in opinions; forming
partnerships with peers and community members; and sound curricular connections such as time management, researching, surveying, interviewing, speech writing, and PowerPoint presentations helped them to connect classroom knowledge with real-world applications.

Students consistently commented that these activities and elements were most meaningful and personally satisfying for them, resulting in deep connections between concepts taught in the classroom and real-world application. In other words, the importance of student involvement/engagement and student/student and student/community member interaction and collaboration cannot be underestimated during this high-quality service-learning experience since personal relations with others appeared to strengthen student learning. This social component allowed for real life opportunities through a high level of community interaction and involvement in the community. As a result of these interactive experiences, students reported gaining a sense of greater community awareness and feeling of personal accomplishment/satisfaction.

Students described themselves as having become proficient at a variety of new skills, such as finding information about their community and its needs and helping to solve its problems, seeing the consequences of their actions, understanding other peoples’ point of view, and using what they learned in the classroom to accomplish their goals. Of genuine interest to this study, students spoke of how they felt their project and work would have a lasting impact on their community and how they had made a positive difference. It is readily apparent that through applying their knowledge to real-world community settings and developing strong, interactive relationships with their peers as well as community members, students’ learning became relevant, meaningful and purposeful for them. Students also made what they believed to be a
profound difference in their own community. These actions support the notion that through utilizing an inquiry-based learning component, that which is learned becomes intrinsically worthwhile for the student and will foster student development over time (Giles & Eyler, 1994).

**Cultivation of a student-learning environment that explored how students were affected by their learning experience.** Experiential learning theory helps illuminate, the transactive process between the teacher and students—that is, the process in which the teacher facilitates student participants constructing knowledge, skill, and value from their direct service-learning experience (Itin, 1999) while also illuminating the process of change that occurs for student participants during the experience.

The transactive process between teacher and student occurred throughout the development of students’ service learning projects, with the teacher cultivating the student environment by providing them with the autonomy to make decisions, plan, and implement their own projects. Students reported having a strong voice and playing a strong role in planning and implementing, which reportedly led to great meaning and personal satisfaction for them. Students decided with which peers they would work, how they would go about determining community needs and ultimately, the formulation of an action plan: finding solutions to a community problem they researched. The teacher afforded students a great deal of autonomy throughout the process, generating a feeling of student ownership for their work and project, and resulting in quality products.

When time and resources are devoted to purposeful activities outside of the classroom such as those described herein, student learning and real-world readiness are enhanced (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 1991). The teacher’s role primarily consisted of involving,
supporting, engaging, and guiding the students, as well as providing direct experience with their learning environment and content (Dewey, 1938). For example, the teacher selected opportunities for student experiences (such as interviewing and surveying community members), utilizing these experiences to make curriculum connections and provide real-world application of the skills and knowledge gained in the classroom. Rarely did the teacher provide specific direction as to how students should go about preparing or implementing their projects. Rather, the teacher presented parameters, outlining tasks and expectations through the use of student rubrics that students were to interpret, follow and meet. In so doing, as reported by students and their teacher, they established a learning environment that allowed for both the teacher and students to share pertinent information, facilitate the overall learning and outcomes, provide mutual feedback, and discuss project progress and student gains (Itin, 1999).

In this study, the development of peer and community partnerships reinforced the importance of the teacher’s role as a facilitator rather than director of the service-learning experience and environment. More pointedly, the teacher in this research provided students with a maximum learning context, promoting group work that integrated community involvement and interactive service opportunities along with the necessary tools and resources such as learning how to research, survey, interview and make public speeches. This approach helped students facilitate their own learning experience within the community, taking charge from start to finish of their projects. They formed memorable and enduring partnerships with peers and community members, collected data through surveys and interviews and decided what level of community involvement they needed to address a problem, find solutions, and produce a successful end product.
It was evident throughout this study that the reciprocity in learning between student and teacher, along with the opportunities to transfer what was learned in the classroom to the community, provided the most positive change for students. Positive student outcomes and growth were achieved through real-world application of students’ newly acquired 21st century skills (such as collaboration/teamwork, creativity and imagination, problem solving, and oral and written communication) in competency areas of communication, critical thinking, career and teamwork, civic responsibility, and academic development and educational success.

Students reported considerable change in their personal and academic growth from the beginning of the project to the end, including a higher level of commitment to community, self-confidence, and communication skills and the development of self-satisfaction because of the accomplishment and enormity of their project. Through student involvement and engagement, students developed feelings that as teens, they could make a difference in their community, address problems in their community, and make the world better. Equally important, through this high-quality service-learning project, students felt responsible for helping others, as demonstrated in their survey responses, in-depth focus group discussions and reflective journaling. They described community problems such as teen boredom, high unemployment and teen pregnancy rates and the importance of addressing these community problems through community generated solutions.

In sum, teacher and student engagement in a purposive experience, such as that which occurred during this high-quality service learning project was examined, as an important component of experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1938). Findings from this case study reinforced the importance of integrating components such as strong partnerships between
teacher/student, student/student and student/community members, a transactive process between teacher and student, reciprocity, student autonomy, allowing for a strong student voice and role in planning and implementation, and a provision of real world opportunities to apply skills to a service-learning experience. Indeed, there was a clear presence of strong partnerships and reciprocity between teacher and students, students and other students, and students and community members. This reciprocity involved an exchange of information, knowledge, and lessons learned, and this exchange affected the learning environment itself, cultivating healthy exchange and autonomy for students. This mutual exchange and reciprocity allowed for students to not only master the curriculum but to also better understand how to apply what was learned to the real world, which is the goal of high-quality service-learning projects.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to Literature Review**

The findings from this study are in alignment with the literature presented in Chapter Two, concentrating on three main areas:

1. History of service learning, including its origins and theorists
2. Service-learning defined and quality of practice guidelines
3. Service learning as a viable 21st century learning tool and alternative to traditional education

Findings from this study reinforced findings presented in the review of the literature, demonstrating that high-quality service learning has evolved into a viable 21st century pedagogy and an important component of K-12 educational reform, with a wide range of positive student outcomes. Connections between the findings of this study to each of these three areas of inquiry are discussed.
History of service learning, including its origins and theorists. Our nation has shared a long and rich history of government service programs like President Roosevelt’s Emergency Conservation Work Act of 1933, the Peace Corp established in the 1960’s by President Kennedy, and more contemporaneously, the USA Freedom Corps and the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009 (as described in chapter 2). These government service programs closely resemble today’s service-learning projects, similar to the one studied, in that they combined knowledge and skill with real-life application.

