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Service-learning is an instructional strategy that links academic learning with the community's needs. It provides opportunities for learning to occur outside of the traditional classroom setting. Service-learning promotes students' abilities to become critical and reflective thinkers as they apply learned concepts to relevant issues in their communities.

This qualitative research study used a phenomenological approach to describe the essence of the service-learning experiences for high school students. This study explored students' perceptions of the benefits they receive from service-learning participation and their desire to participate in service-learning. The study also examined the connection between high school students' participation in service requirements as a direct link to the development or enhancement of their character.

Participants in the study were juniors and seniors in high school. The study participants were immersed in service-learning experiences and were working toward earning their Service-Learning Diploma. Data were collected from face to face interviews, focus group sessions, and field observations. These multiple methods of data collection were used to gain an in-depth view of the essence of service-learning participation for the study participants. Data analysis revealed common themes which expressed the benefits high school students received from their participation in service-learning. The research findings revealed that service-learning participation enhanced the development of the study participants' interpersonal skills, leadership, career awareness,

academic development, and their moral and performance character. The findings also revealed that the study participants desired to make a difference in their community.

The benefits of service-learning from the lens of the participants' evidences the positive impact service-learning participation has on the lives of high school students. Concluding thoughts and recommendations for the implementation of service-learning are outlined.

POWER TO YOUNG HANDS: AN EXPLORATION INTO STUDENT EXPERIENCES  
FROM SERVICE-LEARNING PARTICIPATION

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of my parents, Ed Lee and Hester S. Underwood. Thank you for instilling in me the importance of education and a love for learning. I only wish I had reached this accomplishment while you were here with me.  
Momma and Daddy I love you much!



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## **CHAPTER I**

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Growing up during segregation in the inner city of a large urban area my life revolved around two major institutions: church and school. Giving to those who were less fortunate was stressed in school and in church. Even though my family did not have an abundance of food and clothing, our needs were always met. I learned the difference between needs and wants very early in life. I also took delight in helping others. I would run errands for the elderly ladies in our neighborhood and collect canned goods for the holiday baskets at school and church that were given to families in need. Learning, especially reading was easy for me. So I spent my summer days helping younger children in the neighborhood with their spelling and reading. I can always remember wanting to help others. I knew I wanted to become a teacher when I was very young. I went to college and majored in elementary education. After more than a decade of teaching I entered the field of educational administration. The desire to help others is a part of my being. It is who I am.

Servant leadership is the core of my leadership style. I do not view leadership as a position of power but one of service. I am compassionate and I possess a giving spirit. Reflecting on my upbringing I realize that people are at the center of my value system. Ott (as cited in Deal & Peterson, 1999) states, "Values can be defined as a standard of goodness, quality, or excellence that undergirds behaviors and decision making, and what

people care about” (p. 26). Deal and Peterson (1999) affirms, “Values are a deeper sense of what is important. Values focus attention and define success” (p. 26).

The vision and mission of the school that I serve as principal is to graduate students who are college- and career-ready and prepared for life. To achieve our mission and vision our school focuses on the tenets of scholarship, leadership, character, and service. Students at our school participate in various activities that promote these tenets in and outside of our school. Community service is sponsored by school clubs and is a landmark of our school. The news media has recognized our school for many of their community service projects. Projects have included the following:

- Collecting old towels and blankets for animal shelters;
- Making door snakes out of cloth and bird seed to give to the elderly to put at their door to keep the cold air out during the winter months;
- Collecting hats and mittens to give to area elementary school children to help them keep warm while they stand at bus stops waiting for the arrival of the school bus;
- Caroling at area nursing homes.

These are indeed meaningful activities which were of benefit to both our students who provided the service and the receivers of the kindness of my students. My students willingly volunteer their time and efforts through community service. Providing service in our community is directly linked to our tenets of leadership and character and is indirectly linked to our tenet of scholarship.

Accomplishing our school tenets of scholarship, leadership, service, and character are essential to achieving our school mission and vision as we graduate students prepared for college, career and life. Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, and Smith (2006) state, “The purpose of public schooling requires that schools seek to improve both academic and character education” (p. 449). Shields (2011) supports their view and adds, “The goal of education is not acquiring knowledge alone, but developing the dispositions to seek and use knowledge in effective and ethical ways” (p. 49). Martin Luther King, Jr. stressed the significance of character and academics in a sermon he delivered in 1959 with these words “the ultimate aim of education is the development of individuals who combine a “tough mind” with a “tender heart” like “the “cunning of a serpent with the gentleness of a dove” (Kavaloski & Kavaloski, 2011, p. 25).

Five years ago, Dr. Joseph M. Nelson was hired as the superintendent of Millerton County Schools. Millerton County Schools (MCS) is a large school system located. Millerton County Schools serves approximately 75,000 students. During Dr. Nelson’s first months as superintendent, he spent time visiting schools and meeting with community leaders. He reached out to the community with his “Concerns, Ideas and Suggestions” campaign. The district’s strategic plan was developed from the information he received during the six months of his campaign. The district’s strategic plan contained eight areas which were developed from the input of internal and external district stakeholders. The areas in the strategic plan would be launched at designated time frames over a four year period.

There was very little surprise that the community responses focused on quality teaching and instruction for all students at every school within the school system. In addition to academic achievement for all students, the voice of the community expressed their concerns for safe and orderly learning environments in every school. The community stakeholders asked that the schools share the responsibility for the development of students' character and values with parents and the community at large. It was evident that the community longed for the return of character education in their schools.

Dr. Nelson, the superintendent of Millerton County Schools learned from his Suggestions, Ideas, and Concerns Campaign that the community was in support of students in MCS developing a value system via character education. It became clear to him that the community's advocacy for character education was just as important in their eyes as students' academic achievement. This same value system of goodness was instilled in me as I grew up in my home, school and church and it dictates who I am today. Benninga et al. (2006) conclude that students who attend physically and psychologically safe schools staffed by caring adults who ask their students to demonstrate care for others, achieve academically and make intuitive sense as well.

Millerton County Schools responded to the concerns and suggestions of its community as it developed its strategic plan. In response to the suggestions of the communities' stakeholders to focus on student's character development as well as their academic achievement, Millerton County Schools launched a character development initiative. Area Five in the district's strategic plan focused on Safe Schools and Character

Development. Under the umbrella of character development were three components: character education, civic education, and service learning. The character development initiative was launched in 2010. The Millerton County Schools developed district wide student service learning requirements in an effort to educate children on multiple levels and support students' character development in grades K-12. According to Dr. King, "Character plus intelligence is the true goal of education" (King, 2004, p. 8). It was clear that character and intelligence were goals the community in Dalesville County wanted for the students of Millerton County Schools. Additionally, high school students in Millerton County Schools would have the opportunity to earn service-learning diplomas and service learning exemplary awards for completing a pre-determined number of service learning hours.

As I read MCS's Character Development Initiative it was evident that service learning was more than students merely volunteering their time to benefit others. The work the students at my high school performed was providing a service but a piece was missing, the learning. Therefore, I became very interested in MCS's Character Development Initiative especially the area of service-learning. As a high school principal I desire to become more knowledgeable of the personal benefits that high school students obtain from participating in service-learning.

### **Problem Statement**

MCS character development initiative focuses on three fundamental aspects of creating responsible, caring and contributing citizens: character education, civic education and service-learning. The MCS Character Education Manual (2012) states,

“By connecting academic learning to meaningful community service experiences, the initiative reinforces classroom instruction while offering students unique, life-transforming opportunities to give back to their communities” (p. 8). Character Education is the deliberate effort for people to understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values and is integrated in instruction and school related activities (MCS, brochure, n.d.). Civic Education includes a core curriculum and teaching strategies that give students the knowledge, skills, virtues, and confidence to actively participate in democratic life (MCS, brochure, n.d.). Service-learning is a way of teaching and learning that connects positive and meaningful action in the community with academic learning, personal growth and civic responsibility which takes learning out of the classroom and into the lives of others (MCS, brochure, n.d.). Service-learning helps develop citizenship and good character while providing direct connections to the academic curriculum (MCS, Service-Learning Handbook, n.d., p. 3).

MCS directly links service-learning to the development of the other two fundamentals of the Character Development Initiative, character education and civic education. MCS has identified seven character themes that are integrated throughout the curriculum. The themes are:

- Courage – The determination to do the right thing, even when others do not; to follow your conscience rather than the crowd.
- Integrity – To have inner strength, to be truthful, trustworthy, and honest in all things; acting justly and honorably.
- Kindness – Being considerate, courteous, and helpful and understanding of others; to show care, compassion, friendship and generosity.
- Perseverance – To be persistent in the pursuit of worthy objectives in spite of difficulty, opposition or discouragement

- Respect – to show high regard for other people, self, property and country; to understand all people have value as human beings.
- Responsibility – To be dependable in carrying out obligations and duties; reliable and consistent in words and conduct; accountable for your own actions.
- Self-Discipline – To demonstrate hard work and commitment to purpose; to be in control of your words, actions, impulses and desires and give your best in every situation. (MCS, brochure, n.d., n.p.)

MCS further states, “Simply put, character is about making the right choices” (MCS, brochure, n.d., n.p.).

Lickona (as cited in Massey, 1993) states that, “Character is formed in the crucible of experience” (p. 1). Therefore, should the character of students who participate in service-learning be developed or enhanced from their experience? Traub (as cited in Cranford, 2011) states, “Researchers across the board agree that the effects of character development are extremely difficult to measure because character building is a slow, gradual, ‘soul turning’ process” (p. 44). According to Cranford (2011), “Character development is a long-term, lifelong process that starts in our youth but plays out well into our adult lives as a result of a grand summation of daily choices and habits” (p. 44). MCS affirms the above researchers’ views on the development of character in students. MCS states, “If we can emphasize it (character education) from the moment a child begins school, character development can equip students with the tools and motivation necessary to be the change they wish to see in the world” (MCS, brochure, n.d., n.p.).

Character Development is a K-12 Initiative in MCS. MCS stresses the importance of the implementation of character education throughout the curriculum beginning in the formative years of elementary school. In its character education

literature, MCS states, “Alone character development is a brick in an unfinished building. To be effective, it must function in concert with the tenets of a good education and be reinforced at home and in the community” (MCS, brochure, n.d., n.p.). The initiative states that it takes the school, home, work, and community working together to instill the character traits of good citizenship and social responsibility in students (MCS, brochure, n.d., n.p.).

Research states that service learning promotes civic and social responsibility (Billig, 2000). According to Kaye (2010),

Service-learning can be defined as a research-based teaching method where guided or classroom learning is applied through action that addresses an authentic community need in a process that allows for youth initiative and provides structured time for reflection on the service experience and demonstration of acquired skills and knowledge. (p. 1)

The definition focuses on the extension of academic instruction or classroom learning beyond the walls of the classroom. The extension of learning occurs when students apply the skills learned in the classroom to real life projects, which positively impact or benefit an agency or need in their community. After completing the service, the students should enter a period of reflection allowing students the opportunity to consider the relationship between knowledge learned in the classroom and the actual service. “In the context of service-learning, service is the implementation of a plan, designed or influenced by students that combines classroom learning with meeting an authentic community need” (Kaye, 2010, p. 10). Cranford (2011) affirms, “Service-learning with a Social Studies backdrop is an ideal setting to integrate character development within the academic

curriculum as it provides a natural setting to take learning out of the traditional classroom and tie the content to real community needs” (p. 23). In the years to come, will it be possible to identify high school students who have been immersed in MCS character initiative beginning in elementary school by their display of MCS desired character traits? The connection between MCS high school students participation in service requirements as a link to character development will be explored in this research study.

### **Significance of the Study**

The district rewards students who perform a required number of service-learning hours with a service learning diploma and the right to wear a service-learning cord at graduation. The number of hours is set at 175 hours of service learning during the 2012 school year, 225 hours of service during the 2013 school year, and 250 hours of service-learning hours during the 2014 school year and beyond. This is the manner in which MCS recognizes the students who answer the challenge to lead and learn with strong character (MCS, Service-Learning Handbook, n.d., p. 5). Students who devote 75 hours of service-learning during the 2012 school year and 100 hours of service learning during the 2013 school year and beyond will receive the Service-learning Exemplary Award. The school district provides students with a list of the ways they can earn service-learning hours. The list includes service in non-profit/city agencies, religious organizations, childcare services, school clubs, sports, performing arts, ROTC, money and other services, court mandated services, politics, recruitment, animals, and miscellaneous. Students may also earn service-learning hours for service which is an extension of classroom instruction. Students who meet the requirements for the Service-Learning

Exemplary Award and Service- Learning Diploma are invited to MCS Celebrate Serving. This celebration recognizes students for their accomplishments in service learning. The event symbolizes the importance MCS places on character development and service learning. Students are eligible to win prizes from area businesses including a new car.

Students in MCS can earn service-learning hours for their participation in *service learning* linked to classroom instruction and from performing *community service* at sites MCS approves. Both of these forms of serving provide valuable experiences for the students in MCS but yet there is a difference. *Community service* or volunteerism is service performed for free, usually for a charity or a community effort. Payment is not received for the time, work, or material but rewards are received in the form of satisfaction, contribution, and greater understanding of the world beyond the classroom (National Youth Leadership Council, 2010). Furco (2001) distinguishes community service from service-learning in the following manner. The primary intended beneficiary from community service is the recipient of the service. The connection of the service activity to the curriculum is peripheral and the nature of the service activity is usually based on a social cause. Whereas the primary intended beneficiary from service learning is both the receiver of the service and the provider of the service, the students. The connection of the service activity to the curriculum is integral and the nature of the service activity is based on an academic discipline.

The service in service-learning can be classified as direct service, indirect service, advocacy, or research. When students provide direct service the service directly affects and involves the recipient. With indirect service students do not see the recipients but

their actions are of benefit to the community or environment. The intent of service in the form of advocacy is to create awareness of or promote action on some issue of public interest. Research activities involve students gathering and reporting information in the public interest.

The 2012 graduating class of MCS was made up of 4,600 students. Of this number, 531 received the Service-learning Diploma and 358 received the Service-learning Exemplary Award. Approximately 1/5 of the graduating class of 2012 was recognized for their work with service-learning during their high school career. However, it is unclear if these students earned the recognition for authentic service-learning as an extension of classroom learning or for providing community service to an agency which meets MCS established criteria. It is also unclear whether service-learning is having an impact on MCS students and if so, what is the nature of the impact.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study will focus on students' experiences from participating in service-learning. Through this study, I will examine if service-learning enhances or develops student's character and explore why students participate in service-learning.

The study will investigate the following research questions:

1. What influence does service learning have on high school students' development?
  - A. Does service learning impact students' development of character?
2. Why do students desire to earn the service-learning diploma or exemplary award?

### **Summary and Overview**

This study will seek to better understand why high school students in MCS desire to earn the service-learning diploma or service-learning award upon graduation from high school. The study will explore the meaning of these awards to the recipients. I will explore and gain an understanding of the personal benefits students receive from their participation in service-learning. The goal of this study is to provide information to MCS, other school systems and educational agencies about the benefits high school students receive from participating in service-learning.

The following chapter will explore various bodies of research and literature that apply to this study. Included in the chapter will be a review of literature focused on the definition of and the implementation of service-learning and character education in today's schools. Research and literature on service-learning and community service will be reviewed. The research will focus on the similarities and differences in these forms of volunteering. Finally the chapter will review research focused on the connection or linkage between service-learning and character education.

