SERVICE-LEARNING AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL

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Abstract

This study has the goal of engaging students in their education through the use of service-learning by making learning purposeful and relevant, enhancing their academic self-concept, improving their personal growth, and in doing so, having the potential to reduce student dropouts from school. The national dropout rate is high with students dropping out of school for a variety of reasons. Some of the more prevalent reasons are that they find school to be uninteresting, non-engaging, and its’ purpose to be insignificant. (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore & Friant 2010). An inductive approach based on qualitative research was used to collect and analyze multiple sets of data during and after implementation of a service-learning program in the natural setting of a middle school in the northeast. The three research questions for the study are: (1) How do students, teachers, and administrators at a Blackstone Valley middle school perceive students’ participation in service learning impacting their learning and engagement in school? (2) As part of their service-learning experience, how did it impact their social and emotional growth as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators? And (3) How has the service-learning experience impacted students’ perceptions of school and their choice to continue? Data was collected through multiple methods including reflective journals, observations, questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews, and was analyzed based on students, teachers, and administrators’ perspectives and experiences as recorded through documents, observations, and focus groups. Categorizing and coding was used to sort data and evaluate whether implementing a service learning curriculum was effective in changing students’ perceptions and behaviors towards their education.

Keywords: service learning, engagement, dropout prevention, personal growth, educational perception.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Problem of Practice

Public schools face the challenge that many of their students don’t find learning relevant or engaging, thereby making the purpose of school insignificant to them. The problem of practice that was investigated is the role service-learning programs could take in making learning purposeful and relevant to students, improving their academic and personal growth, and potentially reducing student dropout rates from schools.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, approximately 9.4% of the student population is leaving school before they graduate (NCES, 2009). Massachusetts’ schools have a 2.5% drop out rate according to the most recent annual statistics published from the Massachusetts Department of Schools and Secondary Education (DESE) (http://www.doe.mass.edu).

Students dropout of school for a variety of reasons but some of the more prevalent are that they find school to be uninteresting, non-engaging, and its’ purpose to be insignificant (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore & Friant 2010). Because of this, students’ educational experiences fail to foster a sense of attachment or commitment to school (Bridgeland, et al, 2010). As a teacher, I have seen far too many students dropout of school who may have potentially gone on to do great things while making a significant contribution to our society. When I reflect back on my prior experience or experiences with students, one particular student came to mind; this student was a junior in high school with a relatively high grade point average. He was intelligent, creative, and full of potential. When he told me he was dropping out of school I asked him, Why? His basic answer was that school was boring and that he could make more money working full time. He and countless others need to be engaged in their education.
Service-learning, a form of experiential learning that combines academic coursework with some form of voluntary service provided to the community, is one such program that has proven to be a valuable practice which can have positive effects on student achievement, bring relevance to classroom instruction, and improve attendance while engaging students to stay in school longer (Manzo, 2008; Perkins-Gough, 2009). As stated by Kaye (2010), “Service-learning provides meaningful ways for students, teachers, administrators, and community agencies and members to move together with deliberate thought and action toward a common purpose that has reciprocal benefits” (p.2). In sum, service-learning can help students become more engaged, and help them develop a greater understanding of their civic responsibility, educational relevance, and benefits of school.

Deeley (2010), through a review of literature, found research indicating that service-learning through critical thinking and reflection may contribute to students’ personal development, have a positive impact on their interpersonal skills, and enhance their intellectual skills as they understand the connection between the information learned and their service experience. In addition, service-learning may improve students’ communication skills, social interaction, and self-esteem and bring meaning to their knowledge and learning.

The research and my own experience indicate not enough educational institutes are supporting the practices and implementation of an engaging service-learning curriculum as an effective means of improving students’ academic and personal growth and reducing the dropout rate. According to a report conducted by the Community Service-Learning Advisory Council to the Massachusetts Board of Education (2006), “nationally, nearly a third of all public schools and half of all high schools report the use of service-learning in classrooms” (p.4). This holds true for Massachusetts schools as well. Different factors may help explain this, for example, a
lack of knowledge about its potential benefits, lack of information about the overall characteristics of the implementation of a service-learning curriculum that makes it effective, fear of the unknown and budgetary restraints. The goal of this study is to foster understanding of ways to effectively incorporate a service-learning program into everyday educational practices in order to improve their relevance for students and in turn reduce the dropout rate.

**Significance**

According to the NCES (2009), there is a lifelong, devastating impact on students who drop out of school. The literature suggests that students drop out if they are bored, unable to see relevance in what they are learning, have poor behavior, have substantial absences from school, are not academically prepared and feel an inability to catch up. In addition, they have deviant affiliations, limited parental support, difficult if not dangerous environmental and socio-economical factors, and they experience insipid teaching, (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Wulsin, 2008; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Students who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed and on welfare. If they were employed, their average medium income would be approximately $24,000, $15,000 less than the income of high school graduates or students who went on to earn their General Educational Development (GED) certificate (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Balfanz, Fox, Bridgeland, & McNaught, (2009) report that many dropouts live in poverty, have poor health, low self-esteem, and are lacking 21st Century job skills. They are more likely to commit suicide and they account for the higher percentage of inmates in prison. They are also less likely to volunteer, participate in community projects, vote, and make up only 3% of actively engaged citizens (Balfanz, et al. 2009).

Dropping out of school also has a negative impact on society and has become a national crisis. Dropouts often have lower paying jobs or are unemployed, which results in them paying
less in payroll taxes, as well as income, and property taxes. In addition, they cost the nation approximately $260 billion in lost wages and tax revenue, and there is a $1.5 million fiscal gap in Massachusetts between college graduates and students who drop out of school (DESE, 2008). In addition, according to the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (IES, 2008), dropouts tend to rely on public welfare assistance, public housing, Social Security Disability Income, public health services such as Medicaid, and general relief. Many dropouts are incarcerated and this imposes high costs for the operation, maintenance, and administration of these facilities (IES, 2008). The magnitude of the dropout problem and its consequences highlight the significance of conducting research that contributes to address and reduce it in practice.

This research project investigated how the introduction of service-learning programs may contribute to this end. In addition, this proposed research project is significant at a local middle school and its future practices. In the past there was a brief opportunity to implement a service-learning program in the school involved in this study which showed positive results with its students. Now the opportunity presents itself to continue with the implementation and design as an effective way to engage students while helping them develop an understanding of the significance of school while benefiting academically, socially and emotionally. By developing a systematic research project that documents and assesses the process of design, implementation and revision of the school’s service-learning program will help to improve the practices of this middle school and the learning and engagement of its students. Additionally, it may provide significant information for school leaders to understand the need to create learning opportunities that reflect the environment of the student by allowing them to actively participate in and exercise their abilities in real life situations namely, via service-learning opportunities.
Maxwell (2005) states that it is important to justify research that can generate results by focusing on meeting a need or changing a situation. There is no easy or quick fix to reduce the number of students who drop out of school in a traditional school setting but by furthering the research in this area and continuing to design and implement an effective service-learning curriculum within our school, educators may meet the needs of our disconnected students and enhance their desire to learn. Implementing systemic changes by providing educational programs that creates positive engagement from students through a service-learning curriculum may be a step in the direction that contributes to transforming and improving our learning community’s practices.

The focus of this study consisted of a review of the literature regarding programs that have proven effective for reducing the dropout rate. More specifically, how service-learning curriculum can impact student engagement as well as student interest in school. By providing service-learning opportunities that pose real life situations with student participation, students who lack interest will make the connection and have the desire to complete their education.

**Practical and Intellectual Goals**

Maxwell (2005) states that practical goals are focused on meeting some need or changing some situation and are important for justifying research that can generate results. The practical goals for pursing this study had to do with how service-learning in a Blackstone Valley middle school has had a positive impact on student engagement in school. By furthering research in this area, instruction leaders may recommend service-learning as a practice collaborated within their curriculum and in doing so; educators may meet the need of our disconnected students and enhance their desire to learn.
Maxwell (2005) suggests that when doing a study, intellectual goals focus on understanding, gaining insight, or answering question that previously may have not been adequately addressed. With regard to this problem of practice that addresses the role of service-learning programs in engaging students and thereby helping to reduce the dropout rate, the intellectual goals are as follows:

1. To determine if students who are involved with service-learning opportunities, are more engaged and establish a commitment/connection to school.

2. To determine if service-learning curriculum might help to decrease the number of students who drop out of school.

It is imperative that the research and proposed literature investigation substantiate viewpoints that demonstrate that school districts that implement service-learning as part of their curriculum may see a reduction in their dropout rate. In doing so, information can be available to school leaders so they can create learning environments that reflect the needs of their student by allowing them to actively participate in and exercise their abilities in real life situations via service-learning opportunities. In addition, it is important for educators to take into account the unique difference between each student and design curriculum in ways that provide students with experiences that are immediately valuable and pertinent to their understanding. These experiences will help to shape the students’ cognition, attitudes, perception, and beliefs about the relevance of school and the importance of becoming contributing members of society.

**Research Questions and Goals**

The primary questions used to investigate the significance of a service-learning curriculum being used as a teaching practice to foster student engagement and having the potential to reduce student dropouts are:
1. How do students, teachers, and administrators at a Blackstone Valley middle school perceive students’ participation in service learning impacting their learning and engagement in school?

2. As part of their service-learning experience, how did it impact their social and emotional growth as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?

3. How has the service-learning experience impacted students’ perceptions of school and their choice to continue?

The problem of practice was to develop a greater understanding of how service-learning might contribute to students’ engagement in school and make learning more purposeful and relevant to the student.

To address this problem, this research project utilized an inductive qualitative study. The study relied on characteristics described by Creswell (2009) in conducting a qualitative study which consisted of research taking place in a natural school setting, myself as the researcher collecting data through multi methods based on student participants’ meanings from reflective journals, observations, focus groups, and interviews as well as teacher and administrator questionnaires. The information gathered was emergent, involved the use of a theoretical lens, and interpretive and holistic in nature.

**Limitations**

The small scale study involved service-learning practices and how they were designed and implemented and impacted students’ perspectives on engagement and their choice to stay in school. The implementation occurred in a 5-8 suburban middle school utilizing a teacher with professional status during the 2013-2014 school year. As a result, there were limitations with respect to generalizing the findings based on a small sampling of students as well as a potential
problem with an effective service-learning curriculum as it was fairly new in its implementation. Also, the length of the service learning course did not constitute a semester in length as recommended by Billig (2011). Every effort was made to minimize the potential Hawthorne Effect (Kember, 2003) based on the researcher’s involvement with the participants in the study.

Theoretical Framework

Based upon this problem of practice, two complementary theories were selected that substantiate a better understanding regarding the significance of increasing student engagement and thereby reducing the dropout rate through service-learning. These two theories were Experiential Learning and Service-Learning. Both theories call attention to the way students develop and process knowledge by means of experiences, in particular, doing and reflecting. They also emphasize the importance of ‘connecting’ the knowledge they are learning to real life experiences and situations. "Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand" (Confucius circa 450 BC). Providing students with educational experiences that allow for active involvement will create a greater understanding and in turn help them to become life long learners who understand the significance of education and their civic responsibility.

David Kolb and Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) places emphasis on the fact that learning styles are related to patterns of attitudes, individual thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. Learning is a person’s discovery of meaning through previous knowledge, perception, cognition, and experience. David Kolb’s theory of experiential learning highlights a model for learning that involves concrete experiences, reflective observations, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentations (Marion, 2001). Kolb’s thoughts were a refinement of the experiential
education as promoted by John Dewey, who believed that learning must begin with experience and the curriculum must coincide with students’ interests (Dewey, 1900).

Important aspects of Experiential Learning Theory are that students learn best when they can relate information given with actual experiences. According to Sheckley and Keeton (1997) Experiential Learning espouses that concrete experiences help students’ grasp information when students can reflect on those experiences and experiment with the ideas they are actually learning. It can provide a greater depth of information processing and in turn, a greater impact on student learning. Students need to develop an understanding and be given opportunities to grow and modify their thinking in order to echo their understanding in real world situations and circumstances.

Through the use of Experiential Learning Theory, this research was centered on exploring educational practices that provide students with the opportunity to be involved with real life problems and situations where they can develop a deeper appreciation of their capacity to be contributing members of society. “With structured opportunity to reflect, describe, discuss, and construct meaning from the experience, learners have the potential to develop more complex understanding and more comprehensive intellectual functioning” (Scales, et al, 2006). Experiential Learning also helps educators develop practices that allow students to become engaged in knowledge and experiences being offered, reflect on that knowledge and experiences, act constructively by reciprocating their knowledge into the community, and in turn, develop into productive members of society.

**Service-Learning Theory and Dewey**

Service-Learning Theory as a teaching tradition complements Experiential Learning and John Dewey’s educational and social philosophy as it shares a similar philosophy of developing
student knowledge through active participation. Dewey’s sensible philosophy ties knowledge with experience, students with society, and action with reflection.

“Dewey believed 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. This means that acquisition as well as application of knowledge is dependent on the context, a key element of which is the interaction in the situation. The purpose of the interaction is to derive learning from experience…” (Giles & Eyler, 1994, p.79).

Service-Learning integrates instruction with significant community involvement that must be reflected upon in order to enrich the learning experience and strengthen the importance of obtaining knowledge while fostering civic responsibility (Giles, 1991).

Service-Learning encourages educational programs to make learning experiences relevant to student’s daily lives. It cultivates critical reflection skills, the ability to problem solve, and the ability to synthesize information. Service-Learning is a primary example of experientially engaging students in shared inquiry, meaningful decision making, and integration of class work and community life. Billig’s (2004) extensive review with regard to service-learning research found that students that participate in service-learning generally develop greater school engagement, have better attitudes towards school, better attendance, an increase in problem solving skills as well as in their overall academic achievement.

The aspects of Service-Learning that were found to be most pertinent are the fact that it connects information with relevance; it can help keep students more cognitively engage in school and remain on track academically. According to this problem of practice, this is crucial to solving the problem of students feeling bored, not being able to understand the significance of
obtaining an education, and not being academically engaged. Students who participate in structured programs that relate schooling to real life situations can achieve higher levels of educational attainment (Bridgeland, et al, 2010). Service-Learning also helps with student academic improvement, higher order thinking skills, the development of important personal and social skills (Chinien, C. and Boutin, F. 2001) that may in turn lead to avoiding deviant affiliation, and it helps develop stronger ties to school, community, and society.