Theorists from a variety of fields such as education and psychology have contributed and influenced the practice of service learning over the past 30 years, but none perhaps greater than experiential theorist, John Dewey (1938), the father of “progressive education.” Dewey’s experiential learning theory challenges teachers to understand the nature of the individual learner and his/her experiences. In other words, he challenges teachers to take a child-centered approach, create programming that begins with an individual’s past experience, and to work together with students to provide opportunities for them to transfer the knowledge and skill they are learning in the classroom to a real world setting. According to Dewey (1916, 1938), learning occurs when a teacher purposefully engages the learner by infusing content into direct experience and turning real-life context into the learning environment. This is known as contextual learning, or linking concepts learned in the classroom with real-world application, ostensibly adding value, effectiveness, and meaning to the learning process (McGill & Beaty, 1995).

Consistent with the literature, this study demonstrates the importance of Dewey’s philosophy of experience and education as it pertains to service learning and experiential
learning theory. It appeared that through the provision of real world experience, students’ connections between what they were learning in the classroom with the real world environment had the greatest impact on their learning. Student surveys indicated that *curricular connections to real world practice* was one of the essential elements of quality practice perceived by students in *gaining a better understanding of classroom concepts; making curriculum connections with real world environment skills and application; and gaining greater knowledge about career and the workplace*. Additionally, during focus groups and journaling, students discussed the value of their community work and application of knowledge, in which they reportedly found great meaning in applying their skills to their community project work. Over 92% of the students believed that they had become *fairly good to excellent in using what they leaned in the classroom to solving problems in their community* and over 78% of the students indicated they made *connections between their academic learning and real-life experience*.

The real world application of what was learned in the classroom apparently also had a powerful effect on students, providing meaning, purpose and relevancy in their learning as evidenced in the overwhelmingly positive outcomes associated with their community work. Students indicated that *meaningful service activities* helped them to *gain a better connection to their community* and, in relation to learning relevancy, helped them *gain greater knowledge about career and the workplace*.

The practice of contextual learning as demonstrated in this study allowed for students to make solid connections between classroom learning and their community and real world work, adding personal value and meaning to their learning process. This real world application component was particularly important to the overall positive student outcomes during their
service-learning experience. Through a real world application, students developed both an understanding and desire to be involved in their community and to help improve it. Students discussed in detail the extent to which they had gained personal satisfaction from the work itself and the improvements they had made in their community. As a result of their involvement, 92% of the students who participated reported that they believe they can *make the world better* and can *make a difference in their neighborhood or town.*

**Service-learning defined and quality of practice guidelines.** The literature on service-learning demonstrates some consensus regarding a few of its defining aspects. Generally speaking, it is an intentional integration between academic content and service, along with a well-structured design. Nonetheless there are still discrepant ways in which service-learning is defined within the literature. Helping to define quality service learning, practice and program guidelines such as Essential Elements of K-12 Quality of Practice (NYCL, 1999) have emerged among practitioners, politicians, and youth organizations. This adds standards and helps to better understand the purpose and goals of service-learning projects.

The literature clearly states more empirical research is needed, particularly in relation to high-quality service-learning projects in order to fully resolve the discrepancies in the ways it is defined, both in terms of practice as well as standards of quality. It is especially important to note that quality of practice matters. In other words, student gains and student impact depend largely on the quality of practice (Billig, 2002). As described in chapter two, service learning does not produce the same level of positive student outcomes when standards for best practice (such as the essential elements of quality practice) are not followed (NYLC, 2010) and an
intentionality to integrate academic content with real world application are not present. The literature specifically purports that quality of programming matters (Billig, 2002).

As a reminder, this research purposely chose to examine a well-established and nationally distinguished, high-quality service-learning project, helping to eliminate some of the discrepancy associated with the ways in which service-learning is defined and quality of practice is understood as found in the literature. Through sharing what was learned, findings from this study add to the empirical literature, and consistent with, reinforce the importance of providing quality service-learning programming through incorporating essential elements of quality practice (NYCL, 1999) and purposefully integrating academic learning with real world application. This supports connections in learning through critical reflection in order to increase the level of positive student outcomes and gains. As an example, this study provided strong empirical evidence indicating that the majority of students found all eight essential elements to be important to the completion of their service-learning projects as previously discussed, including critical reflection. In short, as per findings in the literature demonstrating that when the essential elements of quality practice are present, coupled with the strong intentionality of curricular connections to the real world through deliberate student reflection, greater student rewards and outcomes occur, so too did students in this study report positive outcomes.

**Service learning as a viable 21st century learning tool and alternative to traditional education.** Traditional learning creates a structure of knowledge that does not often translate into usable skills required in the world of work (Resnik, 1987). Service learning helps to fill a void in traditional education by providing students the opportunity to gain a better understanding of what is being taught in the classroom, while also contributing to their community (Billig,
Service learning unlike traditional education, engages students in the learning process and provides them with a sense of worth and purpose (Goodall, 2006), often resulting in many positive student effects in the areas of academic achievement, social and personal development, civic engagement, career exploration and resilience (NYLC, 2004-2010). As demonstrated in the literature, high-quality service learning can help students reach their potential as learners and as members of society (Neill, 2005). For this reason, high-quality service-learning experiences can provide relevancy with students successfully participating in the real world in a manner that traditional learning does not allow (O’Loughlin Brooks & Smith, 2011).