Chapter III describes the research methodology used to conduct this study. Key terms used in the study will be defined. The research setting and the criteria for participants involved in the study will be explained. This chapter will describe the methods used for data collection and data analysis. Strategies used to monitor subjectivity and trustworthiness will be explained. This chapter will also describe the benefits and potential risks participants may incur as a result of their participation in the study.

Chapter IV will report findings from data analysis. It will reveal themes that emerged from collected data. Chapter V will share suggestions for further research as an extension of this research study. It will also provide recommendation for further actions to be considered by local and state school systems.

## CHAPTER II

### INTRODUCTION TO SERVICE-LEARNING AND CHARACTER EDUCATION

Over the past decade our schools have operated under an education reform referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The intent of the reform was to ensure that every child received a good, quality education so no child would be left behind. The definition of good and quality education was based solely on scores students and schools received from standardized test. Passing a test was equated to a child receiving a good quality education. Schools and school district who made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) based on student test scores were celebrated and acknowledged for providing good quality education to its clients, the students.

Accountability is a term well known to states and school districts. The federal government through NCLB reform implemented systems of accountability as a means to measure the performance of schools. These systems are primarily based on some type of end of course multiple choice exam. Then President George Bush stated,

Accountability is an exercise in hope. When we raise academic standards, children raise their academic sights. When children are regularly tested, teachers know where and how to improve. When scores are known to parent, parents are empowered to push for change, when accountability for our schools is real, the results for our children are real. (Zhao, 2009, n.p.)

With mandated measures of accountability, standards and high stake testing our schools focused all their attention and funding on instruction especially in the areas of reading, math and science.

The purpose of education in the 21st century is to prepare students to become civically responsible, independent decision makers, appreciative of the arts and humanities, college and career ready while striving to reduce inequalities (Cuban, 2010). Rose (2009) states “The major goal of American education is to prepare the young to make a living” (p. 4). He further states that parents send their children to school for intellectual, social, civic, ethical, and aesthetic reasons as well. According to Gauld (2012), “The basic purpose of education should be character development, where learning is centered on values derived from the family” (p. 1).

The integration of character education into school curriculum and culture was referenced in NCLB legislature (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). However, schools felt pressured to ensure all students scored at a level of proficiency on standardized multiple choice tests. The implementation of service-learning and the teaching of character education were put on the back burner. It is my belief that educators understood the worth and value of service-learning and character education in the lives of children in their schools yet their emphasis was directed toward testing and assessments. Under NCLB teachers felt pressured to devote their time and instruction to what really mattered in the eyes of the public. In this system of accountability, it was clear that the test scores were what really mattered.

### **Service-learning: Regaining Ground**

Service-learning has become more popular in recent decades (Billig, 2000). The rise in the popularity and growing trend for service-learning in K -12 schools was due to two perceived needs: “the reform of youth and the reform of education” (Conrad & Hedin, as cited in Billig, 2000, p. 685). Billig (2000) attributes the resurfacing of service-learning to several factors. First, the community recognized their obligation to help students become active members of their community by involvement in meeting community needs. Secondly, the community recognized the need to increase student knowledge and understanding of the operation of community and their responsibility to encourage and contribute to students’ altruism and caring for others. These causes as cited by researchers point to the need or desire to change the views and actions of students in their communities through their education.

After the tragedy of 9/11, Americans developed a better appreciation for those who provide service to our communities such as emergency workers, fire fighters, and police officers. The election of President Obama in 2008 helped to further revitalize Americans engagement in community service. President Obama's initiative to “Renew America Together,” was a call to service that was launched on January 19, 2008. The goal of the initiative was to reignite the American tradition of service and volunteerism (Courson, 2011). President Obama made it clear in an election speech that community service would be an important theme of his presidency. He stated,

Your own story and the American story are not separate . . . they are shared. And they will both be enriched if we stand up together and answer a new call to service to meet the challenges of our new century . . . I won’t just ask for your

vote as a candidate; I will ask for your service and your active citizenship when I am president of the United States. This will not be a call issued in one speech or program; this will be a cause of my presidency. (Change.Gov, “The Obama-Biden Plan”)

In April of 2009 President Obama followed through on some of these promises when he signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, a national service bill that was passed in both houses of Congress with broad bipartisan support. As the President explained, “The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act is about ‘connecting deeds to needs’—it will open tremendous new avenues of opportunity for Americans to help their country get back on the right track in those many areas where government cannot do it all” (WhiteHouse.Gov, 2013, n.p.). As one connects deeds to needs they are providing service based on an identified area of needed support and assistance which is service-learning.

President Obama and Vice President Biden are charging all American from all walks of life with the responsibility to serve their nation and help address the problems in our country. They are also committed to building the infrastructure and providing the resources that will make it possible. A part of the Obama-Biden Plan focuses on the integration of service into learning. The plan addresses expanding service-learning in our nation’s schools. It sets a goal that all middle and high school students perform 50 hours of community service a year. National guidelines will be developed for service-learning and schools will be provided tools to develop programs and to document student experience (Change.Gov, n.d., n.p.). President Obama stated

People who love their country can change it. It's as simple as that. All that's required on your part is a willingness to make a difference. That is, after all, the beauty of service. Anyone can do it. You don't need to be a community organizer, or a Senator—or a Kennedy—or even a President to bring change to people's lives. (The White House Blog, "A Call to Service")

With our President's renewed emphasis on community involvement and service, now is the time for service-learning not to become as Furco and Billing (2001) have referenced it as "the fad of the day" (p. 245) but a priority in our schools' curriculum.

Service-learning in our nation's schools can engage students in their learning in a manner in which they will desire to make a difference and become the change in their communities. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Everybody can be great . . . because anyone can serve" (2004, p. 8). Service-learning in our schools is the avenue for all students to become great as they provide service to others in their community.

### **Service-learning: A Definition**

Researchers such as Shelley Billig, Andrew Furco, Susan Root and Cathryn Kaye are advocates for service-learning and conduct or review research focused on school based service-learning. The term service-learning has been defined in many ways and its definition is still a source of disagreement among researchers. Sigmon (as cited in Furco, 1996) defines service-learning as "an experiential education approach that is premised on reciprocal learning" (p. 2). The reciprocal learning occurs when the provider of the service, usually the student, and the recipient of the service both learn from the experience. Sigmon (as cited in Furco, 1996) further states, "Service-learning only occurs when both the provider and recipient of the service benefit" (p. 2). The National Society for Experiential Education (as cited in Billig, 2000) defines service learning as,

“any careful monitored service experience in which a student has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experience” (p. 659). Billig (2002b), Billig (2009), and Kaye (2010) all agree that service-learning is experiential where students learn by active involvement in the experience, project or activity. Barbara Jacoby (as cited in Bergstrom, 2004) concurs with these researchers that service-learning is a form of experiential education and she adds, “Service-learning engages students in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (p. 18).

Anderson (1998) states,

Service-learning may be described as both a philosophy of education and an instructional method. As a philosophy of education, service-learning reflects the belief that education should develop social responsibility and prepare students to be involved citizens in democratic life. As an instructional method service-learning involves a blending of service activities with the academic curriculum in order to address real community needs while student learn through active engagement. (p. 9)

Kaye (2010) and the National Youth Leadership Council (2010) both agree with Anderson’s description of service-learning as an instructional method. NYLC (2010) states, “Service-learning is a method of teaching that enriches learning by engaging students in meaningful service in their schools and communities, and integrating that service with established curricula or learning objectives” (p. 2). Robinson and Barnett (1996) concur that service-learning is an instructional method and speak of the importance of linking academic instruction to community needs. They also address the

development of higher level reasoning skills in students as another dimension in defining service-learning as an instructional strategy. Robinson and Barnett (1996) state, “Service-learning integrates community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical reflective thinking and civic responsibility” (p. 1). Learn and Serve America defines service-learning as a strategy that “engages students in the educational process, using what they learn in the classroom to solve real-life problems” (Corporation for National and Community Service, as cited in McCafferty, 2011, p. 24). Learn and Serve America's definition affirms Robinson and Barnett's (1996) notion that service-learning promotes students' abilities to become critical and reflective thinkers thus being able to apply learned strategies to relevant issues.

The Corporation for National Service (as cited in Billig, 2000) has a narrower definition. The term service-learning means a method under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that:

- is conducted in and meets the needs of a community;
- is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program and with the community;
- helps foster civic responsibility;
- is integrated into and enhanced the (core) academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community-service program in which the participants are enrolled; and
- provides structured items for the students or participants to reflect on service experience. (p. 659)

The differences in the definition of service-learning are also linked to the question, what is service-learning? The answer to this question has garnered a division in the opinions

of researchers in the field. They are divided on their opinions regarding the classification of service-learning as a philosophy, educational program or an instructional method, strategy or tool. Those who refer to service-learning as a philosophy usually associate it with school reform. Senator Edward Kennedy once noted, “Service-learning should be a central component of current efforts to reform education” (Kielsmeier, 2000, p. 653). Education reform is the name given to an internal or external process with the goal of improving public education (Zhao, 2009). Educational reform is intended to eliminate or close some existing gap or gaps in schools. These gaps may be in academic achievement, graduation rate, attendance, etc. As a school reform strategy, Kielsmeier (2010) states, “Service-learning creates a two-way bridge of interaction and shared purpose, resulting in better schools, stronger communities, and improved student learning. Through service-learning schools and students alike are redefined as contributors to the community” (p. 8). In this light as a philosophy service-learning is viewed as a means to “reinvigorate the central role that schools can play in developing responsible, caring citizens who deeply understand democracy and the meaning of civic responsibility or as a way to operationalize constructivist theories of learning” (Billig, 2000, p. 660).

Service-learning is viewed as a powerful way to actively engage students in their own learning by researchers who categorize service-learning as an instructional strategy. As an instructional strategy service-learning must be aligned with instructional standards and integrated in the curriculum. According to Billig and Jesse (2008), “Service-learning is an instructional approach whereby young people perform service as a way of learning

important curricular objectives” (p. 21). Service-learning becomes a tool to enhance teaching and student learning, rather than being viewed as a stand-alone or an add-on.

Those who view service-learning as a program generalize it as an after school program, a short term activity, or an elective course. The goal of service-learning as a program is geared toward a community connection. Howard (1993) concluded from research he conducted within the state of Maryland that the advantages of service-learning were too obvious to leave to elective status with students given the option to or not to participate. Historically in education, programs are short lived usually without substance, and sustainability, they come and go.

While agreeing upon a universal definition and classification of service-learning may be a challenge for researchers there is some agreement regarding this concept. Researchers agree that service-learning involves both service to the community and learning which is connected to the curriculum (Billig, 2000, 2002b, 2010; Furco, 1996; Furco & Billig, 2001; Kaye, 2010). Service-learning as pedagogy moves teaching and learning from the 20th century style of teacher directed instruction, laden with lectures, and heavily reliant upon textbook based instruction into the 21st century. It affords students the opportunity to become actively engaged in and take ownership of and for their learning.

### **Service-learning: Its Ingredients and Recipe**

Even though the proponents of service-learning differ on their definition of service-learning, and its classification as pedagogy there is general consensus on the components of service-learning. Researchers agree that service-learning activities must

meet minimum standards in order to be effective and beneficial to all parties (Billig, 2000; Kaye, 2010). Stagg (2004) states that the minimum standards must include curricular integration, a response to real community needs, a sustained duration of time, youth decision-making voice, ongoing reflection, and analysis (pp. 1–2). The National Youth Leadership Council in their K-12 Service-Learning Standards (as cited in Kaye, 2010) expands these minimum standards to include eight elements that must be present to ensure a successful service-learning experience.

1. **Meaningful Service.** The service must be meaningful. Meaningful service refers to individuals feeling a sense of purpose and believing that the activities in which they engage are relevant and have intrinsic worth (Billig, 2009). Billig (2009) states, “Meaningfulness is associated with emotional investment in an issue and a desire to make a difference through service” (p. 135). If students are emotionally hooked or linked to the opportunity they are more likely to fully invest their time and efforts throughout the project. Meaningful service allows students to stay focused and committed to reaching the intended outcome of the service being provided.
2. **Linked to the Curriculum.** Service-learning must be linked to the curriculum. Teachers must strategically connect the curriculum standards or objective to the content of the service activity. “When service learning is employed as a teaching method to meet designated content and skills, academics come alive” (NYLC as cited in Kaye, 2010, p. 14). Service and learning when linked to the curriculum are like threads woven together through a quilt. The quilt is

the curriculum with the service and learning as the threads which reinforce the concepts.

3. Reflection. Reflection is a key component of any service learning experience (Billig, 2009). Students must be given opportunities to reflect before, after, and during the service-learning project. According to Billig (2009) the reflection must be cognitively challenging. They define cognitive challenging as “presenting the learner with a problem or situation that the learner cannot tackle with his/her existing cognitive structure” (p. 137). Reflection is intended to stretch students’ critical thinking and problem solving techniques.
4. Diversity. Diversity in service-learning can be applied in many different dimensions. Diversity can afford students the opportunity to interact with people from various racial and ethnic populations and with various abilities. When students close the pages of the textbook and learn through their experiences of interacting with people the term diversity takes on a more relevant meaning. Research by Billig (2009) concludes that students who socialize with individuals from multiple cultural backgrounds are more likely to be tolerant of diverse ideas, accepting of people unlike themselves, and culturally aware.
5. Youth Voice. Service-learning gives youth a voice. Youth voice has been defined as “the inclusion of young people as a meaningful part of the creation and implementation of service opportunities” (Billig, Brown, & Turnbull, 2008, p. 1). Students who participate in service learning are given the

opportunity to take initiative, make decisions, and put their ideas into action. Strong youth voice enhances youth leadership skills and helps youth and adults to create a trusting and open environment (Billig et al., 2008). Giving students a voice helps them to feel their ideas and opinions are valued, thus empowering them to take risks and act on their ideas.

6. **Partnerships.** Community partnerships develop relationships which produce mutual benefits for the school and community organization. Two-way communication and shared vision and goals are promoted through reciprocal partnerships (Billig, 2008).
7. **Progress Monitoring.** “Service-learning engages participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals, and uses results for improvement and sustainability” (NYLC, 2010, p. 32). Checking in periodically to see how the project is progressing is the key to success in any service-learning experience.
8. **Duration and Intensity.** Effective service learning occurs during concentrated blocks of time referred to as intensity and the duration of the experience must be long enough to meet community needs and learning goals (Billig, 2009).

Billig (2005) is supportive of the eight standards endorsed by NYLC and believes that service-learning must include these quality components to be effective and beneficial to both the provider of the service and the receiver of the service provided.

“No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather both are a process that continue to evolve over a lifetime” (Kofi Annan, as cited in Kaye, 2010, p.

15). Service-learning is a process. The involvement of the process is necessary for students to engage in effective service-learning and is the basis of every service-learning activity. The standards or components of service-learning are the needed ingredients for effective service-learning (Kaye, 2010). Ingredients are usually listed first in any recipe. Ingredients alone become insufficient without the recipe or steps one is to follow to make a desired dish. According to Kaye (2010), the Five Stages of Service-Learning is the recipe one must adhere to for an effective service-learning experience. Ingredients alone will not produce effective service-learning experiences. The Five Stages of Service-learning are investigation, preparation and planning, action, reflection, and demonstration. These five steps are referred to as IPARD and are essential and interdependent for successful service-learning. IPARD constitutes a process that is significant to student's effectiveness and critical to their learning skills and content which can be applied to real life situations (Kaye, 2010).