**Theories as a framework**

While there are relationships and connections between these two theories, they also are different in that Experiential Learning focuses on the learning process of the individual whereas Service-Learning is a form of experiential learning that focuses on integrating meaningful community service with teaching, learning, and reflecting.

Both theories when working together can meet the needs of students by providing instruction that is more effective in context of meaning, can draw from a student’s prior knowledge as well as past and current experiences, that allows for collaboration with peers and community members, that allows for critical and creative thinking all while helping students make a connections that holds valued meaning.

By addressing and utilizing information informed by both theories; Experiential Theory to provide insight into fostering the relevance for students and the need for educational success and Service-Learning Theory which claims to be an effective practice that positively impact students’ self-esteem and academic achievement through the connection of everyday life situations, strengthens the belief that there is a link between the characteristics of students who feel committed and connected to school with students who have been involved with service learning programs.
Chapter II: Literature Review

This study and a review of the current literature strongly suggest that service-learning increases student engagement. Further investigation of the literature on student dropout indicates that a primary reason students stay in school is because of high engagement. Therefore, it was critical to understand the relationship between student learning, student engagement, and dropout prevention. This research focuses on scholarly literature for further information specific to the research questions and problem of practice. The following bodies of literature were investigated in order to develop a better understanding of the problem of practice and the theories that relate to it: service-learning characteristics, student engagement, and dropout prevention. These bodies of literature helped to guide the study by further exploring research questions and developing a deeper understanding of academic and personal growth as it relates to service-learning.

Service-Learning

There has been empirical evidence that demonstrates that service-learning enhances social and emotional development and fosters academic growth in students (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007; Deeley, 2010). So what is service-learning? “Service-learning has been defined in a variety of ways such as: Service-learning is an educational approach that uses community service as a way of helping students master academic content” (Billing, 2011, p.8). The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in its 1999 National Student Service-Learning and Community Service Survey defined service learning as “curriculum-based community-service that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities” (Skinner and Westat, 1999). The Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform (1993:71) defined service-learning in four ways:
1. A method by which young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet the actual needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community,

2. A method that is integrated into the young person’s academic curriculum or provides structured time for a young person to think, talk, or write about what he/she did and saw during the actual service activity,

3. A method that provides young people with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities, and

4. A method that enhances what is taught in the school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of sense of caring for others.

These definitions reflect both theories, for Dewey, “learning occurs through an interaction between the learner and the environment. Learning is active, not passive; the learner creates his or her own knowledge through such interactions” (Dewey, 1938) and for Kolb who believes that learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb: 1984). Service-learning is concerned with meaningful learning for students through a multidisciplinary approach; learning from experience, reflective activities, citizenship and involvement with the community. Effective characteristics of service-learning programs in enhancing student’s social and emotional development and their academic growth need to have quality standards and indicators. According to Billig (2011) when implemented well, service-learning has the potential to increase student academic engagement, civic engagement, and social and personal development.
In order for service-learning to be effective, some basic characteristics that address this type of learning need to be implemented: “authentic learning goals, response to community needs, youth decision-making, and analytic reflection” (Kwak, Shen, & Kavanaugh, 2002, p. 190). Findings from the Community Service-Learning Advisory Council to the Massachusetts Board of Education (2006), the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (1999), the National Service-Learning Clearing House (NSLC), and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) further enhance the belief that in order for service learning to be considered an effective practice, its characteristics also need to include student participating in the design of the service and regular reflection and analysis. In addition, Kaye (2010) found that according to the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) successful service-learning experiences need to have meaningful service (actively engages students in significant and personally relevant service activities), service needs to be linked to curriculum, students need to be exposed to diversity, they need to develop partnerships, progress monitoring by questioning if their service mattered or made a difference, and duration and intensity needs to reflect a quality experience.

Billig (2011) further states that the following six components of service-learning must be met: investigation, planning, action, reflection, demonstration, and celebration. Students can become involved in the investigation process through the collection of data to discover a community need. Planning involves cooperative learning that addresses the community need by problem solving and thinking about possible solutions including, who will participate, what is their role, and how will the solution be implemented. Once the need and solution are thoroughly analyzed and considered, the action by the students needs to take place with reflection transpiring throughout the entire service learning experience. By reflecting and using higher
order thinking skills, students can develop a better understanding of the meaning of their experience and this can be done either verbally, written, or a combination of both. Demonstration involves the active display of knowledge and skills the students learned from the service-learning activity. This includes the measured outcomes of their efforts. Lastly, celebrate what has been accomplished through their efforts.

In addition to the characteristics and components of an effective service-learning curriculum mentioned above, duration, link to curriculum, and authentic learning also play an important role of a service-learning program which must also be addressed. According to the National Youth Leadership Council (2008), there is no set time that service programs need to be implemented. The main consideration is not the duration of time but rather the time needed to create learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate, personally relevant, involve interesting and engaging activities, are relatable, and address the community needs through the desired and achieved learning outcomes.

Service-learning is an instructional strategy that links instructional goals with curriculum based standards. Research regularly demonstrates the positives effects of service-learning linking curriculum to activities (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005). A strong connection between specific learning goals and the correlation of content standards helps students to understand the academic connection, problem solve, and to organize and scaffold their learning. In doing so, students learn how to transfer knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to a community setting and recognize the relevance.

The Corporation for National and Community Service (2006) found that service-learning provides students with authentic learning by providing a strong ownership in the planning, decision making, implementing, and evaluating of their service-learning experience. They feel
empowered when identifying a problem and discovering ways to address said problem. A learning environment is created that supports trust through open communication and ideas. “Giving students more opportunities for active participation and decision making is another factor that has strong empirical support in the literature on how people learn” (Billig, 2011).

When all of these characteristics and components are implemented, and students are given the opportunity to discuss, write, and compare, they can develop the ability to think about their learning and understand how their experience relates to the lesson(s) learned.

**Student Engagement**

Authors as early as John Dewey (1900) and as recent as Marion Terry (2001) has informed us that student engagement is an important element for success. Learn and Serve, America’s National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2007) reported that research conducted by RMC Research Corporation (2003) found that students who participate in high quality service-learning experiences normally become more engaged in learning as shown by increased motivation, attendance, academic success, and positive attitudes towards learning. According to Billig (2002), when students are provided with learning opportunities that are relevant to student’s lives through meaningful activity their engagement affects them in multiple optimistic ways more specifically, personal-social development, academic achievement, citizenship, and career awareness. Astin and Sax (1998) determined that “service-learning represents a powerful vehicle for enhancing student development during the undergraduate years” (p.262).

According to Marks (2000) student engagement has been defined by various researchers as students’ involvement with school, which includes their investment, interest, and efforts, as well as their understanding, emotion involvement, and their motivation to learn. “Engagement is presumed to be malleable, responsive to contextual features, and amenable to environmental
change” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris 2004). Research literature has found that engagement has been viewed to contain three separate components: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Lippman & Rivers, 2008). Behavioral engagement consists of a student’s effort, attention, and participation. According to Fredricks, et al (2004), “it includes involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out” (p.60). Emotional engagement involves efficacy, interest, identifying with school, having feelings of belonging and value. According to Fredricks, et al (2004), “it encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influence willingness to do the work” (p.60). Lastly, cognitive engagement includes investment, effort, strategy, and overall willingness to learn. As stated by Fredricks, et al (2004), “cognitive engagement includes flexibility in problem solving, preference for hard work, and positive coping in the face of failure” (p.64). This study focused on student engagement as a whole because all aspects of a student’s being can affect their desired level of engagement and engagement is an important factor to students’ academic achievements and their human development.

According to Schmidt, Marks, and Derrico (2004) one of the key factors associated with student engagement is active and collaborative learning. Hu and Kuht (2002) suggest that students feel connected to school by the quality of their efforts dedicated to their education and purposeful educational activities that in turn meet their desired outcomes. Bridgeland, Dubulio & Wulsin (2008) highlighted findings from a national survey of 807 students and found that eighty-one percent believed that schools should offer more real-world learning experiences, such as internships and service-learning. Seventy-eight percent wanted courses to be more relevant to
their future while seventy-seven percent believed classes should involve more hands-on activities. Payne & Edwards (2010) found that engagement is present when students are able to make the connection between what they’ve learned in the classroom to something real and then applying that knowledge through service, students bond to something bigger than themselves; it becomes a real world connection. This type of learning experience engages students while providing them with relevance that they may not see in the standard curriculum.

According to the National Research Council (2003) there is positive impact on engagement and academic performance when students have a choice to work on something of personal interest, when they are encouraged to express their desired outcomes, and when they find value in helping their community. Setting goals, monitoring and assessing their efforts all while connecting their goals with a sense of self, makes their understanding more attractive and can heighten their engagement and persistence.

Greene, (2004) believes that different learning strategies results in different learning outcomes, thereby affecting student interests, motivation, engagement, and achievements in learning. Strategies that provide meaningful cognitive processing approaches that involve self-efficacy, goals, and that produce personal value should include the following practices that: a. encourage students to make choices and decisions regarding their learning; b. provide recognition based on student individual effort and progress; c. use group activities for students to collaboratively work together on assignments and develop a sense of belonging; d. conduct evaluations that assesses student performance; and e. allow for time on task and the student’s needs. In close correlation is Newmann’s theory that engagement in academic learning will be enhanced in classrooms where tasks: a. are authentic; b. provide opportunities for students to assume ownership of their conception, execution, and evaluation; c. provide opportunities for
collaboration; d. permit diverse forms of talents; and e. provide opportunities for fun (Newmann, 1991; and Newmann et al, 1992).

These strategies, along with the components associated with student engagement, whether considered individually or combined as a whole, are instrumental in the overall improvement of student achievement. This combined with the characteristics of an effective service-learning program used as an instructional method has the potential to increase student learning through higher behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement as well as increased motivation through real-life connections to content (Soslau and Yost, 2007).

**Student Dropouts**

Too many students drop out of school. Societal, economic, and equity concerns all point to the need for preventative measures to assist in decreasing the number of students who do not graduate. Payne and Edwards (2010) report that nearly one in three high school students do not graduate. A student drops out of school every 26 seconds which equates to approximately 7,200 students per year leaving school before they ever have a chance to graduate and ultimately costing the country billions of dollars in lower tax revenues, greater public assistance and health care, and higher rates of crime (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Research has determined that there are many factors that contribute to students dropping out of school such as poor academic performance, low socioeconomic status, students who display behavioral problems, find school uninteresting, insignificant and non-engaging. The focus of this review was on the disengaged student.

All too often, this choice to drop out is determined sometime within the middle school years. According to Marks (2000) student disengagement from school emerged as a problem in the mid 1980s when research indicated that teacher were discouraged with an extensive and
fragmented curriculum and a transmission model of instruction which produced meekness and boredom among students. Bridgeland, Dubulio & Wulsin (2008) found that “too many high school students feel disconnected from their school, and this lack of connection is a primary factor in their failure to graduate” (p. 10). Payne and Edwards (2010) reported the major reason students’ dropout of school was that classes were not interesting. Some felt a sense of hopelessness for the future while others lacked a sense of engagement or enthusiasm for school. Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison (2006) found that a little less than half of the students they surveyed and who dropped out of school did so because they were bored, they felt their classes were not interesting and tended to gravitate towards other students who were not interested in school. Over 50% cited not feeling motivated or inspired to work hard. They felt teachers should have held higher expectations and made more of an individual connection. When their participants were asked what schools didn’t do, responses were: “not making school interesting…school was boring, nothing I was interested in...they make you take classes in school that you’re never going to use in life.” Other research suggests that students are more likely to drop out when they feel they don’t have a connection or support from their teachers, school, and peers and they don’t see the relevance.

We have learned that the primary reason students drop out of school is caused from some measure of school disengagement. Some characteristics of students who drop out can be associated with the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive disengagement students’ display. As mentioned early, student behavioral engagement deals will student participation, work involvement, and conduct. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris (2004) reported that students, who are behaviorally disengaged, do less homework, exert less effort, participate less in school activities, and have more behavioral problems, cut class, skip school, have been suspended, and
have been retained. They are more likely to have poor attendance, disruptive to the school environment, and exhibit school failure and are more likely to drop out of school. When students are disengaged emotionally, referring to their (interests, values, and emotions), from school they feel an alienation or estrangement from school and social situation. They don’t feel that connection to school or their peers. They don’t find school interesting and in turn have negative attitudes towards school and they too have the potential to drop out of school. Finn’s (1989) participation-identification model on engagement and disengagement and the long-term effects on students behavior both behaviorally and emotionally show that lack of behavioral engagement can lead to poor academic achievement which in turn can lead to a lack of school-wide participation also known as emotional disengagement. Both behavioral and emotional disengagement can result in low academic success and the potential for student drop out. As for a student’s cognitive disengagement (motivation, effort, and strategy) I have not found any research that correlates cognitive engagement, as it stands independently, with students’ desire to ultimately drop out of school.

A review of the current literature concerning dropouts has brought to light many ideas, theories, and strategies to assist with the national dropout crisis. Lack of engagement, interest, motivation, and connection all adversely affect student achievement and initiates a downward spiral that may lead to dysfunctional school behavior and the potential for students dropping out of school. The focus of this researcher was the hope of shedding light on practices, namely, service-learning, as a means to engaging students and helping them see the relevance in academic achievement and finishing schools. To promote student engagement and achievement and potentially decrease the dropout rate, schools need to implement strategies and practices that are designed to reshape how students experience school. Service-learning is one such practice
that can engage students with a sense of belonging and value and help them make the connection with school and its relevance. It can increase participation which in turn can lead to higher achievement, academic success while being developmentally responsive. Meade & Rudow (2009) reported that “the causes of dropping out, and the benefits service-learning aims to bestow, can be framed in terms of the absence or development of protective factors. These factors include opportunities to engage with caring adults; to build career goals and skills; to grapple with intellectual and civic challenges; to develop a set of academic, civic and career skills, including self-efficacy, communication, organization, empathy, leadership; and high expectations (p.22).” Basically, active, authentic learning is the goal of service-learning and an effort in preventing students from dropping out.