Many findings from this study aligned with the literature, demonstrating that high-quality service-learning programming is a viable alternative to traditional education, providing students with an opportunity to gain real-world skills in several areas of development as well as the opportunity to apply what was learned in their community setting. As evidenced in this study, many positive contributions students believed they made throughout their project occurred during their real world practice of the skills they had learned. For example, students believed they made a difference in their community through researching community problems and needs, listening to others’ needs and ideas, working with others toward a common goal and incorporating what they learned into their projects. Students were able to acquire new skills such as teamwork and collaboration and apply them directly to their work in the community, further reinforcing what they had learned. Students also indicated that by the end of their project they felt an increased sense of civic responsibility, believing that they should find time to contribute to their community, be concerned about local community issues, should plan to improve their neighborhoods in the near future and that they can have a positive impact on local
social problems. Student participants reported feeling that they had achieved mastery of most of the 21st century skills required for college and career while also fulfilling a community need, thereby improving their community. They wanted to continue their service in the future. Consistent with the literature, these results show that new skills must not only be learned, they must also be practiced.

In sum, findings presented above demonstrate that providing quality service-learning opportunities in a real world setting can lend itself to a wide variety of authentic assessment, focusing on students’ competencies rather than rote, memorization of facts such as those found in traditional education. The teacher in this study fostered opportunities for the students to incorporate their own life experiences into the curriculum through self-identity and reflection activities such as shadow boxes and class discussions. Actively reflecting through journaling and classroom discussions, students made deep and meaningful learning connections between their newly acquired knowledge and skills and real life practice in the community. Offering true authentic learning experiences such as quality service-learning projects, provides students the opportunity to demonstrate “what they are able to do, with what they have learned” (Bradley, 2010). Consistent with the literature, the transcending of student lives into their community enhanced both content and in-context learning for student participants, increasing their potential for personal and academic development as demonstrated throughout this study.

Limitations of the Study

The greatest limitation in this study was its purposeful sampling. The researcher specifically selected participants involved in a well-established, high-quality service-learning program. These participants represent a unique point of view concerning high-quality practice—
a point of view that others who had not participated may have not. While participants were representative of a small population, transferability is dependent upon the degree that another researcher can expect the same results of this study, under new situations and with new people (Barnes, et al., 1994-2012). Provided another researcher followed the highly detailed descriptions of conditions, procedures and research methods used (as described in chapter 3), this case study could be reasonably transferred to another research environment with the same or similar results.

Another consideration for this study is that the site for this case study was a district with a 20-year history of high-quality service-learning programming. This district serves as a model program for other schools and districts. Additional research would have to be conducted to determine whether the longevity of high-quality service-learning practice and the history and recognition of quality programming played any role in the overwhelmingly positive experiences that participants had and whether a more novice service-learning district would have yielded the same results. The student participants were enrolled in an Honors English course. This may indicate that they are high achieving students.

This case study was also somewhat limited by the researcher’s inherent bias or subjectivity regarding the impact of high-quality service-learning projects. The researcher has a certain inherent professional bias based on her prior and extensive high-quality service-learning experiences as an educator, administrator, and author of state service-learning grants. Despite this potential bias resulting from the researcher witnessing the positive impact of quality service-learning experiences firsthand, (something also about this site being specifically selected because
you have no affiliation with it perhaps) she remained open to all data, whether positive or negative, and attempted to report findings as objectively as possible.

**Significance of the Study**

Through the theoretical lens of experiential learning theory, the researcher uncovered many themes as to how students were affected by their high-quality service-learning experience. In particular, identifying which essential elements of quality practice provided the most meaning, personal satisfaction and relevancy to their service-learning process. The findings from this study were consistent with both the tenets of experiential learning theory and findings from other studies examining the impact of high-quality service-learning programs as evidenced in the review of literature. While there were no apparent inconsistencies to note, this study may add new and detailed information from the student perspective, providing empirical evidence that is currently limited in the literature.

Now, more than ever, K-12 educators are faced with the challenge of preparing students for college and career success, which in today’s global economy and competitiveness means achieving proficiency in “multi-dimensional abilities” (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2012). Today’s work force must be able to think, analyze, reason, problem solve and communicate. Successful participants in the work force are self-directed and technologically savvy (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009, 2008). Over the next quarter century, at least half of the projected job growth includes jobs that will require advanced degrees and a high level of these diverse skills (Kirsch, Braun, Yamamoto, & Sum, 2007).

For the United States, these statistics present both educational and economic challenges because many American high school students struggle to achieve the requisite skills necessary
for college and a career. It is estimated that only about one-third of all high school graduates are ready for college, and more than a third of all students entering college must take remedial courses (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Further compounding the problem is that so many American high school students (an estimated 30%) do not graduate, and are unable to enroll in institutions of higher education. This lack of college readiness prolongs the time needed to graduate college, with approximately 56% of college students who graduate taking at least 6 years to complete their degrees (Pathways to Prosperity, 2011).