**Interpretation:** All service-learning must begin with the stage of investigation. Investigation begins with students completing what Kaye (2010) refers to as a Personal Inventory. This inventory identifies interest, skills, and talents of the students in the class. The second investigation is centered on the students identifying a community need which is of interest to the students. Then students begin to conduct research to authenticate the community need. This process of investigation is referred to as "social analysis" (Kaye, 2010, p. 16). During this process students document the scope of the community need and they develop a baseline for monitoring their progress and identify community partners.

**Planning and Preparation:** Students and teachers participate in a wide variety of activities to set the stage for learning and social action. In this stage active learning and critical thinking is used to help students develop understanding of the community need and related subject matter through research, interviews, field trips, etc. (Kaye 2010). Students draw upon their personal inventory of interest and skills as they plan and prepare to take action.

**Action:** In this stage students carry out their plan of action. “Transforming plans into action enables students to use what is inherently theirs—ideas, energy, talents, skills, knowledge, enthusiasm, and concern for others and the natural surrounding—as they contribute to the common good” (Kaye, 2010, p. 17).

**Reflection:** Reflection is one of the standards (ingredients) of service-learning and one of the five stages. Reflection is a process that integrates learning and experience with personal growth and awareness (Kaye, 2010). Reflection occurs throughout all stages of service-learning. It can be structured and spontaneous as well.

**Demonstration:** In the fifth stage of service-learning students share what they have learned and accomplished through their community involvement. Kaye (2010) states, “Students take charge of their own learning as they synthesize and integrate the process through demonstration” (p. 18). Even though the five stages of service learning are listed separately they are interdependent and may be experienced at the same time throughout the service-learning experience (Kaye, 2010).

The National Youth Leadership Council (2010) relates their recipe for service-learning in cycles versus stages. Their recipe for service-learning includes a cycle of

planning (pre-service), action (service), and follow-up (post-service). Pre-service involves five steps: identifying academic goals, identifying genuine needs, establishing evidence of learning, developing ownership, and planning and preparation (NYLC, 2010). This phase is focuses on getting ready to serve and building community partnerships as community needs are identified. Phase two in the cycle is Action. In this phase students take action and conduct meaningful service. This phase:

- allow students to see how their perceptions fit with those of the other people involved in the project
- helps educators and student evaluate how they met academic objective and service goals
- helps students compare their prior knowledge with new understandings of academic content
- provides a means to improve future projects. (NYLC, 2010, p. 34)

The third phase of the cycle is Follow-up. Follow-up involves three steps: evaluate the experience, demonstrate new understanding, and go deeper (NYLC, 2010). In the post-service phase NYLC (2010) states, “the true learning of the experience is revealed and demonstrated. It is here that ideas arise and plans are made for how to extend the project to a new and deeper level” (p. 36). This cycle or recipe for service-learning “changes the views of students and the world in which they live” (NYLC, 2010, p. 39).

Both recipes for service-learning whether the Five Stages of IPARD or the NYLC three phase cycle are inclusive of similar steps designed to immerse students in thinking and learning while collaborating with others to achieve a common community goal.

### **Service-learning and Community Service: A Clearer Picture**

Students in Millerton County Schools (MCS) have the opportunity to earn service learning hours by volunteering at community agencies pre-approved by MCS or by performing service-learning activities as a direct curricular link. Students also have the option to seek approval to volunteer their time with other community agencies not pre-approved by MCS. Students are required to complete and submit a Pre-Approval Form requesting permission to volunteer or serve at organizations which are not pre-approved by MCS. With approval from MCS students receive credit towards their service-learning hours for their time spent serving in these organizations. This form of service is viewed by some researchers as community service versus authentic service learning.

Service-learning finds its roots embedded in community service (McCafferty, 2011). Literature reveals that community service has a longer history than service-learning in public school education and a larger number of public schools engage in community service rather than service learning (McCafferty, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; as cited in Kleiner & Chapman, 2000) reports about 27% of high school students were involved in community service and volunteer work from the mid-1970s through the early 1990s. By 1999, over 80% of public high schools were offering opportunities for students to engage in community service. Service-learning began to emerge in public schools' curricula in the early 1980s (Kleiner & Chapman, 2000).

Many students in schools participate in school lead service activities and projects. These projects are designed to be of mutual benefit to both the student and the

organization. Schools differ in their recognition of these activities as service-learning or community service. Researchers also differ in their definitions of service-learning and community service. Furco (1996) defined community service as: “The engagement of students in activities that primarily focus on the service being provided as well as the benefits the service activities have on the recipients” (p. 4). NCES (1999) defines community service as

activities that are non-curriculum-based and are recognized by and/or arranged through the school. The community service may be mandatory or voluntary and generally does not include explicit learning objectives or organized reflection or critical analysis activities. It may include activities that take place off of school grounds or may happen primarily within the school. (pp. 2–3)

Examples of community service which meet both definitions are: providing food to the home-less during the holidays, serving food at a homeless shelter, collecting school supplies for elementary age students, raking leaves for the elderly and ringing the bell for the Salvation Army during the Christmas holiday season. Each of these activities is inclusive of the definition of community service. The recipients of the service are the primary benefactors. Students may gain personal satisfaction from giving of their time and they may gain some knowledge about the organization and the impact it has on the community but the intended benefactor is the receiver of the service. However, as articulated by NCES (1999) curriculum and instruction is not the bases for providing the service.

Service-learning advocates often distinguish service-learning from community service by calling for some or all of the following:

- Clearly identified learning objectives;
- Student involvement in selecting or designing the service activity;
- A theoretical base;
- Integration of the service experience with the academic curriculum; and
- Opportunities for student reflection (Kraft, 1996).

A key missing ingredient in community service as defined by researchers Kraft (1996), Furco (1996), and NCES (1999) is the connection of the service being provided to the academic curriculum and learning objectives of the students.

Renowned service-learning researcher Furco (2001, p. 24) created a table to distinguish the differences among service-learning, community service and service based internships (see Table 1).

Table 1

Distinctions among Three Types of Service Programs

	Community Service	Service Internships	Service-learning
Primary intended beneficiary	Recipient of service	Provider of service	Recipient AND provider of service
Primary focus	Service	Learning	Service AND Learning
Educational Purpose	Civic & Ethical Development	Career & Academic Development	Civic & Academic Development
Integration with curriculum	Peripheral	Co-curricular/ Supplemental	Integrated
Nature of service	Based on a social cause	Based on any industry or career	Based on an academic discipline

Note. Adapted from Furco, 2001, p. 24

Furco (2001) notes that both community service and service-based internships are prominent in high schools and many confuse these experiential programs with service-learning. As noted in Table 1, the primary differences in service-learning, community service and service-based internships are revealed in three major components. The first major difference is related to the benefactor. In service-learning both the recipient of the service and the provider of the service are intended joint benefactors. Whereas in community service and service based internships there is only one intended benefactor, either the recipient of the service or the provider of the service. The second major difference is the primary focus. Only in service learning is both learning and service the primary focus. Whereas the linkage to curriculum is not the primary reason for community service and service based internships. The third major difference is the nature of the service. The nature of the service in service learning is directly connected or linked to the academic curriculum. These major differences among the three experiential programs help to distinguish service-learning from other experiential programs.

Seitsinger (2005) clarifies the differences in community service and service-learning with this statement. "Service-learning is a synthesis of community service and academic learning. Community service is the part of the service-learning initiative which connects the students with their learning outside of their classrooms" (p. 22). But according to Seitsinger (2005) community service is only a small part of service-learning. Stagg (2004) states, "Service-learning attempts to go beyond mere (community ) service by intentionally connecting service experiences to academic outcomes, providing a

context for classroom learning and helping students draw meaningful lessons from their service experiences” (p. 1). McCafferty (2011) affirms Stagg (2004) and Seitsinger (2005) views on the differences in community service and service-learning. She states,

The distinction between community service and service-learning is an important one, especially in a standards-based educational system where academic integrity is demanded, and accountability systems are in place to measure standards. High-quality service-learning, unlike community service, is an instructional strategy that meets the requirements for being aligned to academic standards. (McCafferty, 2011, p. 26)

The National Service Act of 1993 (as cited in Brown, 2007) makes a clear distinction between service-learning and community service with this statement. “Service-learning is an integral part of the curriculum” (p. 6). Kingsley and McPherson (as cited in Furco, 2001) describe the differences between community service and service-learning by stating, “The added dimension of learning provides depth to young people’s experiences, helps support their social and personal development, and provides integrated curriculum and instruction to support school reform experiences” (p. 26).

In order to understand the concept of service-learning as researched in this study it is essential that one understands that community service and service-learning may have some similarities but the linkage to curriculum and instruction, the major difference is what sets them apart. Unless classroom instruction and curriculum are tied to the service work, then students are involved in community service and not service-learning. Service-learning is a structured modality of learning in which students study, discuss, plan and implement activities in the community which is connected to their learning. Students also have the opportunities to reflect on their service throughout the activity. Reflection

which is a key component of service-learning usually does not occur in community service.

### **Service-learning: A Positive Direction**

Research conducted in the field of service-learning can document several benefits to students from their participation in service-learning. Benefits student receive from high quality service-learning participation include academic, civic, ethical/moral, student career, and personal and social outcomes (Furco & Root, 2010). It is important to note that Furco asserts that the quality of the service-learning is a precursor for the listed benefits to occur. Research by Furco and Root (2010) demonstrates positive effects of service-learning for participating students as academic achievement, student achievement, student engagement, civic responsibility and person and social skills.

Research by Billig (2000), on school based service-learning concludes the following benefits:

- Service-learning helps develop student's sense of civic and social responsibility and their citizenship skills . . .
- Service-learning had a positive effect on the personal development of public school youths . . .
- Service-learning helps students acquire academic skills and knowledge . . . Service-learning helps students to become more knowledgeable and realistic about careers . . .
- Service-learning results in greater mutual respect between teachers and students . . .
- Service-learning leads to more positive perceptions of schools and youths on the part of community members. (pp. 660–662)

Findings from studies by Akujobi and Simmons (2007), Billig (2002b), and Kraft and Wheeler (2003) demonstrate evidence that service-learning can have positive effects on

students' performance on subject-matter examinations and assessments. This finding was also evidenced in a study conducted by Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005). They reported that students who were highly involved in service-learning were statistically more likely to be academically engaged. Engagement in service-learning was also a strong predictor for the following student outcomes; value of schooling, becoming attached to school and community, enjoyment of content courses, perceiving a gain in civic knowledge, skills and dispositions, becoming more civically engaged in general, and feelings of greater efficacy (Billig et al., 2005). Billig (2000, 2002b, 2009) and Melchior and Balis (2002) affirm from their research that service-learning is correlated to positive school behaviors such as school engagement, developing a sense of belonging and connectedness to school, and even enjoying school.

Research by Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, and Atkins (2007) supports positive civic engagement outcomes from students' participation in service-learning. They report that when students perform a service they become personally involved with political issues, rather than just thinking and reading about them. Providing service also provides students with a network of people with whom to discuss civic issues. Finally as students provide service to their community they often become familiar with social problems of which they may have been previously unaware which may spark further engagement.

Kaye (2010) states that service-learning engages young people to learn about critical global issues we face. Issues such as climate change, population migration, hunger, loss of habitat and illiteracy all while contributing to the betterment of themselves and others. Another benefit of service learning is the appeal of the strategy to

a variety of learners. Students who participate in authentic service learning are actively engaged and tapping into multiple intelligences which make the learning more meaningful for the students. Students' engagement in real life projects using nontraditional styles of learning contributes to the motivation and interest of all learners (McCafferty, 2011).

Kaye (2010) supports this idea of the inclusiveness of service-learning projects, noting it works for all ages, grade levels, and "most every ability level" (p. 7). Research by Pleasants, Stephens, Selph, and Pfeiffer (2004) acknowledges "service-learning builds upon students' strengths, values, and talents; it increases their self-confidence; combines individual and collaborative reflection; and helps show students how they can make a difference" (pp. 17–18). Longert (2009) states, "Service-learning promotes good deeds and academic success" (p. 1). David (2000) agrees with this statement and adds, "but its greater potential lies in preparing students to be engaged citizens" (p. 83). Billig (2010) sums up the many benefits of service-learning with this statement, "Service-learning is a value-added proposition with young people benefitting academically, civically and personally" (p. 5).

Service-learning provides students with what Wagoner (2008) speaks of as a "core set of survival skills for today's workplace, as well as for lifelong learning and active citizenship- skills that are neither taught nor tested even in our best schools" (p. 14). The survivor skills include creative thinking and problem solving, collaboration across networks and leading by influence, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing information and curiosity and imagination. It is the responsibility of educators in our

schools to ensure that students graduate from high schools prepared for college, career and life competent in the above skills (Wagoner, 2008).

Marsalis (2009) states, “Jazz is an endless road to discovery leading to more maturity and acceptance of personal responsibility, a greater respect for cultures around the world, and invigoration playfulness, and excitement about change, and an appetite for the unpredictable” (p. 39). Service-learning is the tool that students can use to travel along this endless road of discovery. It engages them in their learning and fosters the development of and an understanding and respect for diversity and Wagoner’s survival skills. One may conclude from the work of these researchers that service-learning if implemented with fidelity is beneficial for 21st century learners.

### **Service-learning and Present Challenges**

In spite of the many benefits that result from authentic service-learning experiences there are also some challenges. Furco and Billig (2001) state, “Service learning continues to remain a fragile reform primarily because it is highly dependent on individuals to be sustained” (p. 245). Researchers in the field point out that service-learning is found in “Swiss cheese like holes” (Cranford, 2011, p. 53) in educational priority in our schools. Therefore, the implementation of service-learning is dependent upon individual teachers to create service-learning opportunities for their students. Cranford (2011) concludes this is a challenge for two major reasons. First, many teachers are not knowledgeable of research findings which point to the numerous positive outcomes students receive from participation in service-learning. Secondly, today’s educational system of standards, testing and accountability prohibits teachers from using

time which they consider precious to create and implement service-learning projects (Cranford, 2011).

Anderson (1998) also questions how to implement service-learning into teacher education and the availability of community service-learning sites. Billig (2000) shares concerns from respondents as to whether service-learning would distract schools from the basics or undermine the role of the parents in teaching values. Concerns were also expressed with student safety and mandatory service being viewed as involuntary servitude. Anderson (1998) discusses the numerous issues that face teachers as they develop service-learning experiences. These challenges focus on whether students in teacher education programs should participate in service-learning themselves or simply learn to use service-learning as a teaching method. Other questions arise as to when the preparation in service-learning as a teaching method should occur in the teacher education program. Anderson (1998) also points out the difficulties that may arrive in arranging successful K-12 and community service-learning sites, and mandating or connecting service-learning as a requirement for state and national teacher education standards of accreditation.