Research has also indicated that increased student engagement has a positive effect on lowering the dropout rate. “Engagement is associated with positive academic outcomes, including achievement and persistence in school; and it is higher in classrooms with supportive teachers and peers, challenging and authentic tasks, opportunities for choice, and sufficient structure” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Schools need to make learning more relevant; teachers need to learn to structure curriculum that is more interesting and engaging. According to Bridgeland, et al (2006) improving teaching and curriculum to make school more relevant, engaging, and providing opportunities for real-world, experiential learning enhances the connection between students and school. In addition, smaller learning communities with more individualized instruction, high expectations, challenged and different approaches instead of the one-size fits all model in an effort to motivate students to want to learn and counter students’ boredom and lack of interest in school, which are all factors contributing to students wanting to drop out of school. Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmier, & Benson (2006) found that
creating school reform that restructures a student’s school experience through the opportunities for meaningful participation, promotion of closer student-teacher relationships, creating a ‘fit’ for students to feel connected, authentic instruction that connects subject matter with real-world problems, having the opportunity to partner with their peers and community, and developing a greater connection to the community with the use of practices associated with service-learning all contribute to increased student engagement. By increasing student engagement, students demonstrated gains in communication skills and self-efficacy, awareness of community needs, the development of higher levels of academic success with lower levels of risky behaviors that are contributing factors to students dropping out of school.

Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) reported that the national status dropout rate is unreasonably high with students dropping out of school for a variety of reasons, more specifically feeling disengaged from school, not finding relevance, and its purpose being insignificant. There was a consensus among researches that schools that offer programs that offer authentic, relevant learning experiences lead to increased student engagement (Billig, 2002; Deeley, 2010; Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Faint, 2010; Giles & Eyler, 1994). Billig (2002, 2004, 2011) and Billig, Root, & Jesse (2005) found that one such program that provides curriculum that involves students in the construction of knowledge, ownership of the cognitive work, and authentic connection to real-world learning through partnerships with the community is service-learning. For that reason, an examination of student perception of engagement while participating in a service-learning based classroom enlightened this body of literature and potentially will provide educators with programs and practices that will engage students and increase their academic achievement and prospective of lowering the dropout rate.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The rationale of this chapter is to describe the research design and methodology of this inductive qualitative research study conducted in a rural Blackstone Valley middle school. This study assessed the role of service-learning programs in making learning purposeful and relevant, improving students’ academic and personal growth, and thereby, its’ potential to reduce student dropout from schools. This chapter includes (a) a statement of the problem, (b) the primary research questions, (c) the research design, (d) participants, (e) data collection, (f) data analysis, (g) validity, and (h) protection of the human subjects.

Statement of the Problem

Public schools face the challenge that many of their students don’t find learning relevant or engaging, thereby making the purpose of school insignificant to them. The national status dropout rate is unreasonably high. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, approximately 9.4% of the student population is leaving school before they graduate (NCES, 2009). Massachusetts’ schools have a 2.5% drop out rate and can be as high as 48.3 in some inner city districts according to the most recent annual statistics published from the Massachusetts Department of Schools and Secondary Education (DESE) (http://www.doe.mass.edu).

Students drop out of school for a variety of reasons but some of the more prevalent reasons are that they find school to be uninteresting, non-engaging, and its’ purpose to be insignificant. Because of this, students’ educational experiences fail to foster a sense of attachment or commitment to school (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore & Friant 2010).

Service-learning, which is a form of experiential learning that combines academic coursework with some form of voluntary service provided to the community, is one such
program that has proven to be a valuable practice which can have positive effects on student achievement, has shown to bring relevance to classroom instruction, and has improved attendance while engaging students to stay in school longer (Manzo, 2008; Perkins-Gough, 2009). “Service-learning provides meaningful ways for students, teachers, administrators, and community agencies and members to move together with deliberate thought and action toward a common purpose that has reciprocal benefits” (Kaye, 2010). Namely, helping students become more engaged, develop a greater understanding of their civic responsibility, educational relevance, and benefits of school.

Deeley (2010), through a review of literature, found research indicating that service-learning through critical thinking and reflection, may contribute to students’ personal development, have a positive impact on their interpersonal skills, and enhance their intellectual skills as they understand the connection between the information learned and their service experience. In addition, service-learning may improve students’ communication skills, social interaction, and self-esteem and bring meaning to their knowledge and learning.

Based upon the aforementioned, not enough educational institutes are supporting the practices and implementation of an engaging service-learning curriculum as an effective means of improving students’ academic and personal growth and reducing the dropout rate. According to a report conducted by the community Service-Learning Advisory Council to the Massachusetts Board of Education (2006), “nationally, nearly a third of all public schools and half of all high schools report the use of service-learning in classrooms” this holds true for Massachusetts schools as well. Different factors may help explain this, for example, a lack of knowledge about its potential benefits, lack of information about the overall characteristics of the implementation of a service-learning curriculum that makes it effective, fear of the unknown and
possibly budgetary restraints. The goal of this study is to foster understanding of ways to effectively incorporate a service-learning program into everyday educational practices in order to improve the relevance for students and thus reduce the dropout rate.

**Research Questions**

1. How do students, teachers, and administrators at a Blackstone Valley middle school perceive students’ participation in service learning impacting their learning and engagement in school?

2. As part of their service-learning experience, how did it impact their social and emotional growth as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?

3. How has the service-learning experience impacted students’ perceptions of school and their choice to continue?

**Methodology**

The proposed research project will utilize an inductive qualitative research study which defined by Creswell, J. (2009) “as a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p.4). In an effort to investigate to what extent, if any, service-learning curriculum increases student engagement, the research relied on characteristics described by Creswell (2009) whereby “the process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (p.4). The approach utilizing qualitative information allowed for the data to be collected through multi methods consisting of observations, questionnaires, focus group interviews, and student reflective journals, which were based on student participants’ perspectives, meanings, and experiences. This method provided
information as to whether implementing a service-learning curriculum was effective in changing students’ perceptions, engagement, and behaviors towards their learning and how they identify with their overall education experiences.

**Site and Participants**

The research took place in a rural public middle school consisting of students in grades six through eight in the Blackstone Valley. The school serves approximately 467 students: 95.1% of the population being white in ethnicity, 0.6% percent Asian, 1.5% percent Hispanic, 0.9% percent African American, and 1.9% multi-raced and 23% on free and/or reduced lunch. Approximately eight percent of the students from this district’s high school dropped out of school in the 2011-2012 school year which is higher than the state average of 2.5%. Over the course of a quarter timeframe; this study involved approximately nineteen students enrolled in an English Language Arts Skill Building class that also integrates characteristics of effective service-learning practices. The student participants were randomly grouped into teams. The class was taught by a professional veteran status teacher who is familiar with and has incorporated service-learning characteristics into prior teaching experiences. Six teachers who witnessed the community component and three administrators completed questionnaires. The assistant principal, who is also the researcher, conducted all classroom observations and collected data through multi methods based on student participants’ meanings, involve the use of a theoretical lens, and were interpretive and holistic in nature. Table 1 provides the participating school’s demographic information.
**Enrollment based on Ethnicity, Gender, and Grade of participating school (2012-2013)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment by Ethnicity</th>
<th>% of School</th>
<th>% of District</th>
<th>% of State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>91.6</td>
<td>66.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Race, Non Hispanic</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment by Gender</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>933</td>
<td>489,289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>949</td>
<td>465,484</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment by Grade</th>
<th>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating School</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Demographic information retrieved from [http://profiles.doe.mass.edu](http://profiles.doe.mass.edu)

**Data Collection**

In order to utilize an inductive qualitative study as defined by Schmuck, (1997), “research specific school situations with a view toward improving practice” (p.42), consent was needed and obtained from all parties involved. First, a letter was sent to the superintendent of
schools explaining the study and requesting permission to conduct the research involving the teacher, students, and community members that will be involved with the health and wellness class and its service learning components (see Appendix A). Second, discussion and collaboration took place with the teacher reviewing the characteristics of an effective service-learning program including authentic learning goals, response to community needs, student decision-making, and analytic reflection and ways in which service-learning would be implemented into her health and wellness curriculum and the community members it will involve. Third, permission forms were sent to the parent and/or guardian of all the students involved in the study, explaining their participation in the service-learning experience and requesting consent for their child to participate (see Appendix B). Fourth, consent forms were provided to the students with an explanation of the study (see Appendix C). The researcher provided time for questions and answers regarding the students’ participation in the study and the expectations.

Once the consent forms had been received and the student consent forms were signed, student participants of the service-learning focused English Language Arts Skill Building class were placed in groups based on the number of students enrolled in the class.

Throughout the course, students were instructed to complete student reflective journals, as an aid to their reflection regarding the various components of their experience. According to Scales, et al (2006), “with structured opportunity to reflect, describe, discuss, and construct meaning from the experience, learners have the potential to develop more complex understanding and more comprehensive intellectual functioning” (p.42).

Observations were conducted from the researcher as a non-participant in the natural school setting throughout the service-learning focused course. Data was collected and noted
using descriptive (portraits of the participants, a reconstruction of dialogue, a description of the physical setting, accounts of particular events or activities) and reflective (researcher’s personal thoughts based on speculations, feelings, problems, and ideas) notes including date, place, and time of the event being observed (Creswell, 2009). Observations were conducted periodically while students were involved in the investigation of the problem that needs to be addressed, during the planning of a way or ways to fix or assist in the need, the action taken, including the reflection, demonstration, and celebration of their efforts. In addition, observations of student behaviors and their academic outcomes were also carefully viewed.

Interviews were conducted from all nineteen students on a volunteer basis. The interviews were based on a conversational approach in an effort to learn of the students’ perception of service-learning and how it relates to students and their engagement in school. Questions evolved from previous questions, responses, and observations by the researcher. Some questions were:

1. How do you perceive your participation in service-learning impacting your learning and engagement in school?
2. As part of your service-learning experience, how did it impact your social and emotional growth?
3. Does participating in service-learning impact your academic and personal growth at Blackstone Valley Middle School? If so, how?
4. Does participating in service-learning curriculum make you feel more connected and committed to their education? If so, why?
5. How did you perceive the service-learning program?
   a. Did you find it engaging?
b. What aspects of the program made it work or not work?

c. What parts of the program can be improved?

Each interview was transcribed and coded using a variety of coding methods. There were multiple approaches for coding qualitative data. “…coding is not just labeling, it is linking” (Saldana, 2009, p.8.) The input from the student interviews was helpful in learning how they perceive the practice of utilizing service learning as a means to their overall educational engagement.

Questionnaires were presented to teachers and administrators and they were asked to provide direct answers that demonstrated their understanding, values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding the authentic learning experiences created through the practices of service-learning (Saldana, 2009).

Data Analysis

According to Stringer (2007) the type of information acquired and how it was recorded and analyzed needs to be addressed. Of the two qualitative tools used, one consisted of a student reflective journal which the students maintained throughout the service learning infused course, while the other was based on focus groups interviews and observations by the researcher. Observations focused on participants and their actions/comments during class and activities associated throughout their authentic classroom learning and community service experience. Interviews were conducted and recorded with students who volunteered to participate. Open ended questions were used to enable participating students to describe and interpret experiences in their own terms while also providing opportunities to present their perspective on the issues discussed. The interview process was approximately 30 to 45 minutes in length and was recorded and transcribed by the researcher.
The researcher’s role was to collect data and look for underlying themes to emerge. Organization and preparation of the data followed by a detailed analysis using a descriptive coding process was conducted. The same coding method was used to analyze reflective journals, questionnaires, and interview questions in an effort to categorizing and sort data into related groups and/or categories. Said groups and categories were then analyzed to identify common words, themes, and descriptions.

The qualitative data collected through reflective journals, focus groups, questionnaires, and observations were explored using a combination of coding methods divided into two main sections. According to Saldana (2009) there are two distinct cycle methods with various options. “The First Cycle methods are those processes that happen during the initial coding of data…the Second Cycle methods involves analytical skills such as classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing, and theory building” (p.45).

During the first cycle of coding, in vivo, initial, and values coding was used. According to Saldana (2009) in vivo coding refers to the actual language used by the participants broken down into short word or short phrases. Initial coding breaks down data into distinct parts, allows for examination comparing similarities and differences. Values coding reflects a participants’ attitudes, beliefs, and values. These types of coding methods were valuable in obtaining the thoughts of the individual participants, the direction of the study and if additional information was needed, and helped to acquire a better understanding through the participants’ personal experiences.

During the second cycle of coding, pattern coding and theoretical coding was used. According to Saldana (2009), pattern coding helps to identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. It allows for the researcher to discover themes, relationships, and/or differences
between the responses of the participating groups. Theoretical coding was used to identify essential categories (Saldana, 2009). The data was coded to expose potential correlations between the theoretical frameworks and students’ perception of service-learning practices which in turn helped to render themes regarding student engagement and their potential to continue their education.

**Validity and Credibility**

This study focused on students and how they perceived their learning experience via service-learning and if this type of curriculum increases their engagement in school. The results of the study helped to identify possible correlations between service-learning curriculum, student engagement, and the potential for reducing the number of student dropouts. In an effort to make certain that the findings drawn from this study were valid, the researcher chose a process that would “ensure that the study will be accurate because the information draws on multiple sources of information, individuals, or processes” (Creswell, 2005, p. 252.)

It should be acknowledged that the effectiveness of the service-learning curriculum, as it was offered to the students in this study, was fairly new in its implementation. In addition, the findings in this study may not necessarily be widespread or generalized, as the study was fairly small and limited to one school. The service-learning course was also conducted in a shorter time frame than the typical service-learning characteristic recommendation for effectiveness, namely, a semester in length. This limited time may not have allowed for deeper meaning and understanding that may have occurred if given more time. There is also a risk that the findings and the interpretations could be biased because the researcher is also the assistant principal and author of this study. The Hawthorn effect should also be considered as this researcher attempted to keep her enthusiasm to a bare minimum but greater enthusiasm may have ensued.
Protection of Human Subjects

Participants were informed on the purpose of this research study. Participation was on a volunteer basis after all information had been provided and any and all questions had been answered. In addition, all participants received letters informing them of the purpose of this research study. The letters needed to be signed by their parents and/or guardians acknowledging their consent and allowing their son or daughter to participate in the study as they are all under the age of eighteen. All data collected was held in the strictest of confidence and no identifiable personal information was used or described in the study. All recordings were transcribed by and secured on the researcher’s personal computer. All recorded information will be destroyed in a timely manner after the data has been transcribed.