One primary reason that students are unprepared for college is that the current high school curriculum does not meet or teach the skills needed for success in 21st century higher education and careers (Wagner, 2008). Even today, teaching skills such as problem solving, innovation, creativity, reasoning, articulation, and applying knowledge to new situations are either not being included in high school curriculums or if they are, they are not being assessed to the degree required (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008; Wagner, 2008). If K-12 public schools in the United States are to close the gap between what is being learned in the classroom and what is needed for college and career success, significant pedagogical changes must occur. High school curriculum must change to better prepare students for college through more rigorous coursework that is more compatible with college readiness (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). And, skills and knowledge developed in high school and college must meet the needs of today’s potential employers (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007; The National Center, 2005; Wagner, 2008). The service-learning project examined in this study provides evidence of one promising and powerful 21st century pedagogical tool that expands both college and career readiness.
High school graduates can be better prepared for higher education and eventually for the 21st century job market if they are offered more non-traditional, progressive and innovative pedagogies such as the high-quality service-learning project examined in this study. Mountain View School District has demonstrated successful high-quality service-learning programming for over twenty years and could serve as a 21st Century instructional model for other similar districts. Given the extent to which quality of programming matters, a model of quality programming (such as Mountain View School District) is needed if students are to obtain the best possible learning outcomes (Billig, 2004). This service-learning project, demonstrated the possibilities of expanding student preparedness for college and career through offering quality programming, including 21st century skill development, application of skills in a real-world setting and a strong critical reflection component to connect learning with real-world practice—all essential elements of service-learning practice and determinants of quality practice (NYCL, 1999).

The findings from this study demonstrate that throughout this high-quality service-learning project, student participants acquired many new 21st century skills. These include life and career skills such as decision making, problem solving, flexibility, adaptability and initiative; and learning and innovations skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, oral and written communications, collaboration, creativity and innovation; and technological and information skills. All of these prepare them for college and career. This project also allowed for many student real-world opportunities, transferring skills learned to real life situations in the community and providing deeper meaning through critical reflection of their service experience.
Thus, the potential significance of this study is its contribution to the development of best practices in designing and implementing high-quality service-learning programs, quality service-learning programs that teach the 21st century skills needed for college and career. More broadly speaking, the potential significance of this study is its ability to inform educational practices that best prepare high school students for their future. The findings from this study can help inform future research in this area, which collectively will inform best practices for service-learning programs. More specifically, this study can contribute detailed, in-depth and valuable insight from student surveys, journaling, focus groups and open-ended questions which are currently limited in the literature regarding how students are affected by their high-quality service-learning experience and what components are most important to students during their high-quality service-learning experience.

**Recommendations for Future Studies**

Future studies could further investigate students’ perspective of high-quality service-learning projects and determine what they consider to be the most important elements of their experience. The student perspective is not well researched, though it may be crucial for teachers to incorporate into design and implementation if they are to provide the highest level of student engagement and involvement and develop the most meaningful, purposeful, and relevant programming for them. Specifically, studies need to be conducted on well-established, high-quality service-learning programs in order to: (a) add to the limited empirical literature in this area, and (b) determine the extent to which findings from this study hold true. And more importantly, future studies can address high-quality, service learning’s future role in helping to
close the gap between what is taught in public schools and what is needed for student success in college and careers.

The following topics should be explored in future research:

1. Reciprocity and interaction between teachers and students to determine best practices to foster student-centered, hands-on, authentic learning experiences.

2. Student learning environments, specifically how to create, cultivate and provide the best learning environment, to foster the highest level of student outcomes and initiative.

3. The contextual learning process of service learning to ascertain best practices for creating ideal learning circumstances and opportunities for transference of classroom knowledge and skills learned to the real-world setting that add relevancy for the learner.

4. The ways in which high-quality service-learning districts’ viable and lasting community partnerships help to sustain quality programming and greater student outcome.

5. The impact high-quality service-learning programs have on college attendance and career and college readiness.

**Conclusion**

Service learning has the potential to be a powerful pedagogical tool for teaching students 21st century college and career readiness, especially when quality programming is evident. Service learning is also a viable alternative to traditional education, helping to transcend students’ learning experience in the classroom to the wider world and providing real-world
application and practice. The positive effects of quality service-learning programming are well documented in the literature and have been corroborated with this study, but it is important to emphasize that not all service-learning experiences are considered equal.

Simply put, to reiterate what has been noted throughout: the quality of service-learning practice matters. To this point, student gains and student impact depend largely on the quality of experience (Billig, 2002). Because there is no universally accepted definition or set of guidelines that constitute quality service-learning practice, providing quality programming remains a challenge for many service-learning practitioners. However, the two most commonly accepted determinants of quality practice (NYCL, 1999) include: (1) a clear intentionality to integrate classroom knowledge and skill with real-world service activity; and (2) critical reflection to make curricular connections with real-world application. As evidenced in this study’s findings, when these two factors are present, there appears to be greater potential for positive student outcomes and gains. That is why further empirical studies such as this one are needed to more clearly define service learning and reinforce the essential elements of quality practice and programming.

This study examined how students are affected by a high-quality service-learning experience and also explored the most important, meaningful, purposeful, and relevant elements of quality service-learning practice from the student perspective. Findings show a true commitment to quality practice—including adherence to national and state best practices—and a strong curricular presence in the district’s educational priorities. These findings, along with students’ detailed testimony from journal entries and focus groups discussions, reinforced that the essential elements of quality practice add to the potential success and quality of service-
learning programming and ultimately to positive student outcomes and gains. Indeed, student participants confirmed the importance of incorporating all eight essential elements of quality practice, revealing that partnerships, diversity (mutual respect for others), and student voice in planning and implementing were the most valuable elements.

Findings from this study clearly indicate the importance of forming partnerships with peers, the teacher, and community members and providing a strong student voice in planning and implementing should not be overlooked. Students reported that the reciprocity and interactions between students, between students and the teacher, and between students and community members added meaning and personal satisfaction to the service work activities. The most meaningful interactions were those in the classroom environment with their peers and activities that involved working in the community with people and their classmates. Further, students emphasized the importance of having a strong voice and role in planning and implementing. Their strong involvement allowed for autonomy and ownership of their projects. Consistent with the literature, strong partnerships and strong student ownership strengthened the service-learning experience for participants. Therefore, every effort to develop and provide sustaining partnerships and strong student roles should be made.