Billig (2000) articulates the need for additional research on the impact of service-learning. She points out that research is needed to address the following areas; the sustainability of the impact of service-learning over time, what impacts occur on the school as an organization, or on the community as an entity. Kielsmeier (2010) views are consistent with Billig (2000) as he points out that the large scale adoption of service-learning has been hampered by the lack of infrastructure to sustain it. He states the key

components of lasting reform such as consistent research-based practice standards, ongoing professional development, high quality evaluation both formative and summative, and a consistent funding base are lacking in substance in the service-learning movement. According to Conrad (2011), skeptics see the narrative qualitative dimensions of service-learning/character education research as unreliable and sketchy. She further states, “The majority of studies are conducted on a self-selected sample without a control group. One could then argue that students who choose to engage in community service are possibly already more developed in moral, social, personal, academic and emotional measures” (p. 45). It is my opinion that advocates for service-learning must not allow these roadblocks to become permanent obstacles in the implementation of high quality service-learning in today’s schools.

### **Putting Character in Education**

“Good character education is simply good education. It helps solve behavioral problems and improve academic achievement” (Character Education Partnership, 2009, p. 3). Researchers Davidson, Lickona, and Khmelkov propose a paradigm shift in the way we think about character and character education. According to these researchers, “Character isn’t just about doing the right thing in an ethical sense, it is also about doing our best work” (2007, p. 373). These researchers conclude from studies they conducted in high schools that character has two essential and interconnected parts: performance character and moral character (Davidson et al., 2007, p. 373). Performance character consists of qualities needed to realize one’s potential for excellence in any performance environment. Moral character consists of those qualities needed for successful

interpersonal relationships and ethical conduct (Davidson et al., 2007, pp. 373–374).

“Each of the two sides of character are interdependent, each needs the other and character is a foundation for and a critical outcome of all academic and ethical endeavors”

(Davidson et al., 2007, p. 378). Based upon evidence from these researchers the

development of performance and moral character is essential for students in our schools

to achieve academically and become lifelong learners.

Germane (as cited by Fairchild, 2006) defines character as “one’s way of reacting to life situations . . . character is the sum total of one’s ways of responding that have become fairly well established or set” (p. 5). The Character Education Partnership (CEP) defines character as understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values such as respect, responsibility, honest, fairness, and caring (Mattera, as cited in Fairchild, 2006, p. 201). Shields (2011) proposes character as the true aim of education. He states, “Developing beneficial and prosocial disposition should be prioritized over acquiring more and more facts and formulas” (p. 49). These definitions of character are all inclusive of one small critical element, time. Time is continuous; it keeps moving, never constant. Time is a process and so is the development of one's character. Fairchild (2006) inserts environment as another important element in the development of character. Fairchild (2006) regards character as, “The attributes or features that make up and distinguish the individual, the complex of mental and ethical traits making a person” (p. 9). She adds, “Any definition of character is as much a function of the surrounding moral culture as it is a manifestation of the individual person” (Fairchild 2006, p. 9). Therefore,

character is developed over time and one's environment can impact negatively or positively one moral and ethical values.

Goodman (2012) states, "The word character refers to our essential identity, our distinctiveness (literally, that which marks us). It includes what we stand for, what we pursue and why, the reason for the choices we make" (p. 2). Having character usually implies a person has distinguishing moral qualities, moral virtues, and moral reasoning abilities (Goodman, 2012). According to Huitt and Vessel (2003), "a moral person understands right and wrong and willfully chooses what is right; a virtuous person engages in good behavior intentionally, predictably, and habitually; an ethical person figures out what is right or good when this is not obvious" (p. 1). Is it evident from these definitions of character that the researchers would all concur with this statement: "Character is what defines a person."

Character education is designed to develop a student's character. The term character, education according to Cranford (2011); Edgington (2002); and Schwartz, Beatty, and Dachnowicz (2006) is difficult to define and is very subjective. Cranford (2011) further states, "The term does not refer to a single attribute, virtue, pedagogy, or approach" (p. 12). Character education is not a new program, pedagogy, or strategy in our system of education. Schwartz et al. (2006) state, "The term character education has become a catch all umbrella term that describes concerted efforts to teach a number of qualities including: civic virtue, respect, responsibility, social and emotional learning, empathy, caring, tolerance, honesty, and service to community" (p. 27). Lickona (as cited by Prestwick, 2004) defines character education as "the deliberate effort to cultivate

virtue” (p. 140). Lockwood (1978) defines character education as, “any school initiated program, designed in cooperation with other community institutions, to shape directly and systematically the behavior of young people by influencing explicitly the non-relativistic values believed directly to bring about that behavior” (p. 180). The National Commission on Character Education has defined character education very broadly “as any deliberate approach by which school personnel, often in conjunction with parents and community members, help children and youth become caring, principled, and responsible” (Gray, 2009, p. 8). CEP (as cited in Bier & Berkowitz, 2005) defines character education as “the deliberate effort by schools, families, and communities to help young people understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values” (p. 2). The definition of Character Education by CEP is affirmed by Clouse (2001), who asserts, “Character education is based on the universally accepted premise that adults know better than children what is proper and are therefore responsible for the acculturation of the children within their care” (p. 23). Benninga et al. (2006) agree with Clouse (2001) that character education is the responsibility of adults. They affirm, “It is the duty of the older generation to form the character of the young through experiences affecting their attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors” (p. 449). Davidson et al. (2007) state, “Character education isn’t just about helping kids get along; it is also about teaching them to work hard, develop their talents, and aspire to excellence in every area of endeavor” (p. 373). Character education is affirmed by researchers in the field not to be the sole responsibility of schools. They all agree that character education is a collaborative initiative among schools, parents, and community. Through the common efforts of these stakeholders

students will develop positive moral and ethical values and behaviors which will transcend throughout their lives.

Researchers may differ some in their definition of character and the purposes of character education but they all hold the belief that it is the obligation of schools, both public and private along with families and community to teach children values in order to develop their moral and ethical stamina. “Values affirm our human dignity, promote the good of the individual and the common good, and protect our human rights. Not to teach children these core ethical values is a grave moral failure” (Lickona, 1993, p. 8). The development of values through character education will equip students with the attributes needed to become productive and responsible citizens in our democratic society.

### **Character Education: A Revival and Rebirth**

In the 1980’s a revival of character education began to emerge. This revival was attributed to growing parental and public concern for the moral drift in our schools, or what sociologist James Davidson Hunter referred to as “the death of character” (Dovre, 2007, p. 38). Sanford McDonnell, chair of Character Education Partnership (CEP) a national umbrella group that provides coordination, encouragement, and support of schools stated,

We have a crisis of character all across America . . . the good news is that we know what to do about it: get back to the core values of our American heritage in our homes, our schools, our businesses, our government, and indeed in each of our daily lives. (Dovre, 2007, p. 38)

Many educational advocates for character education state that students need to learn more than reading, writing and arithmetic. They must learn what they call the

fourth and fifth R's—respect and responsibility (Education Week, 2004, p. 1). Lickona (as cited in Vincent, 1994) describes the teaching of respect and responsibility as reflecting the public school's moral agenda, "Respect and responsibility are the 'fourth and fifth R's'" (p. 3) that schools not only may but also must teach if they are to develop ethically literate persons who can take their place as responsible citizens of society. According to Bier and Berkowitz (2005), character education is critical as it emphasizes "the other side of the report card" (p. 65) in development of the whole child. Former first lady and former teacher Laura Bush has promoted the use of character education in schools, saying "Reading and writing are not all we need to teach our children. Respect and responsibility are just as important. We need to make sure we're teaching our children to be responsible citizens who have good values and ethics" (Education Week, 2004, p. 2).

Over the past two decades the character education popularity has emerged. This popularity for the return of character education can be directed to the perceived moral drift (Dovre, 2007). Vincent (1994) strongly affirms,

The cause of many problems in our schools, homes, and society at large is a lack of good character. An individual with good character knows how to act towards other, that individuals should be treated with respect, and that one should act in a responsible, caring manner. This seems to be common sense. (p. 12)

Patricia Hersch (as cited in Cranford, 2011) states that the main reason for the moral drift among American youth "is that more and more teens are growing up and navigating the transition to adulthood in their own separate, socially isolated spheres" (p. 14). She attributes this to several factors, the change that occurred in the family structure when

both parents began to work outside of the home, the use of technology attributed to social isolation, and adults began to pull away from their adolescent children relinquishing their parental responsibilities (Hersch, as cited in Cranford, 2011). According to Hersch (as cited in Cranford, 2011), “the result of these changing social structures have attributed to individual adolescents having less and less significant time with close adult relationships. She refers to this unique teen culture as a ‘tribe apart’” (p. 14). The lack of this social and emotional support from their families and communities has attributed to adolescent coming of age in what she refers to as a social vacuum and has given them the free time and autonomy to engage in unhealthy behaviors (Hersch, as cited in Cranford, 2004). These factors referred to by Hersch were accentuated by the promiscuous nature of our society. It is my opinion that parents are not only spending less time with their teenagers, but also families are not worshipping together and adhering to religious values. These factors combined with the onset and affordability of technology in our fast paced society contributed immensely to the decline in the amount of quality time teenagers interacted with their families.

The modern education movement began to emerge as parents and educators formed a backlash at what they perceived as the “anything goes ethnos” (Traub, 2005, p. 32). The increase in school shootings and violence involving youth, the rise in school dropout rates, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol use and the rise in gang activity all seemed to point to the painful realization that our nation’s youth had somehow lost basic principles of character. The deep reason America is in imbalance and decline according to Gauld (2012) is obvious: “We have educated ourselves to value achievement and

wealth over character and purpose” (p. 1). He further states, “The present character of our leadership, economy, and culture cannot sustain the greatness of our nation” (p. 1). The character education movement sparked conversation and actions to bring about needed change in the behavior and attitudes of American youth.

### **Support of Character Education Programs**

In 1992 at a conference in Colorado a group of educators and ethicists developed an agreed upon list of character traits that were essential for our nation’s youth to develop character and values. The character traits were: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship and were titled, *The Six Pillars of Character* (Cranford, 2011, p. 15). In 1993 the Character Counts Program was established to help school incorporate the six pillars and the Character Education Partnership (CEP) was created. “The mission of CEP is to lead the nation in helping schools develop people of good character for a just and compassionate society” (CEP, 2009, p. 24). In 1995, Tom Lickona, Ph.D., Eric Schaps, Ph.D., and Catherin Lewis, Ph.D. wrote the *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education*. These principles are the cornerstone of CEP philosophy on effective character education.

Principle 1: The school community promotes core ethical and performance values as the foundation of good character

Principle 2: The school defines “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and doing.

Principle 3: The school uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development.

Principle 4: The school creates a caring community.

Principle 5: The school provides students opportunities for moral action.

Principle 6: The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.

Principle 7: The school fosters students’ self- motivation.

Principle 8: The school staff is an ethical learning community that shares responsibility for character education and adheres to the same core values that guide the students.

Principle 9: The school fosters shared leadership and long- range support of the character education initiative.

Principle 10: The school engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.

Principle 11: The school regularly assesses its culture and climate, the functioning of its staff as character educators, and the extent to which its students manifest good character (CEP, 2009, pp. 2–23).

According to CEP these eleven principles if implemented with fidelity within our schools will positively impact the character of students.

In 1994, President Clinton and the U.S. Congress recognized and acknowledged the strength of grassroots support for character education by providing for character education through the U.S. Department of Education Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Project Grant Program (Bier & Berkowitz, 2005). President Bill Clinton in his 1996 State of the Union address asserted, “I challenge all our schools to teach character education, to teach good values, and good citizenship” (Traub, 2005, p. 33).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 renewed and re-emphasized this tradition and substantially expanded support for character education. Then Secretary of Education Rod Paige supported character education with this statement,

Sadly, we live in a culture without role models, where millions of students are taught the wrong values- or not values at all. This culture of callousness has led to a staggering achievement gap. Poor health status overweight students, crime, violence, teenage pregnancy, and tobacco and alcohol abuse . . . good character is the product of good judgment made every day. (Benninga et al., 2006, p. 448)

Today, one of the six primary goals of the Department of Education is to “promote strong character and citizenship among our nation’s youth” (Strategic Plan, 2002–2007, p. 49).

The United States Congress and the Department of Education have expanded support for character education in schools across our nation. With this financial support schools have been able to implement character education in a variety of ways.

Bier and Berkowitz (2005) speculate that there were a wide variety of reasons for the strong bipartisan support for character education in K-12 schools. They assert,

Many people are upset by the wanton corruption, incompetence, and greed on display at so many of the nation’s most prestigious institutions. Some people are concerned for our national values and system of government—a democracy demands citizens who share a sense of responsibility and care for their community. Others recognize that in an increasingly diverse society there is an increased need to foster habits of respect and tolerance in the nation’s youth. While others fear the dangerous influence of violence and drugs on our children. (p. 1)

There seems to be the desire of citizens in the 21st century to recommit to the goals of American education by the renewed interest in character building in our schools. It is a common view shared by most people that schools should be formally and strategically involved in building moral character, virtues, and ethical behaviors by working collaboratively with parents and community (Huitt & Vessels, 2003). Character education historian, James Traub (2005) convincingly states, “The character education bandwagon had swiftly become a juggernaut” (p. 33). With this renewed interest of character education the movement has garnered the needed support to become a vibrant and inclusive component of education in our schools.

### Effectiveness of Character Education

The current climate of accountability in today's schools necessitates that policy makers and educators justify their investment in character education. Evidence must be provided to school communities that validates positive student outcomes will be produced from the local, state, and federal support of the character education initiative. Character Education Partnership with funding from the John Templeton Foundation conducted a comprehensible and interdisciplinary review of the scientific literature supporting character education. Their research revealed 78 scientifically adequate studies representing 39 character education program/methods. The researchers concluded that 33 of 39 programs produced a positive net gain and were thus judged "effective" (Bier & Berkowitz, 2005). Their analysis of the research supporting the 33 "effective" programs resulted in the following findings:

*It can work.* Researchers stated that it was not appropriate to conclude that character education works, but rather more appropriate to state a character education programs can work. *It varies.* Character education comes in a variety of forms, whole school reform, classroom lesson-based models, target behavior models, integrated component models and so on. *It affects much.* Character education affects various aspects of the head (knowledge, thinking), heart (emotions, motivation), and hand (behavior, skills). Findings also revealed character education improves academic performance, reduces risk behaviors, increases desirable behaviors and improves social-emotional and pro-social competencies. *It lasts.* There is evidence of sustained and even latent effects of character education. *Doing it well matters.* Programs are more effective

when implemented fully and faithfully. Professional development and substantive support material and follow up trainings were highlighted in the findings of the most effective programs (Bier & Berkowitz, 2005).

Davidson et al. (2007) agree that ‘the most important goal of character education is to prepare all young people to lead a flourishing life. Developing good character offers the hope of striking at the root of anti-social or self-destructive behavior and thereby helping to correct and prevent them’ (p. 372). To achieve this goal for young people in our schools, Bier and Berkowitz (2005) state,

We must not let character education become discredited through the adoption of unsubstantiated and superficial programs. If we take the implementation of high quality character education seriously we will be developing the next generation of ethical, responsible, and caring citizens. (p. 10)

If our nation is sincere in the development and forward movement of character education in our schools funding must be provided at the federal, state and local levels to support this initiative. Without financial support and a commitment of sustainability we will find a recurrence and continuance of the behaviors in our current generation that we as a society so desperately want to change.

### **Linking Service-learning to Character Education**

Character education and service-learning are both concepts which are difficult for researcher to reach consensus on a uniform definition. Researchers have concluded both character education and service-learning to be beneficial initiatives in K-12 education. The boundaries of character education and service-learning are imprecise. The goals of both programs and initiatives overlap and are inclusive of one another. In fact, service-

learning emerged from the larger character education movement that began in the 1980s (Dove, 2007).