Schedule

The proposed research timeframe depicting data collection, analyzing, coding, and synthesizing is displayed in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Estimated Timeframe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentation, materials, student reflective journals, questionnaires,</td>
<td>9 weeks</td>
<td>September – November, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interviews, and various information/materials to support data collection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student reflective journals</td>
<td>9 weeks</td>
<td>September – November, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>9 weeks</td>
<td>September – November, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher questionnaires</td>
<td>1 week</td>
<td>October – November, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative questionnaires</td>
<td>1 week</td>
<td>October – November, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>October – November, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis, code, and</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>December - January</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Proposed timeframe for data collection, analyzing, coding, and synthesizing findings
Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings

Introduction

The objective of this inductive qualitative study was to develop a greater understanding of the role of service-learning practices in a rural public middle school. More specifically, the perceived impact of service-learning on student engagement, personal growth, and making learning purposeful and relevant, and in doing so, having the potential to reduce student dropout from school. The first section will provide a brief overview of incorporating service-learning practices within school-based curriculum. The second section will provide an overview of emerging themes from student reflective journals, questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews. The final section will present a summary of the main research findings.

The data was collected and reviewed to answer the three research questions developed at the inception of this study:

1. How do students, teachers, and administrators at a Blackstone Valley middle school perceive students’ participation in service learning impacting their learning and engagement in school?

2. As part of their service-learning experience, how did it impact their social and emotional growth as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?

3. How has the service-learning experience impacted students’ perceptions of school and their choice to continue?

Participants of this study consisted of 3 administrators, one administrator worked for the Blackstone Valley Middle School while the other two administrators worked within the district’s elementary school where the community outreach took place, 9 students, and 7 teachers. Six teachers were involved with the community based action project within their classrooms. One
teacher incorporated the service-learning practice into her curriculum creating learning experiences that were developmentally appropriate, personally relevant, involved interesting and engaging activities, were relatable, and addressed the community needs through the desired and achieved learning outcomes. The 19 students were part of an English Language Arts skill building class where they were required to read a book entitled “The Fat Boy Chronicles” which talks about a boy’s struggles with taunts and torments, basically the bullying he faced from his classmates. From this reading, students then researched the topic of bullying, how widespread it is not only nationwide but within their own school and school district. They took that knowledge, were placed in groups, and required to develop lessons that would be delivered to the 5th grade elementary students within their district. All the students participated in the student reflection journals, classroom observations, questionnaires, and focus group interviews. Teachers and administrators participated in the questionnaires only.

**Research Question #1: How do students, teachers, and administrators at a Blackstone Valley middle school perceive students’ participation in service learning impacting their learning and engagement in school??**

After analyzing the observation notes, student reflective journals, questionnaires for both administrators and teachers, and student focus group interviews, four themes emerged. Participating in a service-learning component (a) increased student engagement in their learning, (b) created a culture of active participants, (c) applied knowledge to real life concerns, and (d) enriched the students’ educational experience. Table 3 depicts the four themes that emerged from the various methods of data collection as stated above, including discussion from participating students, teachers, and administrators from the Blackstone Valley Middle and Elementary Schools. The slight distinction in the participating groups will also be addressed.
Table 3

*Themes Identified from Active Participants for Research Question #1.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Increased student engagement in their learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cultivated a culture of active participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Applied knowledge to real life concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Enriched the students’ educational experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Increased student engagement in their learning.** Administrators, teachers, and students, stated that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum helped to increase student engagement in their overall learning experience. All were clear to emphasize that when all the components of service-learning were integrated (investigation, planning, action, reflection, demonstration, and celebration) into the core concepts, the experience helped to motive and engage the students as they had an ultimate goal they wanted to understand and achieve. They were invested in the information being explored and had a desired outcome. For example, an administrator who was familiar with service-learning felt that “when we have an effective service learning curriculum, it increased engagement in both the learning and the culture.” He went on to say, “because service-learning is usually a schematic exercise in which students are involved in an experience, the kinesthetic value of the learning is that much more engaging.” Another administrator stated, “Service-learning has a positive impact on student engagement because students are active participants.”
From teachers’ viewpoints, not only did they all find this type of learning engaging, four of the seven teachers commented that service-learning motivates and engages students in a more meaningful way because learning was experienced outside the four walls of a classroom. In addition, the teacher who taught the class said:

Incorporating service-learning components into my wellness or ELA curriculum increased student engagement. I base my opinion on observations and comments from student from my recent experience in having the opportunity to offer service-learning to students. Students told me they were excited about their learning and they put lots of effort into their work. In addition, students who in the past would demonstrate that they were not motivated to learn and were disinterested, stepped up, stayed on task, and produced work that was exemplary.

All nineteen students agreed that service-learning incorporated into their curriculum helped them to be more engaged and motivated in their learning. For example, one student said, “I was more excited to come to class because of the type of learning we did, it was not just using a paper and pencil and writing down information.” A second student commented, “I felt more engaged with this type of learning because I didn’t just have to retain information and take a test. I was able to demonstrate what I learned to others.” A third student said, “it was not your traditional learning where you sit at your desk, take notes, study, and then take a quiz or test, that is not a fun way to learn. It was more engaging because you were involved in what you were learning but also in the way you were learning.” A fourth student mentioned, “I wanted to come to class because I knew that the information I was learning was going to help others.” Also, “I think I learned more because it was fun and I wanted to participate.” In addition, one student stressed:
This was personally one of my favorite classes because I wanted to learn. I was engaged in all aspects of the class and knew I had to do my part. I was able to pick my topic, be part of a group, problem solve situations, and showcase what I learned. I was being held accountable and therefore, I needed to be responsible. This experience was awesome.

The researcher’s six observations, which occurred throughout various aspects of the course, coincided with all of the aforementioned participants’ sentiments. Students were engaged, they were willing participants, sharing information, asking questions, being involved in group and class discussions, taking an interest not only in their information but information provided by their classmates. They were excited about going into the community and helping others. They demonstrated an eagerness to learn in order to retain the information and pass it on to others. Community members enforced the students’ engagement by their encouraging words of praise and appreciation for their efforts. All involved provided positive feedback for this service-learning experience.

**Cultivated a culture of active participants.** Administrators, teachers, and students, were clear to state that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum helped to increase student engagement by cultivating a culture of active participants. Information gathered demonstrated that students’ involved in service learning were willing to learn, to be involved, and invested in their education. For example, all three administrators commented on the participation amongst all the students. One administrator who was not familiar with service-learning but was on the receiving end of the students’ community outreach, stated: “I can’t believe how involved and knowledgeable each student was with their information and service component. Students were asking to come back at another time to help inform other grades.” Another administrator commented, “Students were active participants to our community.”
addition, the administrator who welcomed the community component within her school community stated:

Student engagement is two-fold: those who are active participants providing the instruction and those who are the recipients of the information. These types of opportunities encourage active participation for all students and benefit so many. I would like to see more teachers incorporate service-learning into their curriculum and experience just how active students can become in their learning.

From teachers’ perspective, all seven teachers made similar remarks regarding how they noticed active student participation from each student involved in the service-learning practice. The teacher who incorporated service-learning into her curriculum commented that “Students became active participants from the onset of the course through the reflection and celebration of their learning. They investigated a community concern; problem solved, created a lesson, and shared their knowledge with others.” One particular teacher who witnessed the community outreach echoed that “These students actively engaged their audience and kept them focused with their knowledge and activities.” Another teacher said, “I loved how the ‘teaching’ student participated in the teaching and encouraged their students to also participate and become actively involved in the learning.” In addition, one teacher emphasized that:

Not only does this type of learning create active participation from the students, it also helps the students think about a concept or topic at a much deeper level. It fosters students to be independent and creative thinkers. The students become active participants by reasoning, problem solving, and applying their knowledge to real world situations. This type of learning is a great way to get non-participating students to actively participate.
The students made several comments not only on their increased participation in the learning but also their desire to learn the information and impart their knowledge onto others. For example, one student said, “I liked the idea of being responsible for my own participation and only relying on the teacher when I had a question or needed clarification.” Another student stated, “I tended to try harder because I knew others were counting on me and I didn’t want to let them down.” In addition, a student commented that, “I participated more because it was more hands-on learning where I was responsible for learning the information and creating activities to help others learn.” Also, one student elaborated the fact that:

I wanted to participate more because I was responsible for learning information and to pass that information on to others. I had to develop a goal based upon a community need. People were counting on me. I needed to demonstrate what I had learned and in the process hopefully help others. This was very important to me.

During the researcher’s six observations, it was apparent that students were actively participating in their learning. Students were taking ownership of their thoughts and ideas. They were sharing information, collaborating amongst their group members and at times classmates when needed. They provided feedback and contributed to discussions. They worked through issues that arose and came up with alternative solutions. They gather information, studied important facts, demonstrated their knowledge, requested positive and negative feedback from their classmates, and made adjustments to their presentations. Each student and group of students developed different teaching strategies while emphasizing originality and authentic learning. One student in particular told me:

I feel that by actively participating I was given the opportunity to change the world and to tell people what is wrong. I can tell them how they can change it, what it is all about and
all that. The learning and then teaching to others was our responsibility. I believe that our class put a lot more effort into their learning and enjoyed it a lot more because we all participated and had to do our part.

Through the researcher’s observations, student participation was actively taking place. Students felt empowered to identify a problem and address said problem. The service-learning component helped to create a learning environment that supported and provided opportunities for active participation from the inception of a community concern through the planning, decision making, demonstration, reflection, and celebration of the students’ efforts and obtained knowledge.

**Applied knowledge to real life concerns.** Administrators, teachers, and students, stated that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum helped to increase student engagement in their overall learning experience by providing opportunities for students to apply their knowledge to real life concerns. It became evident that when students were responsible for discovering a community need and concern and developing a solution by educating community members with the information that they learned, that their engagement in their education increased. For example, one administrator stated, “When students can relate what they’ve learned to an actual community concern and apply a real life application of skills to address those concerns, it is not only engaging for students but supports their learning.” Another administrator commented, “It opened their eyes to community concerns that they may have been exposed to but didn’t know how to address.” In addition, one hosting administrator said:

I was not familiar with service-learning, I had heard about it in passing but never looked into its components and the affect is has on so many people when done properly. These students took a major concern throughout our school district and educated our youth. I
wish they could have done this will all the grades. The sooner we can tackle concerns with our students and/or needs throughout the community the better educated our students will be. These students had to give quite a bit of thought to something they may have ignored or not considered too seriously in the past.

All seven of the teachers cited that every student’s learning was enriched by allowing the students to incorporate the curriculum with applications to real life concerns. That included the students in the service-learning program as well as the elementary students that were provided with instruction. One teacher said, “Many students learn with hands on, relatable experiences. I feel this experience will stick with all of them.” Another teacher said, “Our students found this experience to be something different, purposeful, and exciting. They were thrilled to be given the opportunity to do something with the knowledge they had gained.” It was also stated, “That the students seemed to grasp the concept quickly because they could apply and relate.” In addition, one teacher emphasized the fact that:

Instead of just taking in information, the students had to then take what they have learned, interpret it, relate it to a real life situation, and then teach it back to others. This process requires students to fully process what they have learned. They developed so many skills that they will use throughout their educational career. This opportunity is something I don’t think any one of them will forget.

The six student centered focus groups were all in agreement with the concept of incorporating what they learned in the classroom while being allowed to help with a real community concern. One group emphasized, “We found out there was a problem within our schools and we wanted to do something about it. We actually helped others.” This was followed with, “A lot of students won’t do anything or they walk away when they see something wrong
going on. This opportunity allowed us to educate students; student-to-student which I think sent
a positive message.” In addition, a student further commented that:

I learn when I can relate to the information instead of memorizing just a bunch of facts. I
felt that I was able to totally get into the topic because I was able to relate and was
actually allowed to go out into the community and share what I had learned and
explained why. I really wanted to get the message across because I understood what it
meant. I knew that what I had to say was going to make a difference to someone.

Based upon the researcher’s observation of the actual community involvement, it was
apparent that students were prepared, invested, and extremely excited to be out in the
community. They taught their lessons, developed a variety of activities, improvised, answered
questions, provided praise and recognition, and appeared genuinely interested in what they were
doing as well as the affect it would have on others.

After this particular observation, a group of service-learning students came up to me after
they returned to school and ask if we could do this type of learning to help a larger audience.
They talked about there being so many problems out there that we can address with different
subjects that this should be a practice incorporated into all of their classes. They wanted to know
how we could make this happen? One girl said, “I want my friends to experience this type of
learning as well, this was a great.” They then started listing areas of concerns that they would
like to look into and how it could be incorporated into their science or math classes. Their
enthusiasm was contagious as other students started chiming in with the same request.

**Enriched the students’ educational experience.** Administrators, teachers, and students,
notated that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum helped to enrich the students’
educational experience by providing opportunities for students to develop authentic learning
goals, respond to a community need and concern, create opportunities for decision-making, participate, and develop a service plan that links their curriculum with a community need, collaborate, present, reflect and analyze, and celebrate. Traditionally, educators develop lessons that are very structured in nature. They plan a lesson, provide students with information, and on occasion teachers may incorporate activities to enrich the lesson, and then assess their students’ knowledge via a quiz, test, or project. Students have a desire to learn when then can relate to the information being taught. By incorporating service-learning into the curriculum, an administrator commented that, “Educators need to create learning opportunities that place a high priority on context that allows for students to grow not only as learners but as people as well.” Another administrated said, “Service-learning has shown me that these types of learning experiences are more enriching for students and their success.” The administrator went on to further state:

This was a great way to instruct information. Students’ educational experiences were enriched and they had the opportunity to enrich the minds of the community members they taught. It was reflected in the comments and attitudes displayed by both groups of students and their teachers. They learned the information and gave back. This was definitely a rewarding experience.