Another important point worth mentioning is that a well-designed, quality service-learning project can produce more favorable student outcomes and personal gains when opportunities are provided to develop new skills and apply what is learned to a real-world setting. Findings clearly indicate that a well-designed, quality project helped students develop significant personal growth and gains from the start of their experience through completion. Students overwhelmingly believed that their participation in this high-quality service-learning
project helped them to make a difference in their community, broadened their perspective about what was possible for ninth graders to accomplish in their own town, and provided a sense of pride and accomplishment.

Perhaps most informatively, this study’s findings provide a strong student perspective and voice, a perspective not well documented in the literature. Through the use of student focus groups, class discussions, and journaling, students were able to share, describe, elaborate, and express a true desire to improve their town’s circumstances, listen to other people’s opinions, and find solutions to significant life problems that could not be learned in a survey, such as teen boredom, unemployment, drug use, and teen pregnancy. Of genuine interest, students reported that as a result of their experience, they felt responsible for helping others and they intended to volunteer or be involved in their community throughout their life. This is one indication of the profound change students can experience during quality service-learning projects and the significance of learning the student perspective.

In sum, these results not only reinforced much of what is already known from the literature, but also added the student voice and perspective, a more in-depth and firsthand account of a high-quality service-learning experience. The student perspective emphasizes the importance of providing meaningful, purposeful, and relevant service-learning projects that allow participants the opportunity to connect what is learned in the classroom to real-life situations in their community through their active student reflection and real-world practice. As was clearly demonstrated in this study, quality service-learning programming undoubtedly can help students develop and demonstrate 21st century skills and knowledge needed for college and career readiness. Through students’ real-world application of these skills and through
committing, contributing, and involving themselves in worthwhile community endeavors, students have the ability and opportunity to make powerful and positive impacts in their community as well as within themselves.

**Personal Reflections from Lessons Learned**

My experience as a non-participatory classroom and community observer—a person on the outside looking in—was simultaneously challenging and enlightening. In the nonparticipatory observer’s role, I sat quietly and paid close attention to what was being said, how the students were interacting, and what was being conveyed in students’ body language and behavior. Being a quiet observer is not a natural tendency for me, and it was admittedly somewhat difficult to refrain from contributing or asking questions. It was also challenging to remain neutral and to not ask leading questions when I later became the facilitator of student focus groups. Refraining from offering my own personal insight while students shared their experiences was most difficult.

Teachers have always referred to the extraordinary “aha” teaching moments as the most defining. In those moments, when learning comes unexpectedly, the teacher must deviate from the planned lesson and recap what has happened and what was meant during that moment. For me, it was during those quiet moments when I forced myself to listen intently and pay close attention to what students were saying or how they were behaving that I learned the most from this study. Student journal reflection and focus group discussions provided a more in-depth characterization of their experience and revealed many personal insights that a survey alone could not have done. It was through these most reflective student moments that I learned the
most about the students and about their learning experience. It was during those unexpected “aha” moments that I learned about students’ most defining experiences. I learned:

- **Unexpected learning moments often come from students themselves.** Service learning offers powerful unexpected learning moments directly from the students themselves, unsolicited by teacher prompts.

- **Given responsibility, students will rise to the occasion.** Students were presented with an enormous project proposition that often appeared impossible to complete. Through teamwork, partnerships, a strong voice in planning and implementation, and pure perseverance, the students accomplished what they perceived to be near-impossible feats.

- **Student challenges often became student rewards.** While students enjoyed the many rewards associated with the success of their project, such as acquiring new skills and developing a greater sense of community awareness, they also encountered many challenges associated with this enormous undertaking. In the end, however, students described their challenges as the most rewarding and personally gratifying components of their experience.

- **Allowing students to have a strong voice in their own learning helps them to take ownership of their learning.** There is no greater voice in learning than that of the student. Through strong student engagement and involvement in their own learning, all students have greater potential to succeed, and educators have the potential to learn from students.
• *Cultivating student learning environments will foster purpose and relevancy in learning.* When there is authentic reciprocity between teacher and student during learning that fosters active, hands-on, real-life applicable learning opportunities, students’ learning takes on greater meaning and relevancy and may better prepare them for life.

• *When provided the right opportunities, students can make deep, meaningful connections with the broader world.* When students are provided the right circumstances to reflect, connect, and apply what they have learned within the greater community outside of the classroom, they begin to live with a greater intentionality of purpose, develop a desire to do good for their community and others, and believe that they have made a difference in their community and the world, whatever their age.

I believe that service learning can be a powerful and defining pedagogical experience for teachers and students when quality design and intentional reflection purposefully connect curricular concepts with real-life applications. It is my desire that the positive findings of this study will inspire and motivate other school districts to incorporate high-quality service learning into their curriculums.
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Appendix A

Letter to Participants and Parents/Guardians

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Principal Investigator: Nena Stracuzzi
Doctoral Candidate: Michele M. Rivers Murphy
Title of Project: High Quality Service Learning Project: High School Students Learning Experience

Dear Student and Parent/Guardian:

My name is Michele Rivers Murphy, and I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. We are inviting your child to take part in a research study because he/she is in a ninth grade Honors English class that is currently participating in a yearlong high quality service-learning project. My thesis involves a high quality service-learning project and student perceptions of their experience. With the permission of your district superintendent, coordinator for service learning and your child’s Honors English teacher, I have formed a partnership to conduct a qualitative single case study regarding your child’s service-learning project.