Current research reveals an increase in character education program inclusiveness of service-learning as a primary strategy. The U.S. Department of Education initially funded character education grants in 2002. At this time only three of the funded grants included service learning as a strategy to promote character education. However, in 2007 nearly half of the funded character education grants included service-learning as a primary approach to character development (Billig & Jesse, 2008). Berkowitz and Bier (2007) reviewed research conducted in 33 successful character education programs. They discovered that each of these programs utilized service-learning as one the pedagogical strategies.

Billig (2009) asserts that “for many years and across many studies” researchers who have studied K-12 service-learning have consistently found that high quality service-learning was associated with significant student results which includes personal development including traits related to character development (Billig, 2009, p. 132). Service-learning provides opportunities for students to be actively engaged in meaningful service. By providing these opportunities to students, service-learning capitalizes on what other studies have shown to make a difference in the development of character traits (Billig, 2010). As students provide meaningful service they collaborate and develop relationships and partnerships with adults who genuinely care about them. These relationships with caring adults as positive role models are often associated with character development (Eccles, as cited in Billig & Jesse, 2008).

The Character Education Partnership lists eleven principles of effective character education (refer to page 30 for a list of the principles). According to CEP service learning when implemented with fidelity is directly connected to six of the eleven principles, (Principles, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10) and indirectly connected to the remaining five principles (Cranford, 2011). This connection between service-learning and character education has been reviewed and is supported by experts in the field of service learning.

Supporters of service-learning believe students involved in service-learning experiences are more tolerant of others different from themselves, have a greater appreciation for other cultures, find rewards in helping others, feel more connected with their communities, and have fewer discipline problem (Hinck & Brandell, 1999). These behaviors which students develop from participation in service-learning are related to character traits of tolerance, respect, resourcefulness, responsibility, and self-discipline. Howard (1993) states, “Service experiences may also impart or reinforce commonly accepted values such as a sense of justice, compassion for others, or an acceptance of the obligation of citizens” (p. 43). Justice refers to fairness, honesty, and integrity, compassion relates to caring and kindness and the duties of citizens are to be responsible, respectful and lawful which in my opinion are considered to be positive character traits. These are values according to MCS Brochure (n.d.) that students acquired from their participation in service learning.

Billig and colleagues (2008) compared the differences in development of caring, altruism, citizenship, civic responsibility, persistence, and respect for self and others in students engaged in a character education curriculum that included service-learning

activities and students whose character education curriculum did not include service-learning. Students who participated in service learning character education program had significantly less diminution in value attainment, which suggests that service learning may help students retain their character assets as they mature (Furco & Root, 2010). Service-learning and character education participation was a positive factor toward the prosocial and personal skills the students developed from their participation. Their participation in the dual programs positively contributed to the decisions and choices students made during the study and tends to indicate this positive acquisition of skills will remain and become enhanced as students continue to grow and mature as adults and productive citizens (Billig & Jesse, 2008).

Research by Benninga et al. (2006) concludes that excellent character education schools provide opportunities for students to contribute to not only their school but more so to their community. This contribution to community was through volunteering such as recycling, fund raising for charities, and community clean-up programs. This community service or volunteering refers to the service component of service-learning. Good schools provide opportunities for students to serve as a means to develop their character. This is affirmed by William Damon who states, “A crucial component of moral education is engaging children in positive activities such as community services which inspire them and gives them a sense of purpose” (Benninga et al., 2006).

Service-learning is a means of providing an innovative opportunity to connect academic learning and the values emphasized in character education with real world application (Phelps, 2005). This connection helps all children meet challenging academic

standards and integrates core ethical values into their lives (Billig, 2002b). It is our responsibility as a community to help students develop positive and caring attitudes towards others by providing opportunities for service at school and in their community (MCS, brochure, n.d.; Vincent, 1994).

### **Summary and Overview**

Chapter II opened with an introduction to the current educational system of accountability and its impact on service-learning and character education in today's schools. The major factors for the decline of service-learning and character education in most classrooms in the U.S., and the factors which attributed to their resurgence were discussed. The varied definitions of service-learning and the classification of service-learning as a philosophy, program, or instruction strategy were addressed. The needed components for service-learning to be authentic and become effective were reviewed. Similarities and differences in service-learning and community service were addressed as a means to understand the significant of authentic service-learning. Benefits students received from their participation in service-learning were highlighted along with challenges and roadblocks for the implementation of service-learning faced by educators.

Character and character education were defined. Factors which contributed to the renewed emphasis in character education and the effectiveness of character education programs was discussed. The chapter ends by linking the entities of service-learning and character development as a means to understand how providing service through service-learning builds student's character.

The following chapter will describe the methodology used to conduct the study. Key terms will be defined as they will be used in this study. The methods used for data collection and data analysis will be explained. The research setting will be described and the criteria and process for the selection of study participants will be explained.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **METHODOLOGY: INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study was designed to describe and explore the experiences high school students received from their participation in service-learning. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What influence does a service requirement have on high school students' development?
  - A. Does service learning impact students' development of character?
2. Why do students desire to earn the service-learning diploma or exemplary award?

This study used qualitative research methods in the form of a phenomenological study.

This chapter begins by explaining the rationale for using qualitative research design and the phenomenology tradition for conducting this research study. The key terms and concepts used in the study are defined. The chapter provides a rich description of the research setting and the criteria and method used for the selection of the study participants. The three methods used for data collection will be explained as well as the process used for data analysis. The benefits, risks and limitations associated with this research study will be explored. This chapter provides a description of the criteria used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

Qualitative research is a very broad term, which includes definitions such as “multimethod in focus,” “interpretive,” and a “naturalistic approach to subject matter” (Litchman, 2010, p. 5). Litchman (2010) defines qualitative research as “a way of knowing in which researchers gather, organize, and interpret information obtained from humans using their eyes and ears as filters. It often involves in-depth interviews and /or observations of humans in natural and social settings” (p. 5). Other qualitative researchers agree with Litchman (2010) that qualitative research generates data from human groups in social settings and adds, “it aims to understand how the participants derive meaning from their surroundings, and how their meaning influences their behavior” (“PPA,” n.d., para. 3). Qualitative researchers according to Woods (2006) are interested in life as it is lived in real situations. Woods (2006) further states that the focus of natural settings for qualitative research has several implications. First, the research settings are authentic. Secondly, researchers do not set up artificial sites for research study. Finally, assumptions are not made in advance of the study. “Openness of mind is the approach. Researchers do not take things for granted, and try to make the familiar strange” (Woods, 2006, p. 3).

In qualitative research, the natural setting ‘has many layers of meaning’ and the researchers have to ‘lift veils’ (Woods, 2006, p. 3) to understand and interpret meanings (Woods, 2006). Woods views qualitative research as interest in meanings, perspectives, and understandings. He states, “The qualitative researcher seeks to discover the meanings that participants attach to their behavior, how they interpret situation, and what

their perspectives are on particular issues” (Woods, 2006, p. 4). Creswell (1998) defined qualitative research as

an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that explores a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzed words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 57)

According to Creswell (1998), qualitative research is an appropriate method for a researcher to follow if he or she is willing to: commit to extensive time in the field, engage in the time consuming process of data analysis, and participate in a form of social and human science research that may not conform to firm guidelines or specific procedures.

Patton (2002) uses twelve characteristic’s to define qualitative research. He groups these characteristics under three headings which he refers to as Design Strategies, Data-Collection and Fieldwork Strategies, and Analysis Strategies.

**Design Strategies**

1. Naturalistic inquiry—There are no predetermined limits, the research must be open to what naturally develops.
2. Emergent design flexibility—The researcher is open to adjusting inquiry as new avenues or paths emerge.
3. Purposeful sampling—Participants are selected based on their personal richness of information or knowledge about the phenomenon.

**Data-Collection and Fieldwork Strategies**

4. Qualitative data—Data is derived from detailed observations, in-depth inquiry and interviews that focus on personal experiences.
5. Personal experience and engagement—The research has direct contact with the study participants and the researcher’s personal insights are critical to understanding the phenomenon.
6. Empathic neutrality and mindfulness—The researcher is open and mindful without prejudice during data collection.

7. Dynamic systems—The researcher is attentive to processes and situational dynamics.

**Analysis Strategies**

8. Unique case orientation—The researcher respects and captures the essence of each individual in the study.
9. Inductive analysis and creative synthesis—The researcher is immersed in data to discover patterns and interconnecting themes.
10. Holistic perspective—Researchers view the phenomenon as a complex system and focuses on it in its entirety.
11. Context sensitivity—The researchers places importance in data analysis for application and adaptation of context in new settings.
12. Voice, perspective, and reflexivity—The researcher is true to his voice and perspective. He understands his own subjectivity and focuses on understanding the phenomenon from the lenses of the study participants. (Patton, 2002, pp. 40–41)

Several researchers (Litchman, 2010; Patton, 2002; Woods, 2006) view qualitative research as a multi-method approach to gather information in a natural setting. Creswell (1998) agrees with these researchers and states, “Qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of meaning people bring to them” (p. 15). According to Maxwell (2005) qualitative research designs are appropriate for research studies in which the emphasis of the research is focused on the processes that participants undergo within a particular context.

Merriam (as cited in Bergstrom, 2004) states that qualitative research is subjective and that qualitative researcher adhere to six study characteristics. First, qualitative researchers focus is on the process over outcomes or products. In the case of this study, the focus was to understand the impact service-learning participation had on high school students’ development. Secondly, qualitative research is concerned with meaning, more particularly how people deal with and make sense of lived experiences. The participants in this research study were interviewed to garner their personal experiences from

participation in service-learning. Thirdly, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. As the researcher, I performed all interviews and focus group sessions to collect data about high school students' experiences from service-learning. Fourth, qualitative research normally involves fieldwork. I observed the participants in this research study as they participated in their field experiences. Field experiences gave me the opportunity to view the participants performing their work as a means to interpret their experiences from service-learning. Fifth, qualitative research is descriptive. The study findings are written in a manner that clearly explains the students' experiences from service-learning participation. Finally, qualitative research is inductive. The data collected in this study were analyzed and interpreted to understand the experiences high school students gained from their participation in service-learning. These six characteristics (s) of qualitative research are all inclusive in this research study of students' development from participation in service-learning.

The goal of this research study was to gain a deep understanding of the participant's benefits from their service-learning participation. The qualitative research approach was used for this study based on the descriptive nature of the approach, the open-ended design of the research questions, and the research's focus on the study participant's perspective. These attributes are all consistent with qualitative research.

### **Research Tradition**

Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of those who have experienced a certain phenomenon (Litchman, 2010). "The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are

perceived by the actors in a situation” (Lester, 1999, p. 1). Phenomenology as defined by Moustakas (as cited in Bergstrom, 2004)

includes the interrelationship between the context (or environment) and individuals, which constitutes an experience. In accordance with phenomenological principles, scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge sought is arrived at through descriptions that make possible an understanding of the meanings and essence or experiences. (p. 13)

These researchers all speak of phenomenology as the understanding of meaning through the eyes of individuals who experience a certain phenomenon. The emphasis of the researcher is on describing and not justifying.

Edmund Husserl is acknowledged as the father of phenomenology (Creswell, 1998; Litchman, 2010). In the 1990’s nursing researchers and educators were among the first to make use of phenomenological approaches in the United States. Phenomenology is said to be both a philosophy and an approach. As an approach, phenomenology looks at the lived experiences of those who have experienced a certain phenomenon. As a philosophy, phenomenology would enable the phenomenologist to come into contact with what matters, the actual lived experiences (Litchman, 2010).

Phenomenology defined literally refers to the study of a phenomenon. This form of research describes something that is in existence in our world. It may be an event, an occurrence, a situation, or a concept that one experiences. Conducting research through a phenomenological lens allows the researcher to understand the true essence of a person’s experiences. “It is snapping a picture that stops action in a particular time and context and presents a photograph in the form of a written text for the reader to glimpse the same

experience. But the written text or photograph was not the experience itself—just evidence of it” (Hug, as cited in Bergstrom, 2004, p. 13). Littlejohn and Foss (2008) agree with Hug (as cited in Bergstrom, 2004) that the collection of data is not the experience and is not the focus of phenomenology. They state, “Phenomenology is the study of conscious experience, in which interpretation takes a central role” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 132).

This study used a phenomenological approach to describe the essence of the service-learning experience for high school students. According to Lester (1999) phenomenological research seeks not to explain, but to describe. Patton (as cited in Bergstrom, 2004) defines phenomenology as “inquiry” which asks the question, “What is the structure and essence of the experience of this phenomenon for these people?” (p. 12). The goal of this study was to explore the personal outcomes students receive from their participation in service-learning. This goal pointed directly to Patton’s definition of phenomenology and is affirmed by Lester (1999) who stated, “Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives” (p. 1). Students in this research study shared their personal experiences with service-learning and the manner in which these experiences impacted their lives.

The phenomenological approach was used to gain an understanding of the students “life world” which is their world of experiences from participation in service learning (Johnson & Christensen, 2007, n.p.). According to Johnson and Christensen (2007) life worlds are where ones consciousness exists. It is the belief of Littlejohn and

Foss (2008) that one comes to know something by consciously examining it and testing their feeling and perceptions about it. This conscious experience from the subjective point of view is the way in which people come to understand the world through direct experiences (Creswell, 1998; Littlejohn & Foss, 2008; McCafferty, 2011; Rawat, n.d.).

MCS in its Character Development Initiative directly links service-learning to the development of character in students. The school system also lists character traits that should be developed in students via the K-12 curriculum and through students' participation in service-learning. But one does not know if students who participate in service-learning in MCS develop or already possess the character traits outlined in MCS Character Development Initiative. The phenomenological approach allowed me to discover common links or themes among the study participants.

Conducting this phenomenological study began with the acknowledgement that there may be an existing gap between what MCS states service-learning promotes in its students and what is really occurring. The benefit of this study was to provide MCS and other school systems with awareness and insight into students' development from their participation in service-learning. This study also will provide information to State Departments of Public Instruction and Local School Districts about the impact service-learning has on the development of high school students.

### **Key Concepts and Terms**

This study explored student's personal outcomes from their participation in service-learning. The following terms were used throughout the study. Each term is defined based on its usage in this research study.

*NobleHours*—An electronic web based program adopted by Middleton School System. Students use the electronic program to document their service-learning hours.

*Service-learning Diploma*—The Service-learning Diploma is a locally-developed, official recognition program designed by MCS to recognize high school students who are committed to serving their community. Students who complete 250 hours of service-learning experience over the course of their high school years will receive this certification upon graduation. For the 2013 school year students must earn 225 service-learning hours to qualify for this award.

*Service-learning Exemplary Award*—The Exemplary Award is an honor a MCS high school student, who devoted a minimum of 100 hours of service-learning experience in their community over the course of their high school year, may receive upon graduation.

*High School Option*—High school options are non-traditional high schools. These schools usually serve about 200 students. There is no defined attendance zone and all students apply and interview to attend these schools.