Table 4 illustrates select comments from both the teachers’ questionnaire, and casual conversation during observations and the students’ focus group interviews on how they felt service-learning enriched their educational experience.
Table 4

*Illustrative Teacher and Student Comments regarding the Theme “Enriched the Students’ Educational Experience”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This type of learning is considered ‘out-of-the-box’ or non-traditional</td>
<td>This experience was great. I liked how we were able to develop our own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and brought such an enriching experience to our students. They got to</td>
<td>plans and share with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>take ownership of their learning.</td>
<td>I was able to put what I learned into action. This is the way to I like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students were excited to showcase what they learned. They were thankful</td>
<td>to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for the experience.</td>
<td>I enjoyed this experience and what I learned from it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students who were not part of the service-learning class but on the</td>
<td>I felt I got more out of this class because of everything I had to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>receiving end wanted to have similar experiences in their classes.</td>
<td>to learn the information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students had the opportunity to be part of a bigger picture. They</td>
<td>I was part of a group and they were counting on me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learned valuable information and then gave back to their community.</td>
<td>I developed friendships with kids that I didn’t think I would ever be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our students were able to relate what they learned with a school wide</td>
<td>friends with. This class experience made a difference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problem. They made the connection which is so important in education.</td>
<td>This class made me a better person. I am glad I was part of it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As part of the researcher’s observations, not only was student enrichment a theme that emerged throughout the course of the class, all participants were in agreement that service-learning incorporated into their curriculum provided students with opportunities that they would like to have happen more often. Comments were made that everyone’s involvement was greatly appreciated, that the role each person contributed to made this learning experience a positive, successful, and worthwhile way to learn. Everyone had a willingness to learn and comprehend
the information provided in order to be effective. One comment that contributed to the overall beliefs of the participants was,

“Not only did this class enrich our learning experience, it provided us with knowledge and skills that we can incorporate into our other classes. We can work with each other effectively to problem solve and come up with solutions. We all had roles in our learning objectives. We needed to rely on each other and it worked.

Research Question #2: As part of their service-learning experience, how did it impact their social and emotional growth as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?

After analyzing the observation notes, student reflective journals, questionnaires for both administrators and teachers, and student focus group interviews, four themes emerged among all the methods and groups. As part of their service-learning experience, students’ social and emotional growth was impacted by their ability to (a) develop a variety of skills, (b) generate a greater awareness/response to community needs, (c) set goals, problem solve, and reflect, (d) work effectively with others. This segment represents the active participants’ views and opinions concerning their social and emotion growth based upon their overall experience. Table 5 depicts the four themes that emerged from the various methods of data collection as stated above, including discussion from participating students, teachers, and administrators from the Blackstone Valley Middle and Elementary Schools.
Table 5

*Themes Identified from Active Participants’ Responses for Research Question #2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Develop a variety of skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generate a greater awareness/response to community needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Set goals, problem solve, and reflect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Work effectively with others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Develop a variety of skills.** Administrators, teachers, and students, stated that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum provided students with educational experiences that had a positive impact on their interpersonal skills, enhanced their intellectual skills, and improved their communication skills necessary for learners of the 21st Century. Administrators commented that, “Students appeared better-rounded because they responded to a community need by collaborating with each other for a solution.” Students had to work together and do so effectively. Another administrator stated, “The educator presented an opportunity to place students in a schema that allowed them to not only plan the delivery of the lesson but to feel its impact as well.” In addition, one administrator said,

This type of learning provided conditions for students to gain skills necessary to respond to various situations while shaping who they are as individuals. They had to think and plan, create lessons and activities, react to situations that arose, respond to glitches, and reflect on their efforts. They grew socially and emotionally in ways that every teacher wants to convey to their students.
Teachers often comment on integrating instructional practice that can amplify their students’ academic, social, and emotional growth and increase skills. The service-learning experience generated responses from teachers that conferred that fact. For example, one teacher said, “I noticed students who were somewhat meek become more assertive and outspoken.” Another stated, “The students responded better to their classmates because they understood what they were going through. These students displayed confidence in themselves and each other.” In addition, another teacher’s response was:

These cooperative experiences made each student focus and create solutions for the tasks at hand. Students developed a sense of independence and responsibility because ownership of the learning was in their hands. I witnessed knowledge and cooperation between the students and their groups.

All nineteen of the students responded with an affirmative response to the idea of the service-learning experience helping to develop skills academically, socially, and emotionally. One student responded, “I learned the information because we did so many different activities and I had to be responsible.” A second said, “I had to be creative with my ideas and I had to compromise at times.” A third student stated, “I had to interact with others; working with my classmates gave me more confidence because I wasn’t alone. I had help when I needed it.” Another student commented:

I felt that I developed better presenting skills and having to present the information to others built up my confidence. I felt that I didn’t have to be afraid because I practiced repeatedly until I was confident. I also learned that people learn differently and we needed to create different types of lessons and activities so that everybody understood the information we were teaching them.
After many observations by the researcher, it was apparent that students developed a variety of skills that helped them to understand the information and to make the academic connection. One student in particular commented to the teacher, “I learned so many new skills from this experience.” Students learned to organize and scaffold their learning and to transfer their knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to the community. They developed skills to be successful learners.

**Generate a greater awareness/response to community needs.** Administrators, teachers, and students, stated that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum helped to generate a greater awareness/response to community needs. They were clear to stress that when given an experience that helped students to find value in helping their community, there was also a positive impact on their engagement and the students’ academic performance. Table 6 shows samples of remarks that administrators and teachers made from the questionnaires related to their perception of students’ social and emotional growth, more specifically their greater awareness/concerning their community.

Table 6

*Illustrative Administrative and Teacher Remarks regarding the Theme “Generate a Greater Awareness/Response to Community Needs”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrators</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our students took an interest in their community and responded.</td>
<td>This type of learning impacted their social and emotional growth. Students showed an impact in the world outside of the classroom by creating awareness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was collaboration between students and schools based upon a concern that was discovered.</td>
<td>These students were role models teaching others about touchy subjects such as our bullying problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students stepped up to the challenge of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Students reaffirmed that idea that they become more socially aware of concerns in their community and wanted to do something about it. One student stated, “I learned that bullying really is a problem and people take away their lives because of it. I needed to do something.” A second student commented, “Now I know how people feel when they are being bullied and I know not to do it.” A third student said, “I don’t want to pick on anyone because I know how hurtful it can be to other people.” Another student commented:  

I think this experience helped me both socially and emotionally because I learned about a problem in our schools. It helped me grow personally because I learned that bullying is a big problem and the struggle kids go through because of it. We had to do a lot of research and come up with ways we could teach the younger kids. We had to bring the experience to life and we did that by working with others.  

The researcher observed students being actively engaged in research, doing Internet searches and compiling facts that they wanted to cite. They were working together in groups, asking each other questions and clarifying information. Some students made comments about how they felt about the information they were gathering, others were eager to share their findings. |
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>generating awareness to a district wide problem. These students became teachers and developed lessons that informed other students about a concern. This experience created awareness for students of a need that affects many people. Awareness and personal/social responsibility with others is heightened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The impact of addressing a concern was ‘real life’ and made a lasting impression. The students wanted to make a difference in their community. They really took a liking to this project. A students told me that she felt proud knowing that she was able to bring awareness to so many who face this problem.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with ways they wanted to help. There were conversations on thoughts, feelings and ideas. They voiced their concerns, had opinions, and at times agreed to disagree. One student in particular made a comment, “I don’t see what is wrong with telling someone that you don’t like something about them.” This student’s partner responded with, “You have the right to feel that way but that doesn’t mean you need to share your thoughts with the person because it can be hurtful.” The conversation continued very cordially with respect being given to both students.

The aforementioned remarks and observations reflected the idea that when students are provided with opportunities that give way to social concerns, authentic learning situations combined with meaningful activities that students can relate to, it affects them in optimistic ways, more specifically, personal and social development, academic achievement, citizenship, and overall social awareness.

Set goals, problem solve, and reflect. Administrators, teachers, and students alike stated that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum helped the students to set goals, problem solve, and reflect on their efforts. Effective learning has been linked to students being able to generate an understanding of a concept. This occurs when students can be part of the process through discovery, planning, implementing, and reflecting. They can relate the concept with an experience and the experience helps them with making the connection. According to the administrators, one administrator in particular stated, “Students involved in service-learning recognize the value of setting goals. They learn how to work effectively with others to develop goals and action plans.” Another said, “These students found a problem, set goals, and then implemented their ideas.” Another administrator commented:

Our students learned how to plan. They discovered a school wide problem and set goals for themselves and their groups. Each group clearly had different goals but in the end
they were all trying to relay the same message. I even overhead one student say to another student, ‘Next time we do this we have to plan on problems that can come up in the community.’ This showed that they were reflecting and thinking of ways they could improve.

Often times, teachers want to provide their students with opportunities to be active participants. They look for ways to assess what they are learning. By incorporating them into all phases of the learning, they can develop a greater sense of their understanding. One teacher noted, “Service-learning definitely fosters student’s social, emotional, and academic growth because they need to problem solve, make decisions, and create ways to apply their learning to others.” A second teacher commented, “This type of learning requires students to problem solve and reflect on their actions. They discover that there may be more than one way to tackle a problem and that one way may work better than another.” A third teacher responded, “Student were in charge of their learning, they had to problem solve and work towards a common goal with their groups. When a decision was made, whether individual or as a group, there was a goal in mind.” In addition another teacher responded:

I think service-learning engages kids because fortunately, service-learning makes kids think beyond the traditional rote learning and memorization of facts. These kids worked together and problem solved. They researched a problem and created solutions to address the problem. They had to make decisions that would affect others and reflect on those decisions. They were responsible for delivering knowledge and had to find ways to do just that. I saw one group make adjustments in their teaching when additional problems arose.
All nineteen of the students were in agreement that service-learning required them to take ownership of their learning. In doing so, they needed to research, layout a plan, respond to a problem, and reflect on their decisions. One student stated, “We grew through this experience because we had to find our own work; we problem solved.” A second student responded, “Service-learning showed us more about the topics and how it affects us because we found out it was a problem.” A third student said, “This experience helped us to learn by discovering a problem and them coming up with ways to fix it. We had to set goals throughout the course, put our goals into action, and then reflect on what we had done.” In addition another student noted:

Service-learning made us work together to solve a problem and sometimes that was a problem. We didn’t always agree or get along but we knew we had to teach other kids what we learned. Our teacher made us set goals. We also had to show her how we were going to meet our goals. There were always a lot of discussions and our teacher would often make us stop and think about what we were doing and why. She also made us reflect on our overall performance. This helped us to think of how we could do things differently if something didn’t work very good.

Through observations, the researcher noted that students participated in groups, taking roles in the problem solving, discussions, actions, and reflections. They were making an effort to contribute their ideas. Every student showed interest, they would collaborate asking each other questions, pointing out facts of interest, some made comments about how angry they felt or how sad they felt because of the information they were researching. One student commented in class, “We have to work together to make this problem go away. We don’t want bullying in our schools.” All the students developed a plan and each group set goals to meet their objectives.
They worked through disagreements and provide ideas for improving their community involvement.

By providing opportunity for students to take ownership of their learning, all participants felt the students developed skills in goal setting, problem solving, decision making, and reflecting on their actions. This type of learning generated an engagement in all of the students because they were not only the student but the teacher and just like teachers, through reflection, they discovered ways to adjust their instruction based upon their audiences’ responses or lack thereof.

**Work effectively with others.** Periodically in the traditional classroom, student may be paired up or allowed to work in small groups to solve a problem, conduct research, or create a small project. When students were allowed to work together in groups for the majority of the course as is the case with the practice of service-learning; administrators, teachers, and students, stated that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum helped students to work effectively with others. One administrator commented, “Service-learning provides opportunities for student to work collaboratively together.” A second administrator enhanced that sentiment with, “These students were working together and truly making connections. It was a pleasure to see them excited about what they were doing.” Another stated:

When I was walking through the different classrooms watching the students teach, each group was working well together. They were delivering their instruction with much enthusiasm. Each student was responsible for sharing information and some groups even had activities for the kids. If there was a problem, like when one group didn’t have enough pencils, the students’ huddled together and came up with alternative writing instruments for them to use.
All seven of the participating teachers communicated that students involved in service-learning worked effectively with one another. One teacher stated, “This experience was wonderful for the students. They responded so well working with one another.” A second teacher commented, “This type of learning requires students to collaborate with their peers to achieve a goal. They might build new friendships because they have to work together.” With a similar thought another teacher noted, “It was evident to this observer that these students worked collaboratively to deliver great lessons. Each lesson was different but all the students were well prepared and knowledgeable in their area. To reinforce these statements, another teacher mentioned:

Service-learning is a great practice that incorporates so many different elements into the learning process. One element that stood out was the students working together. They worked together to deliver lessons that benefited our students. They appeared to genuinely enjoy what they were doing.

All 19 of the participating students communicated in one way or another that they worked effectively with their groups and peers. Table 7 shows samples of remarks that students made from their reflective journals and focus groups interviews related to their perception of working effectively with others.

Table 7

*Illustrative Student Remarks regarding the Theme “Work Effectively with Others”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I learned that working in a group can be fun and an easier way to work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service-learning taught me how to work with people better and how you can split the work between each other.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This project taught me that working with...
others isn’t so bad because we really helped each other.

I’ve been more productive than ever while working in groups on this project.

Working with my group, we all had jobs to do whether it was getting information, creating a PowerPoint or whatever.

We worked together for a common goal.

I learned that by working in group, we got a lot done very fast and this helped me to have better working habits.

All the members in our group concentrated on the information they were responsible for and then we put it all together.

Working with others was actually pretty fun and I liked helping my group members. I liked this a lot.

Working in groups helped me learn how to work with people better. You have to compromise.

Working in groups was fun but it was at times confusing and hard but we worked everything out and I am thankful for this experience.

We all had ideas, but not all worked out so we had to come up with new ideas that would be effective.