I will be working in a cooperative effort with your child’s school and specifically, the service-learning coordinator, Anne French and your child’s Honors English teacher, Melissa Quirk. Your child’s participation in my research would be very helpful to determine how students are affected by their high quality service-learning experience. The attached Statement of Consent describes the research I intend to conduct and as a participant, what would be asked of your child.

Please read the enclosed Statement of Consent to determine whether your child would be willing to participate; this information provides a full explanation of what participants’ involvement entails, the purpose of the study, the data collection process and to whom the data will be reported. I believe that your son or daughter could offer valuable information for this research. For your son/daughter’s participation in this activity, I will need your consent. Your son/daughter’s participation is completely voluntary and he/she can decide not participate at any time without repercussions.

I would also be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have. Please do not hesitate to e-mail me at riversmurphy.m@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you very much for your consideration of your child’s participation in this research.

Best regards,
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting your child to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, please sign this statement and a copy will be provided for you to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking your child to take part in this research because your child’s school district has received both state and national recognition for high quality service-learning projects and your child is currently participating in a yearlong service-learning project in his/her Honors English class. Your child can provide firsthand knowledge, information and insight of how he or she is affected by the high quality service-learning experience, and what elements or activities of the service-learning process they perceive to provide the most meaningful and purposeful learning experiences. The purpose of this qualitative research is to better understand the student perspective regarding specific elements of a high quality service learning process so that teachers can better plan, implement and equip students with the best resources. The procedure will be a single case study design. At this stage in the research, process will be defined as exploring students’ perceptions, feelings and opinions regarding their service-learning experience.

Why is this research study being done?

Service learning has received national and state recognition as a teaching tool for 21st century learning skills and K-12 educational reform; however there is great variation in the quality of service-learning implementation in schools and there is limited firsthand observational research on this subject. This study will help clarify and guide: What elements and activities of a high quality service-learning project provide the greatest student benefit, meaning and real world relevance.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to allow your child to take part in this study, we will ask your child to participate in following ways:

1. Participate in an end-of-the project survey/questionnaire, and
2. Participate in a focus group session that will be audiotaped.

All related student documentation will be confidential and a coding system will be used to maintain student confidentiality. All participating students will be assigned a number ahead of time, which will be used (instead of names) throughout the research to protect students’ identity. All participation is voluntary, and students may opt out at any time without any repercussions.

Where will this data collection take place?

Focus groups will be audio taped, and will take place in the classroom, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes.

Survey/questionnaire will be distributed by the classroom teacher, completed in the classroom and will take approximately 30 minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There is no foreseeable or anticipated risk or discomfort to student participation in this research. Student participants, classroom teacher and school will not be referred to by name in the doctoral thesis. As mentioned, a numerical coding system will help protect student’s identity and maintain confidentiality.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

As participants in this study students could directly benefit from providing individual feedback, insight and knowledge concerning their learning experience. Through your student voice you may help shape future service learning experiences for yourself and fellow students. The information learned in this study may be useful in assisting your teachers as well as other teachers in the district with planning, designing and implementing future high quality service learning projects with less variation and greater consistency. This study may also contribute important programming information for similar districts.

Who will see the information about me?

Since the researcher is using a coding system to correlate information and findings, no one will be able to identify specific information about a student.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you decide to participate, you may stop participating at any time, with no repercussions.

Who can I contact if I have any questions or problems?

You may contact, Principal Investigator, Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, n.stracuzzi@neu.edu or call her at 617-435-6189. You may also contact, the Student Investigator, Michele Rivers Murphy at riversmurphy.m@husky.neu.edu or 413-212-9379.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

There is no compensation for participation in this study. There will be a pizza party for all Honors English students, regardless of their participation, at the conclusion of this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There is no cost to participate in this study.

I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature and character of my child’s involvement in this research program. If you decide to allow your child to participate, your child will be asked to sign an assent form that indicates they understand: the purpose of the survey and focus group discussion, what is expected of them, their participation is voluntary and they may withdraw at anytime without repercussions. Copies of the student assent forms are attached for your information.

Please sign and return this letter indicating your permission for your child to participate in one or both portions of the study.

☐ Anonymous Survey
☐ Confidential Focus Group
☐ My child may not participate in this study

Child’s Name

Date: ________________
Parent/Guardian (Signature)

Student (Signature)

Please mail this form in the self addressed envelope, send in with your child to Ms. _____ or E-mail your consent to: riversmurphy.m@husky.neu.edu as soon as possible. Thank you.
Appendix B

Students’ High Quality Service-Learning Experience Survey

Section A

- What is your student number?________
- Please indicate: Male _____ Female _____
- What section class are you in? 1 2 3
- What is today’s date ___________

*Your individual responses, opinions and insight are important, please take time to read and answer each question. Thank you.

Section B: Elements of Quality Service-Learning Practice

- Meaningful Service: Actively engaged, meaningful and personally relevant service activities
- Link Curriculum: classroom concepts and curriculum are linked to service-learning activities
- Reflection: Multiple reflection activities such as journals that promote deep thinking and analysis
- Diversity: service learning promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect with others
- Youth Voice: strong youth voice in planning, implementing and evaluating learning experience
- Partnerships: collaborative effort, mutually beneficial to participants and community
- Progress Monitoring: assesses the quality of implementation and progress towards goals
- Duration and Intensity: sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs

1. Check any and all elements that you feel contributed to the success of your service-learning project:

☐ Meaningful Service Activities
☐ Curriculum Connections to Real World Practice
☐ Reflection of My Experiences
☐ Diversity, Mutual Respect and Getting Along with Others
☐ My Voice in Planning and Implementing
☐ Partnerships Formed With Peers and Community Members
☐ Assessing/Evaluation My Own Progress
☐ Duration and Intensity: Time Spent Towards Achieving Goals