### **Setting of Research Study**

The research setting for this research study was four high schools in Middleton County Schools. Middleton County Schools is a large urban school system in the southeastern part of the United States. The school system is very diverse in student population although inner city schools serve predominately African American and Hispanic students. Four high schools in MCS were selected to participate in the study. The high school selection was based on the number of documented service-learning

activities in the Character Education Department of Middleton County Schools. The four high schools with the largest number of documented service-learning hours and activities in NobleHours were contacted to participate in the study. Two of the four high schools were large comprehensive high schools and two of the high schools were high school options. Rena London High School and Grant Wiggins High School were the large comprehensive high schools. Rena London serves a student population of approximately 1500 students and Grant Wiggins serves a student population of approximately 1800 students. Both schools serve students in grades 9–12. The high school option schools were Calvin Coolidge College Prep and S. B. Barnes Academy. These schools served approximately 200 students each.

Pseudonym was given to the school system depicted in this study. The high schools which participants in the study attended were also given pseudonyms. This was done as a means of protecting the confidentiality of the school system and schools used in the research study.

### **Study Participants**

The study consisted of participants from four high schools in MCS. The study participants were juniors or seniors at the identified high schools. Twelve to fourteen students from each of the four identified high schools were invited to participate in the study. The participants in the study were working toward their Service-learning Diploma and had logged a minimum of 125 service-learning hours during their high school years in the NobleHours system.

The aim of the study was to have a diverse group of student participants by gender and ethnicity. Students who met the grade level requirement and service-learning hours were sorted by gender (male, female) and when possible by ethnicity (Black, White, Hispanic, other). Based on the location of some schools in the district and the student ethnic demographics of those schools diversity in ethnicity was not possible. Therefore, participants' ethnicity mimicked the racial composition of the schools represented in the study.

Participants from the four identified high schools who meet the requirement for grade and service-learning hours were invited by the district's Character Education Coach to participate in the study. It was evident by NobleHours data that gender and ethnicity requirements would not be met at the four identified schools. NobleHours data from the two large comprehensive high schools revealed that white females outnumbered males and other ethnic groups with the NobleHours requirement. At S. B. Barnes Academy, there was diversity in gender but not ethnicity.

Twelve to fourteen students with the required number of hours logged in NobleHours were invited to participate in the study from each high school. All students who returned their signed consent form became participants in the study. Four students returned signed consent forms and agreed to participate from S. B. Barnes Academy and Calvin Coolidge College Prep. Eight students returned their signed consent form and agreed to participate from Rena London High School. Nine students returned their signed consent form and agreed to participate from Grant Wiggins High School. However, only eight students from Grant Wiggins actually participated in the research

study. There were a total of 24 participants in the study. Table 2 indicates the gender and ethnicity of the study participants from each of the participating high schools.

Table 2

Ethnicity of Study Participants by School and Gender ( $N = 24$ )

Ethnicity	S.B Barnes Academy	Rena London High School	Calvin Coolidge Prep	Grant Wiggins High School	Total
	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F	
Caucasian	0/0	2/3	0/1	0/4	10
African- American	2/1	0/1	1/2	0/2	9
Hispanic	0/1	0/0	0/0	0/0	1
Asian	0/0	0/2	0/0	1/1	4
Total	2/2	2/6	1/3	1/7	24

While more diversity of study participants would have been preferred for the study the difficulty occurred with finding students who met the criteria for NobleHours who also consented to participate in the research study. This fact limited the desire for a more diverse group of student participants in the research study.

Parents of the participants in the study received information about the purpose of the study and a parental consent form stating their willingness for their child to participate in the research study. The parental consent form was signed and returned to the Character Development Coach. Participants in the study who were 18 years of age gave their own consent to participate in the study. Participants in the study who were under the age of 18 gave assent to participate in the study.

### **Data Collection**

Upon receiving approval from International Review Board of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and approval from the Department of Assessment and Testing at Middleton County Schools, I contacted the principals of the four high schools which had been identified to participate in the study. I requested permission from the principal of each of the identified high schools to contact their students who met the study criteria to inform them of the study. The principals at each of the high schools gave their permission for student at their perspective schools to be contacted by the Character Development Coach to learn about the research study.

I along with the Character Development Coach from Middleton County Schools met with the prospective study participants at their perspective high schools. The Character Development Coach introduced the students to me and explained the research study. Students were given packets of information which included an overview of the study and Parental Consent Forms and Student Assent Forms. I contacted students who returned their Parental Consent Forms and Student Assent Forms to the Character Development Coach.

Data collection in the study was derived from multiple methods. Johnson and Christensen (2007) state, "Using multiple methods of data collection is likely to provide complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses" (n.p.). Interviews are an efficient and valid method to understand someone's perspective of a phenomenon. Observations enabled the researcher to draw inferences about perspectives that may have been difficult to obtain if interview data was the sole method of data collection (Maxwell,

2005). Therefore, face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and field observations were used to collect rich in-depth data.

The face to face interviews were conducted via a semi structured process. Using a semi structured process allowed me to ask the participants to elaborate on a response or to ask additional questions based on a response as a means of clarity or to follow up on participants responses.

Focus groups were held as a means to collect data from a group of students who were participating in service-learning with the common goal of earning a service-learning diploma. This method of data collection allowed for group interaction among the participants and offered the opportunity of greater insights to be revealed from the participants.

Field observations were used as another way to verify or nullify the responses of the participants in the face to face interviews and focus groups. Observing students as they served at their service-learning locations yielded additional insight into the essence of their experience. Data collection lasted for 14 weeks.

The first method of data collection was by conducting interviews. Face to face in-depth interviews were conducted by me with sixteen participants in the study. Table 3 gives a description of the ethnicity and gender of the study participants in the face to face interviews.

Table 3

Face-to-Face Interviews by Ethnicity, School, and Gender ( $N = 15$ )

	S. B. Barnes Academy	Rena London High School	Calvin Coolidge Prep	Grant Wiggins High School	Total
Ethnicity	M/F	M/F	M/F	M/F	
Caucasian	0/0	1/1	0/1	0/2	5
African- American	2/1	0/1	1/2	0/1	7
Hispanic	0/1	0/0	0/0	0/0	1
Asian	0/0	0/1	0/0	0/1	2
Total	2/1	1/3	1/3	0/4	15

Rossman and Rallis (2003) assert “collecting data from relatively small numbers of individuals is appropriate for the in-depth nature of inquiry in a phenomenological study that employs open-ended techniques leading to a more holistic collection of data for analysis by the researcher” (p. 15). This method of data collection allowed for probing and posing of follow-up questions. Interviews provided in-depth information and insights into the participant’s internal meaning and ways of thinking (Johnson & Christensen, 2007). The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one hour each. The interviews took place at the participant’s high schools. According to Litchman (2010) in-depth interviews can be described as a conversation between the researcher and the participant. She states, “The purpose of in-depth interviews is to hear what the participant has to say in his own words, in his voice, with his language and narrative” (Lichtman, 2010, p. 143). As the interviewer, I was an active listener by paying close attention to what was said during the interview. Woods (2006) states, “In this sense, the

unstructured interview is a process of constructing reality to which both parties contribute” (p. 14).

The interview began with very general questions designed to allow the participants to feel comfortable and provided me with information about the participants. Woods (2006) affirms the importance for the researcher to develop trust with interviewees and win their confidence. The general questions at the beginning of the interview were designed to serve as an ice breaker and a way to relax the interviewees in the event there were any feelings of anxiousness about the interview. After the opening general questions, the interview questions became very specific and were focused on service-learning and character education. The interview questions ended with overall closing comments about service-learning. Refer to Appendix C for the interview questions used during the face to face interviews.

The recording of the interview sessions allowed me to hear the participants own words in their own voice. All interviews were transcribed by me not only as a means to protect the identity of the participants in the study but to allow the participants verbal cues such as tone and voice inflection to add meaning to the analysis of the interviews. Gillham (2000) supports transcription as soon as possible after an interview because it makes it easier to use memory as a tool to aid the researcher in hearing what has been taped but cannot be clearly understood on the tape. On the same day of each interview, I listened to the recorded interview and began the transcribing of the interview.

The second method of data collection conducted by this study was field observations. Unstructured observations are used not only to see if people are doing what they say they are doing, but for the following reasons:

- to provide insights into interactions between dyads and groups;
- to illustrate the whole pictures;
- to capture context/process;
- to inform one about the influence of the physical environments. (Mulhall, 2003, p. 307)

Three site visitations were conducted to observe the students as they performed their service-learning. The observations at the service-learning sites allowed me to view the interactions between the study participants and the people whom they served in the natural setting in which the service was provided. I assumed the role of observer as I spent time inside the service site.

At the first site, six of the study participants participated in the service-learning initiative, Living Healthy Middleton. The second site visit involved two of the study participants in the service-learning initiative, Safety First. The third site involved two of the study participants in the service-learning initiative, Operation: Safe Driving. Table 4 provides demographic information about the study participants who were observed by me during field observations.

Prior to observing at each service-learning site I secured permission from the site supervisor to be an observer during the service-learning experience. I moved around each service-learning site and made audio notes of the work of the study participants. After each visit I transcribed the audio notes taken at the service-learning activity. I made

additional notations as the audio notes from each site visit were transcribed. According to Mulhall (2003), “observations provide evidence for process—something that is continually moving and evolving” (p. 308).

Table 4

Field Observation Demographics by Location and Gender ( $N = 10$ )

Ethnicity	Living Health Middleton	Safety First	Operation: Safe Driving	Total
	M/F	M/F	M/F	
Caucasian	0/4	0/2	0/0	6
African- American	0/1	0/0	0/2	3
Hispanic	0/0	0/0	0/0	0
Asian	1/0	0/0	0/0	1
Total	1/5	0/2	0/2	10

The third method of data collection was by focus group sessions. Participants from Rena London High School and Grant Wiggins High School each participated in a focus group session. Research by Hancock (2002) recommends that the size of a focus group should be 6–10 participants. This number is considered ideal for it gives all study participants an opportunity to share their ideas and thoughts as well as providing a variety of viewpoints for the researcher. Two focus group sessions were arranged for the participants. The focus group sessions were held at Rena London High School and Grant Wiggins High School. There were eight students in the focus group session at both Rena

London High School and Grant Wiggins High School. Table 5 gives the demographic data of the study participants who participated in focus group sessions.

Table 5

Focus Group Demographics by School and Gender ( $N = 16$ )

Ethnicity	Grant Wiggins High School	Rena London High School	Total
	M/F	M/F	
Caucasian	0/5	1/4	10
African- American	0/2	0/1	3
Hispanic	0/0	0/0	0
Asian	1/0	0/2	3
Total	1/7	1/7	16

The best outcomes for a meaningful service-learning experience are enhanced by the use of reflective tools such as class discussion (Hervani & Helms, 2004). The focus group sessions provided a medium for the study participants to reflect upon their service-learning experience. Litchman (2010) states that group interaction is critical in a focus group and this interaction among participants who share a common experience stimulates each participant to share and talk. There were eight study participants in each of the focus group Sessions. The questions used for the focus group were open-ended and were developed to gain ideas and information about the study participants' perspective of service learning. Refer to Appendix D for the question used to guide the focus group sessions. "Focus groups provide a window into participants' internal thinking" (Johnson

& Christensen, 2007, n.p.). In focus group sessions the focus must be on the how and why rather than the what (Tuff & Johnson, n.d.).

The focus group sessions were audio and video recorded. At the end of each focus group session I reviewed the video recording before I transcribed the group interview. While viewing the video recording I made personal observations on the transcription as to body language and emotional responses of the study participants.

Data were collected over a 14 week period. Face to face interviews were conducted prior to the field observations and focus groups sessions. It was my preference to conduct field observations prior to the focus group sessions. The focus group session at Grant Wiggins was conducted after six of the study participants were involved in Living Healthy Middleton service-learning activity. The focus group session at Rena London High School was held prior to the field observation, Safety First. Two study participants from Rena London High School participated in Safety First. During both focus group sessions participants were instructed to reflect upon the last service-learning activity in which they had participated.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was designed to allow me to explore the collected data to gain an understanding of the experiences of the study participants from their participation in service-learning. Specifically, I sought to discover the benefits students gained from their service-learning experiences.

Data analysis was on going through data collection. Merriam (1998) and Patton (1990) assert that without ongoing analysis, data could become overwhelming to the

researcher. Data analysis began as soon as the first interview was completed. Coding which is defined as marking segments of data with symbols, descriptive words or categories was used to analyze the data. The goal of coding is not to count things, but to fracture the data and rearrange and organize the data into broader themes (Maxwell, 2005).

After each interview was conducted I transcribed the interview and read and reread the transcribed document word for word and line by line. I analyzed student responses based on the significance of their experiences. I developed a system of categorization and coding. The statements from the data were divided and coded into meaningful categories.

I documented significant statements which pertained directly to the research questions. These statements were listed under organizational categories of: service-learning benefits, character development, and service-learning diploma. Johnson and Christensen (2007) refer to these categories as a priori code. A priori code is developed before the researcher examines the data. After the initial coding of student responses to the interview questions, a system was used to group repetitive and overlapping responses and statements. A color code was used to highlight repetitive responses under each of the three organizational priori categories. Repetitive responses and statements were highlighted with the same color. Then the responses and statements highlighted with the same color were grouped together. I reviewed the grouping of the responses and statements to ensure all statements were relevant to each other in the grouping. Some statements and responses were moved to other color-coded groups and some were

removed and became outliers. The grouped color-coded responses and statements were coded with a theme. The identification of themes was necessary to analyze the impact service-learning had on the participants' development.

For the focus groups, I transcribed the interview tapes, read, and reread the transcribed documents word for word and line by line. Additionally, I viewed and reviewed the video recordings of the focus groups sessions. Subsequently, the same process used to analyze the individual interview data was used to analyze data from the focus groups.

I reviewed and transcribed the voice recording from the field observations. Data from the field observation served as a means to validate existing themes which derived from the face to face interviews and focus groups sessions. Responses or statements that were not revealed in the face-to-face observations or the focus group sessions were noted and revisited during data analysis.

Finally, a matrix with the headings: service-learning benefits; character development and service-learning diploma was developed. Under each heading, the emergent themes were listed with the number of statements that were supportive of that theme from the face-to-face interviews, focus group sessions and field observations. Themes that were consistent were extracted as significant responses and findings from the research study.

### **Subjectivity**

Pershkin (1988) states, "One's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and non-research aspects of our

life” (p. 17). Maxwell (2005) prefers the term bias when speaking of subjectivity of the researcher in qualitative research. He believes that it is impossible to eliminate the researcher’s theories, beliefs, and perceptual lens. Reason 1994 (as cited in Maxwell, 2005) refers to subjectivity as, “a quality of awareness in which we do not suppress our primary experience: nor do we allow ourselves to be swept away and overwhelmed by it; rather we raise it to consciousness and use it as part of the inquiry process” (p. 38). Ratner (2002) affirms Reason’s (as cited in Maxwell, 2005) view of subjectivity by this statement. “In qualitative methodology, the researcher is encouraged to reflect on the values and objectives he (sic) brings to his research and how these affect the research project” (p. 1). According to MacKellar (n.d.) subjectivity has become a word with many subtle shades of meaning. “The most value neutral definition would be that it is the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires that comprise a person’s self-identity” (MacKellar, n.d., n.p.).