We learned to work as a team and I learned more about my friends because as we were working together I found out what makes us better as students and teachers.

One of the skills I learned is if you’re not doing your part in the group then your group will not achieve its maximum potential.

My group worked together and we brainstormed. This is very important because any idea can lead to your best one.

I got better at working with people; it helped me to be more assertive.

I learned the importance of working with other people and because of this; I learned that I’m a better listener.

When you work in a group you really have to pay attention to each other so you can find answers to what you need to know.

I learned that I am actually pretty good at working with others and that you need to be on the same page.

This class helped me to work with others, it makes the experience better.

We worked well together and I learned that I was the person who could settle disputes. I also learned that I can be cooperative.

Through the service learning activity and working in a group, I learned how I learn. Also, working with my partner I learned we work good together.

I became more confident working in a group because we helped each other out.
Through observations, the researched observed students working effectively together in all aspects of their learning. When they were in the computer lab doing research, they would discuss the important facts that they wanted to use. During class time, the students would demonstrate in front of their peers and ask for feedback, when preparing for their community involvement, the groups would make boxes of all the information and materials they would need to teach their lesson. After they taught their lesson, they reflected and shared ways they could improve. Each phase generated an effective learning objective.

**Research Question #3: How has the service-learning experience impacted students’ perceptions of school and their choice to continue?**

After analyzing the observation notes, student reflective journals, questionnaires, and student focus group interviews, four themes emerged among all the methods. Students’ service-learning experience impacted their perceptions of school by showcasing (a) a valuable way to learn, (b) the importance of community involvement, (c) commitment and accountability and (d) a greater connection to their education. This segment represents the active participants’ views and opinions concerning their service-learning experience and their perceptions of school. Table 7 represents the four themes that emerged from the various methods of data collection as stated above, including discussion from participating students, teachers, and administrators from the Blackstone Valley Middle and Elementary Schools.
Table 7

Themes Identified from Active Participants’ Responses for Research Question #3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A valuable way to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The importance of community involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Commitment and accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A greater connection to their education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A valuable way to learn.** Administrators, teachers, and students, stated that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum was a valuable way to learn. It goes beyond the traditional classroom methods of teachers delivering information and students receiving the information. These students had to think for themselves and about others. They were able to apply their knowledge to real life situations. An administrator randomly commented that, “The students were provided with instructional opportunities that put emphasis on the student and their discoveries as opposed to the teacher providing all the information.” Another administrator stated, “It’s important for student to take ownership of their learning and service-learning is one of those teaching practice that places the emphasis on the student to become highly informed.” In addition, one administrator said, “Learning experiences are enriched for students. This was a valuable lesson for our kids.”

Out of the seven teachers questioned, five of the seven made similar comments about the value of service-learning as a teaching practice. They felt that using the skills necessary for service-learning, such as higher order thinking, problem solving, and reflecting, students developed a better understanding of the meaning of their experiences. One teacher stated, “The
students listened to their fellow students and remembered the lesson...Teaching made them ‘experts’ with their knowledge and their confidence grew as the days went on.” A second teacher stated, “This was a great way for the kids to learn and all the students knew the information.” A third teacher noted, “The older peers were able to capture the interest and attention of the younger children in a way that teachers aren’t always able to – especially with regard to social issues.” In addition another teacher commented:

Incorporating service-learning into the curriculum was a good thing because it allowed the students to apply meaningful learning outside of the classroom and isn’t this the key to education? We want students to have application of learning so that when they go out into the world, they can use the skills and concepts they have gotten in class. I think it also helps to build confidence in them as learners. It is engaging for the students and it is a valuable practice as well.

All nineteen students stated that they would rather have service-learning incorporated into their classrooms because they felt it was a better, more valuable way to learn. Table 8 shows samples of remarks that students made from their reflective journals and focus groups interviews related to their perception of working effectively with others.

Table 8

*Illustrative Student Remarks regarding the Theme “A Valuable Way to Learn”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We learned more because there was some stuff that I didn’t even know that we learned. I think because we had to go out into the community that we needed to learn more and pass the information on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think we learned more because we were having fun while we were doing it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is really effective to take what we learned and bring it to the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This type of learning make it easier to remember because of the whole experience of going into the community and teaching what we learned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning this way helps my grades and stuff so I believe we should do this way more often.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is a valuable way to learn because I learn better when I don’t just have to memorize stuff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No offense but like a lot of my classes are boring and it is hard to memorize stuff because there is so much but if we did go out and do service learning than that would be a better way for me to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This type of learning is a lot easier because it is hands on learning, not just sitting there staring at a Smartboard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We both prefer hands on learning than the paper/pencil take notes kind of learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly through observation by the researcher, there were multiple instances where students’ commented and reflected on how much they enjoyed the practices incorporated with service-learning and how valuable this type of learning was for them. One student in particular made a statement to the researcher, “I will always remember the stuff I learned in this class because of the experience I had. This experience helped me to better understand the subject and ideas we have been studying.”
The importance of community involvement. Administrators, teachers, and students, stated that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum provided students with the understanding of the importance of community involvement and how it factors into their education. One administrator randomly commented that, “There was a genuine interest from our students and I think that had to do with them being able to identify what they were learning with an actual need in the community.” In addition, a second administrator stated, “The students discovered a need within their community and wanted to get involved. They were enthusiastic about teaching the younger students and it showed with how well prepared and knowledgeable they were.” Similarly, another administrator said,

Incorporating service-learning opportunities into the learning, more importantly the significance of students discovering the importance of community involvement benefits everyone involved. The students benefited and the community benefited. This was a win-win because it helped our students make the connection between learning and doing for others.

The teachers had similar responses when all responded with the belief that service-learning practices teach students about community needs and the significance of student involvement. One teacher stated, “The students discovered that there was a problem in the community and they wanted to address it.” A second teacher shared, “This activity not only helped the students who had to learn the information but the younger students who were on the receiving end of the message.” Another teacher went on to further state, “I saw my students attending with a different kind of enthusiasm because they saw the importance of being aware of the dangers of bullying.” In addition, the teacher utilizing service-learning into her curriculum said:
Incorporating service-learning into the curriculum is a good practice not only because of the benefits it provides to learners, but also because it fills a need in the community. Students learn the importance of giving back to their community, and feel good about making a contribution. Students connect their classroom learning to something bigger than themselves outside the classroom.”

Once again, all nineteen of the students emphasized the importance of being involved with their community. They mentioned that they were aware of the problem but didn’t realize how big a problem it was within their own community. One particular comment from a student that coincided with the importance of being involved in the community was, “There are a lot of very big problems out there and if we can teach the younger students at an early age, it might help to prevent future problems from happening.” Another student alleged, “I think service-learning outreach brought us awareness to a big problem and we were able to do something about it.” An additional student believed, “This activity helped me to learn that my community had a problem and our students needed to be informed. I was glad that I was able to help with that.” Also, another student stated, “I think that this experience really helped a lot of people including me. With recent events in my life, it helped me to cope with things and understand how other people may be feeling.” In addition, a student said:

I got to put what I actually learned into action and I helped others which is important. I really wanted to learn because I knew that I would be making a difference. Isn’t that what learning is all about? Taking what you learned and applying it somewhere. In this case, the information was going to help other people. I was really passionate about this.

The researcher also noted through observations and verbal comments that the community involvement component of service-learning played an important role in the students overall
understanding of the curriculum being delivered. One particular comment the researcher noted was, “This is the best way to learn. I got to help others with what I knew. That’s important.” The students and their teacher alike placed an emphasis on the importance of community involvement and the essential need to always give back. It is understood that everyone needs to have a purpose and this experience help them to better understand that purpose.

Commitment and accountability. Administrators, teachers, and students, stated that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum provided students with educational experiences which enforced the knowledge that students had a commitment to become knowledgably and were accountable to one another and the service to others. An administrator alleged that, “Our students showed commitment to this project and each other.” Another administrator responded, “I was impressed with the commitment by the students and the way they held each other accountable for their share when it came to delivering the information to our younger students.” In addition, one administrator said, “The commitment demonstrated by the student in teaching the younger kids was something I really enjoyed witnessing. I would like to see more opportunities like this one.”

The teachers felt very similarly and made comments that reinforced the idea that the participating students in the service-learning practice were committed not only to learning the curriculum but also in being accountable for their roles in teaching others. One teacher commented, “Incorporating service-learning into the curriculum was a valuable practice because I noticed a sincere commitment from the students. It was reflected in their knowledge and desire to teach the younger students.” A second teacher mentioned, “This type of learning gives the students a fresh experience outside of the classroom that invigorates them to want to get involved. They showed a strong commitment to becoming educated and educating others.” A
third teacher stated, “I know from personal experience that at the least, service-learning helps
kids stay in the classroom…and the need to go to the bathroom or wander the hall is non-
existent.” The students want to remain in the classroom because they are committed to learning
the information and applying it.

Correspondingly, the majority of the students agreed that they were committed to
learning the information and had a responsibility to educate others. One student said, “Service-
learning helped me learn the information better because we all had to rely on each other to do our
own part. My group was counting on me and me on them.” A second student noted, “I made
more of a commitment to learning in this class because I had to help others and my classmates
were counting on me.” In addition, a third student stated, “I felt more committed because I had
to teach others in real life so it really helped me.” Another student said, “I was committed to
learning the topic because I knew I was going to be held accountable by my group members.”

Similar were thoughts by the researcher when observations showcased the participating
students committing themselves to the subject matter. They were genuinely interested in
learning all aspects of the topic including, the best practices to share that information with the
community. Each group of students took ownership in researching information, developing their
skills in communication, problem solving, working collaboratively, and thinking critically. In
addition, they were responsible for demonstrating their understanding and using their knowledge
in an authentic way to help others.

**A greater connection to their education.** Administrators, teachers, and students, stated
that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum provided students with educational
experiences that generated a greater connection to their education. One particular administrator
concurred,
I think authentic activity where students have a purpose but more importantly, understand that purpose and can answer the “why are we doing this” question increases students desire to learn and stay in school. I believe it presents an opportunity for strengthening community (school and greater community) as well.

Another administrator commented, “Service-learning incorporated in the curriculum has the potential to be a factor in helping some students make the connection regarding the importance of their education. When they can make the connection they appear to be more interested in the learning.”

The teachers have also noted the idea that the students were more connected to their education when they could make the correlation of education and real life experiences. One teacher commented, “I observed my students attending with a different kind of enthusiasm when they understood why they were learning what they were learning.” A second teacher reiterated with:

There was one student in particular who I previously had in class and was difficult to manage behavior wise. When I saw that same student today, I was a little surprise because he was so excited about teaching his lesson. I spoke to him and he said, “I hate doing stuff in the classroom, but this is really cool because I get to actually go out and help others with what I learned in class.” So, in my opinion this type of learning does help certain students who may have wanted to give up or who felt bored and disconnected from their education.

In a comparable thought, another teacher said:

“In my opinion, I believe service-learning practices would help some students stay in school. It’s hard to say, but if there is a spark of interest whereby students make the
connection, those students may strive to continue in school. There is never just one type of learning style that ignites students’ interest or helps students in making the connection. Service-learning may be the difference for some in setting the course of their future.

The lead teacher who incorporated service-learning into her teaching practice agreed by making the following comments:

I had a class roster with names of the individuals who did not like school, and the question before me was, What can I do to get their attention and make them want to come to class? The answer – do something different, get them to do something different in and for the community, give them a real world experience that they could own, and connect to, and give them a different type of assessment. Give them service-learning…I learned that service-learning helps kids make the connection and to be active participant in the classroom.

The students have very related thoughts that when service-learning practices were incorporated into the classroom instruction, they felt more connected to their education and had a greater understanding of why they were learning what they were learning because they had the opportunity to apply their learning to a real life situation. Table 9 shows samples of remarks that students made from their reflective journals and focus groups interviews related to their perception of developing a greater connection to their education.

Table 8

*Illustrative Student Remarks regarding the Theme “A Greater Connection to Their Education”*

| Students |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| I think that because we had to go out into the community that we needed to learn more and pass the information on so I understood why | Well this personally is one of my favorite ways to learn because I actually got to use what I learned for something good. |
we were doing what we were doing.  
Like teaching it yourself you understand it more and when you teach it to someone else, you want to have the correct information so they can lean too.

Teaching others helped me learn the information better because I made the connection as to why I needed to know it.

I wanted to learn because I knew why it was so important because I had to tell others.

We learned our topic more than we learned in our other classes and we should do this type of learning more in school because it helps you learn better because you make the connection to what you are learning by helping other people.

If all our classes were like this, people would put a lot more effort into it and enjoy it a lot more because they will understand why they are learning what they’re learning.

It helped me realize how important school really is. It can actually help other people, and not something you have to just go through but you can continue using it.

This class helped me realize how important education is. Sometimes I think we just learn stuff because we have to but this type of learning made me see that there is more to it.

I felt better about learning this way because I got to go out into the community and it makes me feel like I am actually doing something and knowing how stuff like that works somehow.

I feel that we really had to learn as much as possible and understand it because we were passing it onto other people so they could understand it also.

I would like to see this type of learning more because I remember better when I connected to what I was learning and why I was learning it.

Some kids might quit school because they are bored with it but if they could do stuff hands on and understand why its important, it might encourage them to learn more and they can learn much better.

I feel that what we did was give someone the opportunity to change the world and to tell people what is going on and how you can change it. Isn’t this why we need to learn?

I would want to stay in school if learning was more like this because I understood how important it was for me to learn all the information, it wasn’t just about stuff.

Because of this class I became more aware of how important education is. It showed me that education can have a positive impact on other people.

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Through the observations and discussions with the active participants, the researcher learned that by incorporating the practices of service-learning into the curriculum, the students made a deeper connection to their education. Every student that was spoken to emphasized the point that they knew the reason why they were learning the information and how important it was to pass on their knowledge. During one observation in particular, the students were
reflecting on their community involvement and how they thought the overall experience went. All the students were in agreement that they learned better this way because they understood why they needed to learn the information. Their awareness was reflected in the comments and statements they were making and it could be summed up from one student’s statement in which it was mentioned:

When you actually believe that you are putting something that you learned to good use and you understand why you are learning what you are learning, it makes it much better than just sitting there remembering information without a purpose or a purpose that you don’t know of yet.

**Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine the implementation of service-learning into the curriculum as an effective practice to engage students in their education by making learning purposeful and relevant, enhancing students’ academic self-concept, improving their personal growth, and in doing so, having the potential to reduce student dropouts from school. The finding from this study have been a collaborative effort and gathered from the voices of the students, a handful of teachers, and a few administrators as they reflected on the practice of incorporating service-learning into the curriculum of one particular course offered at a middle school in the Blackstone valley.

After evaluating data collected from students, teachers, and administrators, several common themes were revealed regarding the impact that service-learning practices incorporated into the course curriculum has on student engagement including enhancing their academic self-concept, personal growth and the relevance of education. The students were in agreement that service-learning was a significant learning experience that helped them to develop skills in,
planning, organizing, goal setting, problem solving, working collaborative, meaningful decision making, communication, understanding the fact that it connects information with relevance, and the importance of integrating that information with community involvement. In addition, the students articulated feelings of self worth, personal and academic growth, and a greater appreciation regarding their responsibilities to others.

The teachers and administrators acknowledged that service-learning incorporated into the course curriculum was a valuable teaching practice that had a positive impact on student engagement. It allowed them to have authentic learning experiences by planning, delivering, and experiencing its impact. Their awareness and personal and social responsibility with others was heightened. It was an effective way to engage the students while helping them develop an understanding of the significance of school and in turn benefiting them academically, socially and emotionally. One administrator and one of teachers who participated in this study expressed concerns that service-learning is a good practice, but it seems to be very time consuming, teachers would have to be provided with professional development opportunities so they can be trained in how to implement it, and it should not be a mandatory teaching practice. Despite this, all the participants, students, teachers, and administrators were in agreement that service-learning is a valuable learning experience for the students that increase their engagement.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Research

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

Public schools face the challenge that many of their students don’t find learning relevant or engaging, thereby making the purpose of school insignificant to them. The problem of practice that was investigated is the role service-learning programs could take in making learning purposeful and relevant to students, improving their academic and personal growth, and potentially reducing student dropout rates from schools.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, approximately 9.4% of the student population is leaving school before they graduate (NCES, 2009). Massachusetts’ schools have a 2.5% drop out rate according to the most recent annual statistics published from the Massachusetts Department of Schools and Secondary Education (DESE) (http://www.doe.mass.edu).

Students drop out of school for a variety of reasons but some of the more prevalent are that they find school to be uninteresting, non-engaging, and its’ purpose to be insignificant (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore & Friant 2010). Because of this, students’ educational experiences fail to foster a sense of attachment or commitment to school (Bridgeland, et al, 2010).

Service-learning, a form of experiential learning that combines academic coursework with some form of voluntary service provided to the community, is one such program that has proven to be a valuable practice which can have positive effects on student achievement, bring relevance to classroom instruction, and improve attendance while engaging students to stay in school longer (Manzo, 2008; Perkins-Gough, 2009). As stated by Kaye (2010), “Service-learning provides meaningful ways for students, teachers, administrators, and community agencies and members to move together with deliberate thought and action toward a common
purpose that has reciprocal benefits” (p.2). In sum, service-learning can help students become more engaged, and help them develop a greater understanding of their civic responsibility, educational relevance, and benefits of school.

Deeley (2010), through a review of literature, found research indicating that service-learning through critical thinking and reflection may contribute to students’ personal development, have a positive impact on their interpersonal skills, and enhance their intellectual skills as they understand the connection between the information learned and their service experience. In addition, service-learning may improve students’ communication skills, social interaction, and self-esteem and bring meaning to their knowledge and learning.

The research and my own experience indicate not enough educational institutes are supporting the practices and implementation of an engaging service-learning curriculum as an effective means of improving students’ academic and personal growth and reducing the dropout rate. According to a report conducted by the Community Service-Learning Advisory Council to the Massachusetts Board of Education (2006), “nationally, nearly a third of all public schools and half of all high schools report the use of service-learning in classrooms” (p.4). This holds true for Massachusetts schools as well. Different factors may help explain this, for example, a lack of knowledge about its potential benefits, lack of information about the overall characteristics of the implementation of a service-learning curriculum that makes it effective, fear of the unknown and budgetary restraints.

**Review of the Research Questions**

The goal of this study was to develop a greater understanding of how service-learning might contribute to students’ engagement in school and make learning more purposeful and relevant to the student. Therefore, the three research questions analyzed were:
1. How do students, teachers, and administrators at a Blackstone Valley middle school perceive students’ participation in service learning impacting their learning and engagement in school?

2. As part of their service-learning experience, how did it impact their social and emotional growth as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?

3. How has the service-learning experience impacted students’ perceptions of school and their choice to continue?

**Discussion of Major Findings**

The findings in this study suggest that students, teachers, and administrators believe that incorporating service-learning practices into class curriculum is a valuable learning experience. Through observations, questionnaires, student reflective journals, and focus group interviews, it was determined that when all the components of service-learning were integrated (investigation, planning, action, reflection, demonstration, and celebration) into the class curriculum, the experience helped to motivate, engage, and created a culture of active students as they had an ultimate goal they wanted to understand and achieve. They were invested and motivated in their learning because they had a desired outcome to help others; this was experienced outside the classroom walls. The students were willing to learn, wanted to be involved and were invested in their education. They were active participants in the classroom by being involved in the learning through reasoning, problem solving, and demonstrating their knowledge in and for the community. In addition, students took ownership of their thoughts and ideas. They shared information, collaborated amongst their peers and contributed to class discussions. They felt empowered with their overall learning. These students were engaged and active from the
inception of knowledge gathered through community awareness through the planning, decision making, demonstration, reflection, and celebration of their efforts and obtained knowledge.

The data collected during this study also reflects that the participants believe that service-learning opportunities allowed for students to apply their knowledge with real life concerns and enriched their educational experiences. It was evident that when the students were responsible for authentic learning goals, by discovering a community need and concern and then developing a solution by educating their community members with the information they learned that their engagement in their education increased. They displayed a greater desire to learn when they were able to relate to the information being taught and understood its purpose. In addition, they appeared genuinely interested in what they were doing when it had an effect on others. Service-learning provided opportunities that students were not familiar with but would like to have happen more often. It enriched their learning by providing knowledge and skills that can be utilized in real life situations.

Result from this study also revealed that the participants agreed that service-learning practices have led to students’ overall social and emotional growth by developing a variety of skills that include goal setting, problem solving, working collaborative with others, reflecting and developing a greater awareness to community needs and concerns. In addition, these educational experiences had a positive impact on their interpersonal skills, intellectual skills and improved their communication skills necessary for the 21st Century learners. Students appeared better rounded because they had to work together and do so effectively. They had to respond to various situations while shaping who they were as individuals. They were given a variety of activities and had to develop ways to respond to each activity. They were able to understand the information and make the academic connection because they learned to organize and scaffold
their learning and transfer their knowledge and skills while finding value in helping the community. The service-learning experience helped them grow both socially and emotionally because they became more socially aware of a concern in their community and wanted to do something about it. They were part of the process through discovery, planning, implementing, and reflecting. Basically they were able to relate because of the experience that took them beyond the traditional rote learning methods and in turn helped them grow from the experience.

The participants in this study also revealed that by incorporating service-learning practices into the curriculum students found this strategy to be a more valuable way to learn and were more committed and connected to their education. Service-learning went beyond the traditional classroom methods of teaching and delivering information. Students had to think for themselves and about other and apply that knowledge to real life situations. Emphasis is placed on the student taking ownership of their learning and discoveries as opposed to the teachers providing all the information. They were able to develop a better understanding of the meaning of their experience because they could make the connection. They were able to relate to the experience. It was noted that service-learning provided students with educational opportunities that enforced the knowledge that students had a commitment to become knowledgeable because they had to service others. They developed a greater connection to their education because they understood its relevance. They were able to understand the purpose and were able to answer why they were learning what they were learning. The knowledge went beyond the classroom and because of that they were able to make the connection and were more interested in the learning. Service-learning is a practice that helped to spark an interest in learning and that information was used for the good of the community. All participants were in agreement that when students are provided with opportunities for authentic learning with understanding and
purpose, students are more likely to be committed to their learning and in their desire to complete their education and stay in school.

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

This study applied two complimentary theories, Experiential Learning Theory and Service Learning Theory as the lenses through which service-learning practices were examined. The link between student engagement, making learning purposeful and relevant, and enhancing students’ social and emotional growth informs the problem of practice by considering concrete experiences with information and relevance. These two theoretical lenses offered a way in which to investigate the relationship between student engagement, relevance, social and emotion growth, and reducing the dropout rate in the contents of service-learning practices.

**Experiential Learning Theory.** Kolb’s (1984) explanation of Experiential Learning Theory places emphasis on the fact that learning is a person’s discovery of meaning through previous knowledge, perception, cognition, and experience. Students learn best when they can relate information given with actual experiences. The experiential education as promoted by John Dewey believed that learning must begin with experience and the curriculum must coincide with student’s interest (Dewey, 1900).

Through the incorporation of service-learning practices in the classroom from the traditional rote method of learning, students were provided with the opportunity to be involved in the discovery of a real life problem and situation where they were able to develop a deeper appreciation of their capacity to be contributing members of society. They became engaged in knowledge and experiences that were offered, they reflected on that knowledge periodically throughout the course, and reciprocated that knowledge into the community. The findings in this study signify that students become more engaged and grew personally and academically when
their learning was directly linked to something they could relate to. These findings were also consistent with the research on experiential learning theory that espouses concrete experiences with students’ grasping information when they can reflect on experiences and experiment with the ideas they are actually learning. It provided a greater depth of information processing and in turn, a greater impact on student learning (Sheckley and Keeton, 1997). In addition, when learning opportunities for students allowed for them to reflect, describe, discuss and construct meaning from the experience, they have the potential to develop more understanding and more comprehensive intellectual functioning Scales, et al (2006). The students, teachers, and administrators alike made reference to the fact that students were engaged, they grew socially, emotionally, and academically because of the service-learning opportunities that provided understanding with relevance and knowledge with service.

**Service-Learning Theory.** Giles’ (1991) explanation of Service-Learning Theory integrates instruction with significant community involvement that must be reflected upon in order to enrich the learning experiences and strengthen the importance of obtaining knowledge while fostering civic responsibility. Service-Learning encourages educational programs to make learning experiences relevant to student lives. In addition, Giles & Eyler (1994) found that knowledge is acquired through acquisition and application in a given situation.

The information derived from this study is consistent with the construct of Service-Learning Theory. Students, teachers, and administrators agreed that through the incorporation of service-learning practices into the curriculum, students experienced learning opportunities that were relevant to their lives. They were able to discovery, reflect, problem solve, and synthesize information. They engaged in shared inquiry, meaningful decision making, and integrating class work with community outreach. The information also revealed that through service-learning,
students developed a variety of 21st Century skills, were committed to their education because they understood the relevance, and developed a greater connection to their education. In addition, the aspect of Service-Learning Theory that was found relevant and most pertinent to this study was that it connected information with relevance, it helped students become more cognitively engaged in school and they grew academically. All the participants stated that because of the practices associated with service-learning, they were not bored but engaged in their education, they were able to understand the significance because of the association with real life situations; they developed higher order thinking skills, grew socially and emotionally, and developed stronger ties to their school and their community.

The relationship of experiential and service-learning theories as agents to student engagement, growth, and the possible reduction in student dropouts from school is evident in the findings of this study. The outcome of this study communicate to the theoretical frameworks of both Experiential and Service-Learning theories by demonstrating the value of linking the learning process of the individual student with learning that focuses on integrating meaningful community service with teaching, learning, and reflecting. In doing so, students were able to have authentic learning experiences, demonstrating their knowledge in service to others, all while making the connection and relevance and commitment to their education.

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

The findings of this study correlate well with the literature review presented earlier. The literature review was organized and broken down around the following three themes which successfully informed the implementation and understanding of this study:

1. Service-learning

2. Student engagement
3. Student dropouts

**Service-learning.** The findings of this study are in agreement with the current research which states that service-learning enhances their social and emotional development, and fosters their academic growth (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007; Deeley, 2010). When implemented effectively, service-learning practices provide meaningful learning for students through a multidisciplinary approach; learning from experience, reflective activities, citizenship and involvement in the community.

This study supports the idea that incorporating service-learning practices into the classroom curriculum allows students to develop skills necessary for their overall growth and academic achievement. Service-learning allows for students to discover, develop authentic learning goals, problem solve, link curriculum with a community need, demonstrate, and reflect. The research findings revealed that students, teachers, and administrators believed service-learning practices incorporated into the course curriculum was successful in helping students develop a variety of skills necessary in the 21st Century. They appeared to be better-rounded individuals. They developed a greater knowledge of understanding through discovery and relevance. Through their overall experience, students demonstrated growth socially, emotionally, and academically. They worked together and did so effectively. They were able to plan, deliver, and feel the impact of their actions. They responded to a community concern while growing into who they were as individuals.

Billig, Root, & Jesse (2005) stated that service-learning provides a strong connection between specific learning goals and the correlation of content standards which helps students to understand the academic connection, problem solve, and to organize and scaffold their learning. In doing so, students learn how to transfer knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to a
community setting and in doing so, recognize its relevance. “Giving students more opportunities for active participation and decision making is another factor that has strong empirical support in the literature on how people learn” (Billig, 2011). The findings from this study confirm this statement. Students were given opportunities to work together to be a part of the process from discovery to implementation. They set goals, made decisions and connections, used higher order thinking skills, became socially aware and showed an impact in the world outside of the classroom.

**Student engagement.** Marks (2000) states student engagement is students’ involvement with school, which includes their investment, interest, and efforts, as well as their understanding, emotional involvement, and their motivation to learn. Student engagement has been viewed to contain three separate components: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive and all are important elements for success. According to Schmidt, Marks, and Derrico (2004) one of the key factors associated with student engagement is active and collaborative learning. Billig (2002) reported that when students are provided with learning opportunities that are relevant to student’s lives through meaningful activity, their engagement affects them in multiple optimistic ways, more specifically, personal-social development, academic achievement, citizenship, and career awareness.