2. Check any and all elements that you feel helped you gain a better understanding of classroom concepts:

☐ Meaningful Service Activities
3. Check any and all elements that you feel helped you make curriculum connections with real world environment skills and application:

- Meaningful Service Activities
- Curriculum Connections to Real World Practice
- Reflection of My Experiences
- Diversity, Mutual Respect and Getting Along with Others
- My Voice in Planning and Implementing
- Partnerships Formed With Peers and Community Members
- Assessing/Evaluation My Own Progress
- Duration and Intensity: Time Spent Towards Achieving Goals

4. What if any, elements helped you to gain a better connection to your community?

- Meaningful Service Activities
- Curriculum Connections to Real World Practice
- Reflection of My Experiences
- Diversity, Mutual Respect and Getting Along with Others
- My Voice in Planning and Implementing
- Partnerships Formed With Peers and Community Members
- Assessing/Evaluation My Own Progress
- Duration and Intensity: Time Spent Towards Achieving Goals

5. What if any, elements contributed to you feeling more empowered?

- Meaningful Service Activities
- Curriculum Connections to Real World Practice
- Reflection of My Experiences
- Diversity, Mutual Respect and Getting Along with Others
- My Voice in Planning and Implementing
- Partnerships Formed With Peers and Community Members
- Assessing/Evaluation My Own Progress
- Duration and Intensity: Time Spent Towards Achieving Goals

6. What if any, elements helped you to gain more respect for others:
Meaningful Service Activities
Curriculum Connections to Real World Practice
Reflection of My Experiences
Diversity, Mutual Respect and Getting Along with Others
My Voice in Planning and Implementing
Partnerships Formed With Peers and Community Members
Assessing/Evaluation My Own Progress
Duration and Intensity: Time Spent Towards Achieving Goals

7. What part of the experience helped you to gain greater knowledge about career and the workplace?

Meaningful Service Activities
Curriculum Connections to Real World Practice
Reflection of My Experiences
Diversity, Mutual Respect and Getting Along with Others
My Voice in Planning and Implementing
Partnerships Formed With Peers and Community Members
Assessing/Evaluation My Own Progress
Duration and Intensity: Time Spent Towards Achieving Goals

8. Which elements were most important to me while completing my service-learning project:

Please check and rate: 1- Not Important 2-Somewhat Important 3-Important 4-Very Important

- Amount of prep time for this project. 1 2 3 4
- My student voice in planning and implementing my project. 1 2 3 4
- My involvement and role in this project. 1 2 3 4
- Clear academic goals established and connected to my service-learning activities. 1 2 3 4

1- Not Important 2-Somewhat Important 3-Important 4-Very Important

- Service-learning activities that re-enforced my student learning through real world application. 1 2 3 4
- Service-learning activities that helped me to address real world problems and issues. 1 2 3 4
- Reflection activities that helped to make deeper connections and provide greater meaning. 1 2 3 4
- Working with my peers and community members towards a common goal. 1 2 3 4
Section C: 21st Century Skills: Your Perceptions

9. What if any, new skills have you gained through this experience?

- Check those new skills you acquired, and
- Rate the degree of importance to you and your future
- Using a 1-4 scale of importance, 1 being not at

Check and Indicate Degree of Importance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Not at All</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Extremely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration and Teamwork</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity and Imagination</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility and Adaptability</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility and Adaptability</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global and Cultural Awareness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Literacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic Literacy and Citizenship</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral and Written Communication</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Responsibility and Ethics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Literacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity and Inquisitiveness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Preparation Skills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-evaluative and Assessment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Analysis</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SECTION D: Making a Difference to Community and Self

Please answer each question according to how you perceive yourself in relation to the question. Degree of Agreement, 1 Little and 4 Greatly:

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I made a difference in my community.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I helped address problems in my community.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I encouraged others to work on community problems.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students my age can do things to make the world better.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can make a difference in my neighborhood or town.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel responsible for helping others.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I intend to volunteer or be involved in my community throughout my life.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please rate yourself by checking the category that best describes your answer. How good did I become at the following:

- Designing and implementing a service-learning project. __________
- Finding resources to help me with my service-learning project. __________
- Leading a group project. __________
- Understanding what other people are trying to say. __________
- Getting others to listen to my ideas. __________
- Speaking in front of groups of people. __________
- Accomplishing goals. __________
- Seeing consequences of actions. __________
- Finding information to solve problems. __________
- Solving problems. __________
- Using what I learn in the classroom to solve problems in my community. __________
- Finding out more about our community and how it works. __________
Which learning and service activities were most meaningful and provided the greatest personal satisfaction? Please check all that apply.

☐ Activities working in the community with new people and my classmates
☐ Working in the classroom environment with my peers
☐ Preparing and planning for my project
☐ Research on my community
☐ Learning about myself
☐ Learning about myself and connections to my community
☐ Project work
☐ Community Presentation
☐ Community Speakers
☐ Direct Interaction with Community Members

**Reflection Experiences:**

Check which reflection activities provided the most meaning to what you learned and what you experienced in the community:

☐ Class Discussions
☐ Journal Entries
☐ Class work
☐ Class Projects
☐ Research
☐ Other, please state: ___________________

About Your Project: Please circle all that apply.

Who chose the problem you worked on? Check all that apply:

Teacher  Principal  Community Partner
You, other Students and Teacher  Adult Volunteers  Other ________________

**SECTION E: STUDENT OUTCOME SECTION**

For each item below, circle the number that best describes the degree to which you feel you achieved the listed learning outcome.

On a 1-to-4 scale, 1 indicates the lowest amount and 6 indicates the highest amount of that learning outcome.