As an African American female who grew up during segregation, I have a strong sense of belonging and responsibility to community and my race. Growing up, my world as I knew it revolved around two major segregated institutions, which were church and school. Experiences which were ingrained in me while growing up, years spent earning my undergraduate degree at a historically Black college (HBCU), and my first professional job in a majority Black setting all enhanced my subjective I’s of Community and Ethnicity. The societal needs of African American people were vast and were evident in my church, the workplace, and the community in which I chose to reside. Therefore, I developed a spirit of giving of myself to help others in my community who needed a

helping hand. I aligned myself with service organizations who worked with senior citizens as well as children in African American neighborhoods.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s opened my eyes to the injustices society placed on people based on their ethnicity and social position. I personally experienced unjust treatment based on my skin color and my subjective I of Justice kept my senses sharp. As I have grown personally and professionally, I have opened my eyes to view the world not as it has been but focused on life as I wish it would become. My personal experiences instilled in me by my Christian upbringing have molded me to possess character traits that promote justice for all. Being aware of my subjectivity will allow me to truly listen to the participants' experiences in service-learning from their perspectives and not what is important to me.

Lichtman (2010) notes, "The qualitative researcher is aware of and sensitive to the way his or her own history shapes a study" (p. 122). My personal experiences and first professional position put me in a place where I needed to give of myself to assist others who looked like me but whose needs were so much greater. Being an advocate of service, which is at the core of my leadership style and my spirit of compassion toward humanity made me consciously aware to listen critically to the words I heard to ensure that I was hearing the essence of the participants' experience in the study.

A personal reflective log was kept in which I denoted my personal thoughts and feelings during the interviews and focus group sessions. Being aware of my subjectivity allowed me to truly listen to the participants' experiences in service-learning from their perspectives and not what is important to me.

### **Trustworthiness**

The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative study is to support the argument that the researchers' findings are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Fenton & Mazulewicz, 2008, p. 1). The four criteria for trustworthiness are: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmation. During qualitative research the researcher must be aware of these criteria and address them to obtain trustworthiness in his/her research (Fenton & Mazulewicz, 2008). *Credibility* is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a credible conceptual interpretation of the data drawn from the participants' original data (Lincoln & Guba, as cited in Fenton & Mazulewicz, 2008). *Transferability* is the degree in which the findings by the researcher can be applied or transferred to other studies or situations (Fenton & Mazulewicz, 2008). *Dependability* is an assessment of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection and data analysis (Fenton & Mazulewicz, 2008). *Confirmability* is used to validate if the researchers' findings are supported by the data collection (Fenton & Mazulewicz, 2008). According to Fenton and Mazulewicz (2008) trustworthiness is enhanced when researchers use the above criteria in data collection and analysis.

Rossmann and Rallis (2003) argue that qualitative research is an analysis of multiple perspectives of the same phenomenon. According to Rossmann and Rallis (2003) there is no one truth that applies to all of the perspectives of those who experience the phenomenon, it is therefore the responsibility of the researcher to present each account as honestly and accurately as possible. To address the credibility or worthiness of the research findings the researcher used corroboration. Corroboration was used to ensure

the research findings accurately reflect the study participants' perceptions. Three methods of data collection were employed by the researcher; face to face interviews, focus group sessions, and field observations. I recorded all interviews and focus group sessions. Prior to the transcribing of each interview, I listened to the recording and made notes. I transcribed each interview session prior to conducting focus group sessions and field observations.

Corroboration was used in the study through the process of triangulation.

Triangulation is a strategy that reduces the risk that conclusions from the research will reflect only the systematic biases or limitations of a specific source or method, and allows the researcher to gain a broader and more secure understanding of the issues being investigated (Maxwell, 2005). "Triangulation is a valuable means for enhancing rigor and validity in qualitative research" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 93). Using multiple methods of data collection warrants more credibility of findings versus limited data solely from one method of data collection. Triangulation of data can provide a more complete and accurate account than either source of data can reveal alone (Maxwell, 2005).

Triangulation of data from student interviews, focus group sessions, and field observations was used to identify consistent themes regarding the essence of service-learning for students. Outlier data was documented in the study as additional data that was not consistent with participant experiences.

Member checking was also used to address credibility. All participants in the study were given the opportunity to receive a copy of their transcribed interviews and a transcription of the focus group sessions. This information was mailed to the participants

who desired the data at the end of data collection. Participants were given a follow up form to complete and submit to the researcher if there were questions about their transcribed responses.

Rossmann and Rallis (2003) view transferability as the insights from a study being applicable to other situations. According to Rossmann and Rallis (2003) in qualitative research, the researcher is not looking for one application universal to all situations. Therefore, the researcher must provide a complete description of methods and results of the study. To address the transferability of the research findings I compared findings from this study with other research focused on similar research questions. I also reported the findings with in-depth descriptions as a means of transferability (Key, 1997; Rossmann & Rallis, 2003).

To address dependability of the research findings I used triangulation of data collections to validate the themes derived from data analysis. I also used a code- recode procedure to assess the fidelity of the research findings. I coded each method of data collection separately. Several days later, each method of data collection was recoded without me viewing the first analysis as a mean to verify data analysis. The practice of triangulation of methods of data collections, the use of a peer reviewer, and the careful coding of data were all used to ensure dependability of the research findings.

To address confirmability of the research findings I participated in peer review during the collection and analysis of data. The peer reviewer was a doctoral student who understood the process of data collection and was able to work collaboratively with me to discuss data methods for collection and findings. I shared each step in data collection and

data analysis with the peer reviewer. The peer reviewer reviewed transcribed documents, listened to audio tapes of interviews, viewed field observation notes and the video sessions of focus group sessions.

The essence of service-learning in Middleton School System was compared to findings from other research studies focused on students' gains from service-learning experiences. The researcher used quotes from participants, which spoke to the essence of their experiences in service-learning. Key information from researchers in the field of service learning and the messages of the participants were used to explain the essence and significance of students' outcomes from their service-learning experiences.

### **Benefits and Risks**

Gaining an understanding of service-learning participation from the lens of the study participants will be beneficial to the Character Development Department at Middleton School System and other local and state school systems. Sharing this research with MCS will serve as a means of helping this school system and other school systems gauge whether service-learning helps students enhance or develop their character. The participants' participation in the research study helped their school system understand their desire to participate in service-learning and their personal growth from the experience. The findings from this study will benefit schools and schools systems as they plan, develop and implement service learning.

Risks for the participants were minimal if at all. The identification of the participants was kept confidential in the research. As a means for protecting the confidentiality of the study participants I transcribed all tapes. Pseudonyms were used

for the name of the school system in the study and for the schools the study participants attended. Hard copies of research data was secured in a locked file cabinet at my home. Video and audio recordings were kept in a secured locked cabinet at my home and they were password protected. Additionally, my home was equipped with a security system. All documents will be destroyed after the required period for keeping research documents.

### **Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to determine if student's participation in service-learning affected or enhanced their character. The study shared the benefits of students' experience from their service-learning participation in the community. Student experiences may not justify if their character development is enhanced through their participation in service to their community.

The study limitations and results were specific to one school system in the Southeastern part of the United States. The students selected for this study only represented a small population of students in only four of the high schools within the school system. There was not a uniform focus and emphasis placed on service-learning at each of the high schools attended by the study participants. Therefore, the results of this study are not necessarily generalizable to the service learning experiences of all students at all high schools within the MCS, the state or the nation.

### **Conclusion**

Service-learning is a means for students to connect their learning with their community. In order to make service-learning meaningful for students it is important to

hear their voices as it pertains to the experiences they gain as participants who provided the service. This study permitted students in Middleton School System to share their personal experiences with service-learning. A qualitative research design was used to discover the meanings and perspectives of the study participants' experiences from their participation in service-learning. A phenomenological approach was used to understand the actual lived experiences of the study participants. Key concepts used in the study were defined.

The research setting for the study was four high schools in Middleton County Schools, an urban school system in the Southeastern part of the United States. The study participants were juniors or seniors in the school system who were working toward earning their service-learning diploma. All study participants obtained parental consent and gave assent to participate in the research study. The names of the study participants were kept confidential. Pseudonyms were used for the schools they attended and the name of the school system.

Multiple methods of data collection were used as a means to collect rich in-depth data. The methods of data collection included face-to-face interviews, focus group sessions, and field observations. Data was collected over a fourteen week period. Data analysis was ongoing through data collection. I kept personal reflective logs to denote personal thoughts and feelings during data collection and data analysis. Triangulation was used to validate data analysis.

The aim of the research study was to explore and share information acquired about high school student perceptions of their development from their participation in

service-learning. The findings from this research study will be shared with MCS and available to other school systems and State Departments of Public Instruction. I will also use the results of this research to enhance the implementation of service-learning at the high school in which I serve as principal.

The findings of this study are from the perspective of high school students who were immersed in service-learning and focused on earning their service-learning diploma. There were minimal risks to the study participants. All interview tapes were transcribed by me and were passcode protected and kept in a secured location. The research study examined the benefits a small group of high school students received from their service-learning participation. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized to all high school students.

The following chapter will share the findings from the data analysis. The findings will be shared in themes under three topics or priori codes; service-learning benefits, character development, and the service-learning diploma.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS: INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The purpose of this research study was to explore and describe the experiences of high school students who participated in service-learning. A qualitative method, with a phenomenological design was used to present descriptive snapshots of the benefits gained by the study participants from their participation in service-learning. Analysis of the data collected and coded during the study is presented in this chapter. Data collected during the study were used to answer the following research questions:

1. What influence does a service requirement have on high school students' development?
  - A. Does service learning impact students' development of character traits?
2. Why do students desire to earn the service-learning diploma or exemplary award?

These questions were explored through a series of interviews, focus group sessions, and field observations designed to glean the experiences of high school students with service-learning and what they gain from their participation in service-learning. Data collection was designed to understand the students' feelings as related to their participation in service-learning during their high school years.

Shumer (2000) articulates that one cannot get a true sense of the technical and artistic qualities involved in the pedagogy of service-learning unless those involved share

their service-learning stories and insights. This exploration into service-learning came through understanding the meaning of the ideas, insights and reflections of high school students from their service-learning experiences. “While adhering to a sense of rigor that will ensure validity, we need to be able to tell, in detail, the story of service-learning as it plays out in the lives of students” (Shumer, 2000, p. 79). As educators it is important to understand why students choose to participate in service-learning as well as their interpretation of their experiences. Shumer (2000) states, “It is eventually the stories about the lives of those who participate in service-learning that will ultimately provide the substantive data that makes the case about its value and effectiveness as both a philosophy and a method” (p. 81). According to Anderson (1998) the value of service-learning as a philosophy of education is the development of socially responsible involved citizens in a democratic life. As an instructional method Anderson (1998) references the value of service-learning as a blending of curriculum with active engagement in real community needs. The voices of the high school students who participated in service-learning provided the substantive data to understand the impact on their lives from their participation in service-learning. The aim of this research study was to discover the essence of service-learning through exploring the benefits the study participants gained from their experiences with service-learning.

### **Description of the Participants**

Participants in the research study were high school juniors or seniors. Access to potential study participants who met the criteria for the study was more difficult than anticipated. This difficulty was attributed to two major factors. First students for some

reason do not log their hours in NobleHours as they are earned. Students typically logged all hours at one time at the end of the school year. This factor greatly decreased the pool of candidates who met the criteria for service-learning hours logged in NobleHours. Secondly, many students who met the criteria for hours logged in NobleHours declined the invitation to participate in the study. Their decline was based on their availability to participate in the research study. These two factors highly impacted the study participants' diversity as to ethnicity and gender.

Approximately, fifty students were invited to participate in the research study. Students were invited to participate in the study based on their service-learning work as documented in NobleHours during their high school years. Each student who was invited to participate in the study met the requirement of having logged a minimum of 125 hours of service-learning participation.

Consent and assent forms were completed and participants were informed of their rights as participants in the study. Parents of each of the study participants under 18 years of age were contacted and gave consent for their child to participate in the study. Students who were under 18 years of age gave their assent to become study participants. Students who were age 18 gave their consent to participate in the study. All consent and assent forms were completed and returned to me prior to engaging students as study participants.

### **Research Findings for Overview of Service-learning**

In this section, I will share a synopsis of the study participants' knowledge of service-learning and their views on character. It should be noted that the quotes cited by

the study participants are unedited and represent the student's thoughts and feeling with regard to their experiences with service-learning. The first part of the research study was designed for me to explore the participants' understandings of the concept of service-learning. Study participants were asked to define service-learning, discuss the components of service-learning and to compare service-learning to community service or volunteering.

Study participants consistently shared two topics in their definitions of service-learning. The first topic focused on the word community. The study participants used the word community in some variation of two phrases, "giving back to the community" or "helping others in the community." For example, Griselda Jones stated, "Service-learning to me is just when you take time out of your schedule to *give back to the community* because people gave back to you." Harrington Smith defined service-learning in this manner. "Service-learning is going out there and *helping the community*." The definition given by Hurley London was consistent with the other study participants focus of community in their definition of service-learning. "Service-learning is making a difference in your community and *helping others* and getting other people involved in making the place you live a better place to live." This same concept of community was revealed in the definition of service-learning by Morris Jemison, "Service-learning is an experience or opportunity, you get to do something or *help others in the community*." When the study participants were asked to explain giving back their responses were based on giving their time to others as people had done for them such as girl scout leaders, summer camp counselors, Sunday School teachers. Their responses to helping

others were centered primarily on children and the elderly. The study participants shared their experiences of tutoring children, volunteering as lunch buddies with school children, caring for animals, and working with the elderly.

The other consistent topic from the students' responses to their explanation of the term service-learning was a form of the word "learn." Alice Jessup defined service-learning in this manner, "Service-learning is basically going outside of your comfort zone and *learning* about things you would not normally *learn* about in day to day basic school." Aubrey Timmons defined service-learning as a "gateway to *learning* extra things in your life." Johnelle Evans used the term learning in her definition of service-learning with this statement, "Service-learning is basically *teaching someone and learning from it* and sometimes it can be a life changing experience."

Several study participants used both terms community and learning in their definition of service-learning. "Service-learning is *giving back to your community*, and you grow and *learn* as a person" (Abbie Woods). Another study participant defined service-learning with this statement, "Service learning is not only *giving to the community but learning something* at the same time for yourself" (Kiana Underdo). Alice Jessup defined service-learning with this statement, "Service-learning is a way to *give back to the community* from the *stuff you learn at school*." Danielle Carson explanation of the term service-learning also included classroom instruction. Danielle Carson stated, "Service-learning is when a person goes out into the *community as in helping* but at the same time you're making an impact using what you've *learn from school*, being able to teach others and then reflect." The study participants who defined service-learning with

the word *learning* connected learning to their classroom curriculum and to their personal growth and development from their participation or involvement with the organization.

Sources such as Billig (2008), Robinson and Barnett (1996), NYLC (2010), and Kaye (2010) define service-learning as an instructional method that links academic instruction to community needs. The study participants included community and/or learning in their definition of service-learning.

The study participants were asked if they were knowledgeable of the components of service-learning and which components in their opinion were needed in order to have an effective service-learning experience. Seven of the study participants readily admitted that they were not knowledgeable of the components of service-learning. Four of the study participants each could name only one of the eight components of service-learning. Three study participants stated reflection was a component of service-learning and one study participant stated youth voice was a component of service-learning. It was the opinion of these study participants that the component that they stated, reflection or youth voice was necessary for service-learning to be effective. Several participants spoke of learning and helping others as components of service-learning. Learning could be considered as linked to the curriculum and helping others could be considered as meaningful service.