The findings in this study support the link between service-learning practices and student engagement. “Engagement is associated with positive academic outcomes, including achievement and persistence in school; and it is higher in classroom with supportive teachers and peers, challenging and authentic tasks, opportunities for choice, and sufficient structure” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Students, teachers and administrators reported that when all the components of service-learning were integrated into the core concepts, the experience
helped to motive and engage the students as they set ultimate goals that they wanted to understand and achieve. Their behavior engagement consisted of an increase in their overall effort, attention to detail and increased participation. Their emotional engagement consisted of an interest in their topic through discovery, relevance, and the value of not only the knowledge learned but the value it presented to others in the community. The students all responded to working collaboratively in groups and in the commitment to do their part. As for the cognitive aspect of engagement, all students displayed investment, effort, strategy, flexibility in problem solving, and overall willingness to learn.

Payne & Edwards (2010) found that engagement is present when students are able to make the connection between what they’ve learned in the classroom to something real and then applying that knowledge through service, students bond to something bigger than themselves, it becomes a real world connection. Through the service-learning opportunities provided, the participants reported that it became evident that when the students were responsible for discovering a community need and concern and developing a solution by educating community members with the information they learned, their engagement in their education increased. The findings from this study supported this fact and had shown that students displayed an increase in their learning through higher behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement as well as increased motivation because of the real-life connections to their academic content.

**Student dropouts.** Research has determined that there are many factors that contribute to students dropping out of school such as poor academic performance, low socioeconomic status, students who display behavioral problems, find school uninteresting, insignificant, and non-engaging. This study and its findings focused on the disengaged student. All too often, this choice to drop out is determined sometime within the middle school years. Payne and Edwards
(2010) reported the some of the major reasons students’ dropout of school were that classes were not interesting. Others felt disconnected and lacked a sense of engagement or enthusiasm for school. Other research suggests that students are more likely to drop out when they feel they don’t have a connection or they don’t see the relevance.

The findings in this study support the idea that service-learning practices increased student engagement, their interest and enthusiasm in their education, and their connection to the topic and community responsibilities. RMC Research Corporation (2003) found that students who participate in high quality service-learning experiences normally become more engaged in learning as shown by increased motivation, attendance, academic success, and positive attitudes towards learning. Participating students, teachers, and administrators, stated the service-learning impacted the students perception of school in a positive manner by showcasing their experience as a valuable way to learn by taking ownership in the discovery of their learning and the need to be highly informed because they developed a greater understanding of the meaning of the experience. Hu and Kuht (2002) suggest that students feel connected to school by the quality of their efforts dedicated to their education and purposeful educational activities that in turn meet their desired outcomes. The students also understood the importance of connecting what they learned with a real life community concern. They were adamant about the fact that they needed to be committed active participants because they had a responsibility not only to themselves, their group members and peers, but the community members as well. In addition, they felt a greater connection to their education because it had a purpose and they understood that purpose. They were more connected to their education when they made the correlation of education and real life experiences and were able to apply their learning to the experience. Service-learning helped students answer the often posed question of, why am I learning this, will I ever use it?
Based upon the examination of participants’ responses concerning their perception of student engagement while participating in a service-learning based classroom, enforced the existing bodies of literature that state engaged students who make the connection and understand the relevance of their education has the prospective of students wanting to continue with their education and potentially lowering the rate of students who want to dropout of school.

**Limitations**

While the results of this study are encouraging, the first and greatest limitation was the small sample size. This study focused on students in one English Language Arts skill building class, seven teachers, and three administrators. According to Patton (2002), the sample sizes “should be judged according to the purpose of the rational of the study” (p.245). In addition, Creswell (2009), states that data should be collected “in the participants setting” (p.4). In doing so, this provided a greater understanding of how service-learning impacted the students’ perception of engagement in their education.

Second, since the researcher is the assistant principal and author of this study, researcher bias was a validity threat. In addition, the Hawthorn effect should be considered based upon the researcher’s possible influence on some of the participants.

Lastly, this study only focused on the experiences of one relatively small conservative rural middle school. This narrow focus didn’t include the suburban and/or urban schools and the generalization of the findings may be compromised.

**Future Research Considerations**

To expand on the findings of service-learning practices on student engagement and their potential to stay in school, further research is needed with a longitudinal design to confirm and more fully explain the reasons behind these findings. Tracking students who have been involved
in service-learning opportunities from a younger age until they complete high school, compared to students who have not participated in service-learning opportunities could provide a greater awareness on the overall long term affects of service-learning, student engagement, and students’ potential to complete their education, and possibly close a gap in the literature.

In addition, it is important to recognize that students drop out of school sometime in their high school years. Further research should focus on the design and implementation of a service-learning curriculum instituted at the high school level starting in grade 9 in an effort to impact student engagement as well as student interest in school by allowing them to actively participate in and exercise their abilities in real life situations. Students need to be given authentic learning opportunities at the high school level that provide them with experiences that are immediately valuable, pertinent to their understanding and help them to make the connection and ultimately have the desire to complete their education.

Furthermore, it is imperative to continue to investigate the perception of faculty regarding the practices of service-learning and its effects on student engagement and academic achievement. Teachers in this study voiced concern regarding the need to be educated with the proper implementation of service-learning but that this type of practice has value that may not be present in other instructional methods. It would be important to learn more specific information about the value of service-learning with student engagement and academic growth by analyzing service-learning participants with classroom test results.

**Significance of the Study to the Field**

The perception of students, teachers, and administrators on the effects of service-learning practices on student engagement must be considered within the field of education. The findings obtained from this research can provide evidence that supports the need to incorporate service-
learning into course curriculum as a way to engage students, enhance their social and emotional growth, and has the potential to reduced student dropouts from school. This study built on and supports existing research that signified the effects that service-learning has on student engagement and their success.

The study also explored the perceptions of teachers and administrations thoughts on providing an educational program that made learning experiences relevant to students. When learning is made relevant as is the case with service-learning, students generally develop greater school engagement, have better attitudes towards school, better attendance, and increase problem solving skills, and their overall academic achievement (Billig, 2004). Through this study students, teachers, and administrators who participated in the study developed a greater understanding of the impact service-learning practices has on students, their increased engagement in learning and desire to complete their education. Everyone involved gained valuable insight on the benefits of service-learning as a teaching practice. In addition, it provided significant information for our academic leaders to understand the need to create and provide learning opportunities that reflect the environment of the student by allowing them to actively participate in and exercise their abilities in real life situations. As one teacher said:

Incorporating service-learning into the curriculum is a good practice not only because of the benefits it provides to learners, but also because it fills a need in the community. Students learn the importance of giving back to their community, and feel good about making a contribution. Students connect their classroom learning to something bigger than themselves outside the classroom…they become engaged learners…they want to stay in the classroom.
She also expressed a desire for more teachers to incorporate service-learning into their teaching practices. She didn’t understand why this practice wasn’t more prevalent throughout our school district and hoped that more teachers would see the benefits it had on our students’ academically, socially, and emotionally.

**Conclusion**

Through analysis of the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators with regard to service-learning being incorporated as a teaching practice in the classroom, the majority of the participants agreed that service-learning increased student engagement, made learning purposeful and relevant, enhanced their academic self-concept, improved their personal growth, and had the potential to reduce student dropouts from school.

Based on the research relating service-learning with student engagement, student engagement with student understanding the relevance of school and their desire to stay in school, and based on the evidence from this particular study, it can be confirmed that all participating members perceived service-learning as an effective teaching practice that improves student engagement and overall academic achievement.

In conclusion, this study through an English Language Arts skill building course at a Blackstone Valley Middle School that incorporated service-learning as a practice in the classroom, contributed to a greater awareness amongst the Blackstone Valley School community regarding the effectiveness of service-learning. The positive effects and elements that emerged from analyzing the data should be considered by teachers and administrators alike in an effort to provide learning opportunities for student that will increase their engagement, foster their growth, and form a commitment to stay in school and finish their education, namely, via service-learning practices.
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Appendix A

Letter of Consent to Superintendent and Middle School Principal

Dear Superintendent Davis,

My name is Janis Laporte and I am the assistant principal of the Frederick W. Hartnett Middle School. I am currently working on my doctoral thesis in administrative leadership at Northeastern University. I am conducting an inductive qualitative research study that will examine whether participation in a service learning based curriculum will help to increase student engagement and have the potential to decrease student dropouts.

This study involves collecting data from students and their teacher and I am requesting permission to solicit voluntary participation from one of your staff members and her students. The data collection will involve reflective student journals, observations and student focus groups interviews. The total time commitment from individual participants involved in the interview process will not exceed more than one hour.

All willing participants (with the consent of their parent and/or guardian) will be asked to return a signed consent form. I have a copy of the recruitment letter, parent/guardian consent and student assent form, as well as sample questions for the personal interviews that will be used to collect the data for this study for your review if you would like to review the same.

It is my hope to acquire and identify tangible information concerning effective educational practices that develop and maintain students’ interests while providing relevance to knowledge being presented with real life situations. In addition, I aspire to increase teachers’ perception of characteristics that increase student engagement and propose educational practices that provide students with experiences that are immediately valuable and pertinent and will help to shape the students’ cognition, attitudes, perception, and beliefs about the relevance of school.

Please don’t hesitate to get in touch with me should you require additional information with regard to this proposed study.

Sincerely,

Janis Laporte, AP
Frederick W. Hartnett Middles School

I have received and read the contents of this letter requesting consent to conduct a basic qualitative study on student engagement, service learning, and dropout reduction and hereby give you my consent.

____________________________________  ____________________
Perry P. Davis, Superintendent     Date
Appendix B

Letter of Consent to Parent and/or Guardian (Recruitment Letter)

Dear Parent(s), Guardians,

As many of you may know, my name is Janis Laporte and I am the Assistant Principal of Frederick W. Hartnett Middle School. I am currently working on a doctoral research project that will examine if participation in a service learning based curriculum will help to increase student engagement and therefore have the potential to decrease the student dropout rate.

I am contacting you because your child’s teacher has agreed to participate in my study and I would like to invite your child to participate. Participating in this research consists of your child maintaining a reflective journal that will be part of the class curriculum and being part of a focus group where a face-to-face interview with me will be conducted. I will ask questions such as: 1. How did you perceive the service learning program? 2. Did you find it engaging? 3. What aspects of the program made it work or not work? 4. What parts of the program can be improved? 5. Has the service learning program influenced your decision to stay in school? I will also conduct observations throughout the class and field experience.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. Your child does not have to participate and they can refuse to answers any questions. Students who opt out of participation will be allowed to complete assignments or read silently while questions are being administered. If you agree to allow your child to participate, please sign and return the attached parent consent form to the main office of the Frederick W. Hartnett Middle School no later than ____________________.

If you have any questions or concerns about your child participating in this research you may contact me at: laporte.j@husky.neu.edu or 508-876-0190. You can also contact Dr. Sara Ewell, the Principal Investigator overseeing my research at s.ewell@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about you and your child’s rights in this research you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Boston, MA 02115. Tel. 617-373-4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Sincerely,

Janis Laporte
Doctoral Student Northeastern University
Appendix C

Parent/Guardian and Student Assent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Name of Investigators: Janis Laporte, Graduate Student, Dr. Sara Ewell, Principal Investigator

Title of Project: Service Learning & Student Engagement in School

We are inviting your child to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, and the researcher will have explained it to your child in his/her class. You and/or your child may ask this person any questions that you, he/she may have. You do not have to allow your child to participate if you do not want him/her to. If you decide to consent to your child participating, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why is my child being asked to take part in this research study?
Your son/daughter is being asked to participate in this study because he/she is a middle school student participating in a class that offers a service learning curriculum.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of this research is to develop, validate, and determine the effectiveness of a service learning based curriculum and its potential to increase student engagement and decrease student dropouts.

What will my child be asked to do?
If you allow for your son/daughter to take part in this study, he/she will be asked to:

- Maintain a reflective student journal (which is also part of his/her class requirements);
- Be observed periodically throughout the course and the field experience.
- Take part in a focus group whereby face-to-face interviews will be conducted regarding his/her thoughts and feelings relative to his/her participation in a service learning based curriculum.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to my child?
I do not foresee participation in this project posing any risk to your child. However, the information learned from this study may help schools better understand the relationship between service learning based curriculum, student engagement, and the potential to decrease student dropouts.

Who will see the information about my child?
Your son/daughter’s participation in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Any reports or publications based on this research will only use group data and will not identify your child, your child’s school, or any individual being part of this project. All audiotapes and responses will be destroyed after analysis.
Will my child benefit by being in this study?
There are no direct benefits to your child for participating in this study. However, it is hoped that the results of this study may lead to a greater understanding of educational strategies that increase student engagement.

If I do not want my child to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
Participation in this study is voluntary and your child may withdraw at any time and your child can refuse to answer any question. In addition, your child will not be putting his/her name on anything except for this form and all results will be reported anonymously. Your decision to allow your child to participate or not will have no effect on your child’s standing in the school.

Will my child be paid for his/her participation?
There is no compensation offered for participation.

Who can I contact if I have any questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this research you may contact me at: laporte.j@husky.neu.edu or #508-876-0190. You can also contact Dr. Sara Ewell, the Principal Investigator overseeing my research at s.ewell@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my child’s rights as a participant?
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.

I, _______________________________, parent/guardian of __________________________.

______ DO grant permission for my child to participate in the research study.

______ DO NOT grant permission for my child to participate in the research study

_________________________________ ________________________________
Parent/Guardian Signature Date
Appendix D

Open-ended Student Interview Questions

1. How do you perceive your participation in service learning impacting your learning and engagement in school?

2. As part of your service learning experience, how did it impact your social and emotional growth?

3. Does participating in service learning impact your academic and personal growth at Frederick W. Hartnett Middle School? If so, how?

4. Does participating in service learning curriculum make you feel more connected and committed to their education? If so, why?

5. How did you perceive the service learning program?
   a. Did you find it engaging?
   b. What aspects of the program made it work or not work?
   c. What parts of the program can be improved?