**CRITICAL THINKING**

By the end of your service-project, as a student participant, you were able to know how to:
COMMUNICATION

By the end of your service-learning project, as a student participant you could:

Not at all – Somewhat – Moderately – Definitely

☐ identify problems in the community 1 2 3 4
☐ uncover the root cause of a problem 1 2 3 4
☐ generate alternative solutions to a problem 1 2 3 4
☐ evaluate information for possible biases 1 2 3 4

CAREER AND TEAMWORK

By the end of your service-learning project, as a student participant you:

Not at all – Somewhat – Moderately – Definitely

☐ have strong leadership skills 1 2 3 4
☐ are able to work well in teams and with others 1 2 3 4
☐ have a realistic understanding of the daily responsibilities involved in the jobs or careers in which they are interested. 1 2 3 4
☐ obtain the skills to work in a career that will make contributions to society. 1 2 3 4

CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

By the end of your service-learning project, as a student participant you:

Not at all – Somewhat – Moderately – Definitely

☐ think that people should find time to contribute to their community. 1 2 3 4
☐ be concerned about local community issues. 1 2 3 4
☐ plan to improve their neighborhoods in the near future. 1 2 3 4
believe they can have a positive impact on local social problems.

GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING AND CITIZENSHIP

By the end of your service-learning project, as a student participant you:

Not at all – Somewhat – Moderately – Definitely

- be comfortable working with cultures other than their own.
- know about different cultures of people in other countries.
- understand that there are different perspectives on international issues.
- recognize that what they do in their jobs or work might have implications beyond the local community.

ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

By the end of your service-learning project, as a student participant you:

Not at all – Somewhat – Moderately – Definitely

- understand how the subject matter of this class can be used in everyday life.
- understand how the subject matter of this class can be used in everyday life.
- learn better when classes include hands-on activities.
- see the connection between their academic learning and real-life experiences.
- be committed to finishing their educational goals.

Short Answer Questions (Please reply in as much detail as possible)

1. What were the most meaningful events or activities of your high quality service-learning experience?
2. What experiences allowed you the opportunity to best transfer what you had learned in the classroom to the community setting?

Thank you for your participation and opinion.
Appendix C

Focus Group Protocol

Group Interviewees: Students in Class A, B or C, Student Numbers, for example, (f5 means female, student number assigned 5

Focus Group Interviewer: Michele M. Rivers Murphy

Date: ____________________________

Location of Interview: ____________________________

Introduction

Part I. Introductory Question Objectives (3-5 minutes): Build rapport, describe the study, answer the questions, review and sign IRB protocol, audio taping already signed by parent/guardian.

Introductory Protocol

• You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about their high quality service-learning experience this year at your high school.

• This research focuses on the student perspective of service-learning, specifically how they are affected by their experience and gaining a better understanding of what they perceive as the most purposeful, meaningful and relevant elements, events and activities.

• Through this study, we hope to gain more insight as to what students perceive as the most important components of their quality learning experience.

• This information may help to provide more consistent and quality programming for your school and other similar schools.

• Your responses are important and we want to capture everything you have to say so I would like to audio tape our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only your assigned student number will be used and not your name.

• There are no right or wrong answers, please answer the questions according to your own opinions, feelings, thoughts or perceptions. Your feedback is valued.

Interview Questions:

1. How would you describe your high quality service-learning experience, in a few sentences or more?

2. What were the most rewarding tasks, events or activities of your experience? How so?
   a. What if anything, did you learn about yourself during the rewarding parts of your service-learning process?
3. What were the most challenging tasks of your experience? How so?
   a. What if anything, did you learn about yourself during the challenging parts of your service-learning process?
4. What elements, activities or events of your service-learning experience provided the best opportunity for you to transfer the knowledge and skill you learned in the classroom to the real world environment? Please explain.
5. What was the most meaningful and purposeful (beneficial) component(s) of your service-learning experience?
   a. If at all, how did this experience change you? Please describe.

Traditional Classroom Learning in comparison to Service-Learning:

6. Which of the two teaching approaches offers more relevancy to the real world environment? Please give an example.
7. Does applying what you learned in the classroom to the real world environment help or hinder your overall learning in anyway, and if so, how?
8. What if any, new skills did you learn during your service-learning project?
9. Did your service-learning experience affect you in a positive or negative way? Please explain.
10. In what ways do you feel you have changed during your service-learning experience?

Research will follow Creswell’s (2007, pp. 134-138) Protocol for Group Interviews (recording information collected during observations):

Preliminary Preparations:
- Select site (both classroom and community)
- Seek permission (to gain access to Site, prescheduled times determined with teacher)
- Determine at site (who, what, when and how long of observation)
- Determine type of observation and role of observer (nonparticipant for all observations)
- Teacher will introduce researcher (general explanation of why researcher is present and will in classroom or community throughout project)

Design Method for Recording Field Notes (Observational Protocol):
- Both Descriptive and Reflective (experiences, hunches, reactions etc.) will be used for Researcher’s Field Notes, including a divided page with one column for descriptive notes (description of activities and chronology of activities) and another column for reflective notes (process, reflection of activities and summaries/themes).
Audio taping and videotaping (Use District Permission Form) will be used to further verify and review student discussions and presentations.

Safeguarding of Student Observational Information:

- All field notes will transferred to researcher’s secure (password protection) software on personal computer.
- All students will be identified by his or her pre-assigned number (numerical coding system) instead of his or her student names in order to maintain confidentiality of student information and student anonymity.
- All tapes will be destroyed after thesis is complete, software will be maintained in accordance with IRB standards, 3 months after completion of thesis.

Description of Site (Classroom or Community):

- Length of Observation
- Date and Time of Observation
- Physical Environment (layout)
- Social Environment
- Participants

Description of Event/Activity:

- Types of learning activities
- Teacher’s teaching style (Facilitative or Shared)
- Use of Materials/Resources
- Student Responses, Interactions and Involvement