Researchers in the field of service-learning agree that service-learning activities must be inclusive of minimum standards in order to be effective and beneficial to all parties (Billig, 2000; Kaye, 2010). The National Youth Leadership Council in their K-12 Service-Learning Standards (as cited in Kaye, 2010) state that eight elements must be

present to ensure a successful service-learning experience. These elements are: meaningful service, linked to the curriculum, reflection, youth voice, diversity, intensity and duration, partnerships, and progress monitoring.

The study participants were asked if there was a difference in service-learning and volunteering in the community. The majority of the study participants agreed that there was a difference in service-learning and volunteering in the community. They used the terms reflect and learning to distinguish service-learning from volunteering in the community. Hurley London compared service-learning and volunteering in this manner, “I realize that you volunteer with service-learning as well but you have to reflect on it and take lessons from it. Volunteering you really don’t have the opportunity to reflect on it you just make a difference but it really helps you more if you reflect.” Danielle Carson expressed that not knowing that there was a difference in service-learning and volunteering in the community was a problem for many students. In her opinion the focus of many students was just getting their hours. Danielle Carson stated, “With service-learning you have to plan stuff, you go and participate in it, and then you have a reflection period. You put a lot of time into things. But with volunteering you just have to show up, give your time and then you’re done.” According to Yvonne Nelson, “when you volunteer you go and serve and that’s great but with service-learning you get to reflect on what you did and think of ways you could make it better the next time and get more kids involved.” Reflection which is a component of service-learning was one key difference in service-learning and volunteering as conveyed by these study participants.

Several study participants conveyed that learning was the aspect that separated service-learning from volunteering in the community. Morris Jemison stated, “You go out and volunteer but service-learning has an educational aspect to it.” Linda Charles explained the difference in the two concepts in this manner. “Volunteering is something that you do on your own and service-learning is learning how to do something like a career.” In the opinion of Timothy Wallace “volunteering is just an action which is meaningless. Service-learning requires thought, reviewing your actions and learning from what you have done.” Another study participant summed up the difference with this statement, “Volunteering you are not learning but service-learning is a learning experience” (Aubrey Timmons). There was one study participant who had a very different perspective about the difference between service-learning and volunteering in the community. Angelina Cummings stated, “Service-learning feels like you have to do it and learn something for it. Volunteering is from the bottom of your heart, I want to do this, it is not mandatory.” This study participant’s view was in direct contrast to Janelle Evans who stated, “Volunteering is giving back to the community but I feel pressured into it. Service-learning is a learning experience because you are teaching someone.” Abbie Thomas sums up the difference in service-learning and volunteering with this statement,

The difference is your attitude toward service-learning and volunteering. You give back when you volunteer but with service-learning you think about how what you are doing impacts your life, your education, your chosen career. You are helping others and you also benefit from providing the service.

Table 6 illustrates the study participants' comparison of service-learning to volunteering in the community.

Table 6

Study Participants' Views of Service-learning Compared to Volunteering

Service-Learning	Volunteering
Educational Aspect	No educational aspect
Learning about careers	You do it on your own, no connection to learning
Requires thought, review of actions, and learning	Meaningless action
A learning experience	No learning
Mandatory and learning from it	Comes from the bottom of your heart, I want to do this
Teaching someone	Giving back to the community
Learning Experience	Pressured into it
Learning and giving back, two way street	Doing something great without always getting something out of it
Experience impacts your life reflective, helps others and benefits you	Giving back to the community
Learning while giving of your time	Give your time and not learn anything from it
Learning while serving, continuous experience	No learning, short period of time
Making an impact, reflecting, and learning	No learning or reflection on activity
Learning which is an extension of a class	Doing a good deed
You serve and reflect on the impact of your service	Organization or people want or need you

The majority of study participants understood that there was a difference in service-learning and volunteering in the community. They shared several components which separated service-learning from volunteering. According to the study participants service-learning was inclusive of teaching and learning, the experience impacted their lives, it was reflective and continuous, and both the provider and receiver of the service benefitted. Their opinion of volunteering was giving of your time at a one-time event with no connection to learning and the receiver of the service was the sole beneficiary. Only one study participant viewed service-learning as being a forced activity as compared to volunteering being from the heart.

The definition of community service by NCES (1999) affirms the study participants' views about the difference between community service and service-learning.

Community service is activities that are non-curriculum-based and are recognized by and/or arranged through the school. The community service may be mandatory or voluntary and generally does not include explicit learning objectives or organized reflection or critical analysis activities. It may include activities that take place off of school grounds or may happen primarily within the school. (pp. 2–3)

According to Seitsinger (2005), "Service-learning is a synthesis of community service and academic learning. Community service is the part of the service-learning initiative which connects the students with their learning outside of their classrooms" (p. 22).

Stagg (2004) states "Service learning attempts to go beyond mere community service by intentionally connecting service experiences to academic outcomes, providing a context for classroom learning and helping students draw meaningful lessons from their service experiences" (p. 1). The above sources are supportive of the views and opinions

expressed by the study participants as they compared service-learning to volunteering in the community. It is evident that the academic connection to learning is the missing link in volunteering in the community.

### **Recurring Themes for the Influence of Service-learning on Student's Development**

The intent of this research study was to explore students' experiences from their participation in service-learning. The following themes emerged from the coding process to answer this research question: What influence does a service requirement have on high school students' development?

- a. Service-learning experiences increased student consciousness and awareness of others.
- b. Service-learning increased students' ability to communicate, cooperate and collaborate.
- c. Service-learning helped students appreciate the personal satisfaction of extending a helping hand.
- d. Service-learning enhanced and connected the curriculum.
- e. Service-learning influenced career aspirations and future endeavors.
- f. Service-learning experiences developed students' leadership skills and abilities.

**Service-learning experiences increased student consciousness and awareness of others.** A major impact resulting from high school students' development from their participation in service-learning was their awakening to worldly views. High school students' participation in service-learning opened their eyes and expanded their thinking.

It allowed them to change the lens in which they viewed the world from a self-centered perspective to a philanthropic worldly view. As students focused their lenses they became aware of life as it evolved outside of their comfort zones. Service-learning participation presented the study participants with a serendipitous experience. Sheridan Ellis described the experience in this manner, “Service-learning taught me to try to do more with my life. So I am not just standing on the sidelines of life. I am involved in my community and not just being there but being a part of things.” This experience was also validated by several of the study participants whose primary focus in life prior to service-learning participation was self-centered. Danielle Carson exclaimed, “Service-learning definitely impacted my life to not be so egocentric and just think about myself but to really think about how my actions are affecting others. I feel I have become very concerned with my actions how they reflect on me, how they reflect on others and how that goes.” Abbie Woods shared her new awakening with this statement, “I use to think only of myself when I was younger. Service-learning has helped me embrace the world and now I have a world view versus a self-view.” Timothy Wallace acknowledged his influence from service-learning participation with this statement, “It helped me realize life is much more serious than I would think it is. I went outside of my boundaries that I set for myself. It really helped me look at the bigger picture of life instead of the smaller picture.” This new found personal awareness of life was explained by Kiana Underdo and Aubrey Timmons. Kiana Underdo stated, “service-learning opened my mind to a bunch of new things.” Aubrey Timmons agrees with the statement and adds, “I have become

more aware and more open to the experience around me and I have opened myself up to doing more things that I probably would not have done.”

This consciousness of life from a self-view to a world view allowed the study participants to also view people in a different manner. Alice Jessup learned not to stereotype and assume what people were like based on their dress. This concept was affirmed by Hurley London who made this statement about viewing people differently from his service-learning experience. “My mind was not the best in accepting people; now I look at people for who they are, not their title or race”. Yvonne Nelson has participated in various service-learning activities from picking up trash, feeding the homeless, working with Kid’s Voting to developing Hate-Hate Campaigns. She attributes becoming a well-rounded person to her experiences from interacting with different types of people in different ways. The newness of life as experienced by the study participants can be summed up with statements by Timothy Wallace and Morris Jemison. “Since participating in service-learning I have become more involved in my community, more aware of opportunities and problems and just general things. I have become less a student and more a member of my community” (Timothy Wallace). “Service-learning has opened my eyes to what you can do for other people. Seeing the impact that you have been a part of is what you can get out of it yourself” (Morris Jemison). The study participants used their skills and knowledge outside of their classrooms to connect to something bigger than themselves and from this connection. Yvonne Nelson stated, “I’ve grown better as a person.”

Researchers agree that service-learning participation exposes students to many opportunities in their communities. According to researchers Payne and Edwards (2010) adolescents are usually uninterested in conventional academic subjects but are curious about the world. Payne and Edwards state,

They respond positively to opportunities to connect what they are learning to participation in real-life situations such as community service projects, and . . . generally idealistic, desiring to make the world a better place and to make a meaningful contribution to a cause or issue larger than themselves. (2010, p. 29)

This speaks to the consciousness experienced by the study participants as they were exposed to the world around them by their participation in service-learning. Payne and Edwards (2010) affirmed as students become aware of worldview they develop a “sense of purpose and agency” (p. 29). Mahatma Gandhi (as cited in Din, 2010) states, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others” (p. 35). Isaacson, Dorries, and Brown (2001) discussed the importance of stretching people’s understanding of others. “Leaving our comfort zone almost always enlarges our knowledge and understanding of the world. In service-learning we often have to reach beyond our previous boundaries” (p. 21). Providing service to others allowed the study participants to step outside of themselves and stretch beyond their boundaries to recognize and embrace the world around them by being of service to others.

Research by Billig (2000) states the following:

- Service-learning has a positive effect on the personal development of public school youths.
- High school students who participated in service-learning showed increased measures of personal and social responsibility. (p. 660)

Service-learning provides an avenue for students to become active positive contributors to society.

- High school students who participated in service-learning and service activities are more likely to be engaged in community organizations.
- Students who engage in service-learning feel that they can “make a difference.”
- Service-learning participation has a positive effect on students’ interpersonal development and the ability to relate to culturally diverse groups.
- Students who engage in high quality service-learning programs reported greater acceptance of cultural diversity. (pp. 660–661)

Researchers Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, and McFarland (2002) agree with Billig’s research on service-learning engagement contributing to acceptance of cultural diversity.

They also conclude from their research that students reduce stereotyping and have greater understanding of other cultures when involved in service-learning projects.

Eyler and Giles (1999) state, “One of the consistent outcomes of service-learning is the reduction of negative stereotypes and the increase in tolerance for diversity” (p. 29).

They add that this outcome is consistent even if the intensity and duration of the service is limited and usually the service providers are surprised that the people that they worked with were often different from their original expectations (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Hinck and Brandell (1999) reported that U.S. youth, as a group, tend to feel alienated from society. They further state that service-learning provides youth with an opportunity to make a positive contribution and connection to the community and society. Isaacson et al. (2001) affirm the value of the experiences students receive from their service-learning participation with this statement.

Performing service gives you an opportunity to reflect on yourself as a person and respond to life's challenges. Your ability to handle strange situations, to deal with diverse people, and to accomplish tasks results from a committed service placement. These personal attributes make you better equipped in every aspect of your life. (p. 8)

Kielsmeier (2000) states, "If the act of service is perceived to be 'real,' not a stimulation or 'feel-good' act of charity that primarily benefits the student then it becomes a conscious act of citizenship" (p. 657). This conscious act was experienced by the study participants as they immersed themselves in service-learning in their communities and according to Morris Jemison, "the experience was more than for today it was for you in the future."

**Service-learning increased students' ability to communicate, cooperate and collaborate.** Communication, cooperation and collaboration which I refer to as the 3C's were a major impact on high school students' development from their participation in service-learning. The study participants shared that the 3Cs helped them learn to work effectively as a group. Sheridan Ellis stated, "I would say before we all did service-learning together we were like not really talking and stuff. But now that we participated in service-learning together it's like we all communicate better." This same experience was shared by Alice Jessup, "Service-learning showed me how to work with different people and communicate well." Hurley London was not good at group work prior to participating in service-learning. He states, "At first I was not the type of person that liked group work. When we did group work I worked by myself because I use to think it was my way or the highway. But now I'm good at working in groups and I actually like group work better than working by myself." Danielle Carson shared that group

interaction and participation was the most rewarding aspect of service-learning.

“Working in a group helped me to learn about the struggles people have in life.” Group work boosted Linda Charles’s confidence and ability to communicate in front of other people. She states, “Being accepted in a group helped me not to get real nervous.”

Timothy Wallace shared how he has become very busy and involved in working with others from participation in service-learning. He states, “There is more community involvement, more awareness of problems and opportunities and as a group we discuss things we can do to make a difference.” Danielle Carson affirms the thoughts of Timothy Wallace with this statement, “I really like working with people and making a difference in other people’s lives and not just focusing on my life.” The study participants abilities to communicate, collaborate, and cooperate were enhanced from their service-learning participation.

Researchers in the field of service-learning affirm the development of the skills needed for students to effectively communicate with others from participation in service-learning activities. According to Moore (2000) one of the goals of service-learning and experiential learning is to develop skills through the ability to work effectively and communicate in groups. Research by Isaacson et al. (2001) affirms service-learning builds teamwork skills through effective group communication in projects. Research by Billig (2000) states that service-learning builds cohesiveness and more positive peer relations. Eyler and Giles (1999) found that involvement in service-learning affected students’ tolerance of others and communication skills. Garber and Heet (2000) state “the lasting lessons grow from working with one’s peers to arrive at group solutions

rather, than from driving toward purely individual solutions” (p. 677). Study participants stated that service-learning provided them with the skills and ability to collaborate, cooperate and communicate which are vital components for effective and productive group or team work.

**Service-learning helped students appreciate the personal satisfaction of extending a helping hand.** Giving back and helping others was a major influence which impacted the development of the study participants. Giving back and helping others were acts which the study participants used to define the term service-learning. Study participants discovered the value of helping others and giving back during their service-learning participation. Danielle Carson valued helping others to the point that she stated, “I feel like I kind of have a problem saying no now. I may overbook myself but I really don’t like to say no to people and that never used to be the case. I have noticed that change in me.” Several other study participants noticed this same change in their development which they attributed to their service-learning participation. Parker Currie stated, “It was a joy to help others and helping others was a good thing to do.” Angelina Cummings not only enjoyed helping others but greatly benefitted from making new friends. Alice Jessup shared, “helping people was something I use not to do, but service-learning showed me how to help people and now I like helping people.” Yvonne Nelson reflects on service-learning participation with this statement,

I feel because of service-learning if I look at something and think that could be better I always want to help and make it better than what it is. I think service-learning has made me want to see the problems, like actually feel the need to help. Before service-learning I probably would be like, ‘oh that sucks,’ but I probably

would not do anything about it but now it is like a thing I can feel the need to help out and make it better.

Angelina Cummings also enjoys spending her time helping people but shared a noticeable change she observed in her peers:

It is really good to see my friends not hanging out with the same people all the time but going out there and using their skills to help others. And I notice that they are not just taking to their friends but they are talking about the service projects they are working on which is nice.

During one of my field observations to Living Healthy Middleton I observed the study participants demonstrating helping behaviors. The study participants were observed helping the presenters unload their materials from their cars. They were observed helping the presenters set up their displays and helping younger children play games and fill out forms. I heard the study participants using these phrases: “Do you need help?,” “Let me help you!,” “Are you lost?,” and “Is there anything you need?” These phrases all signaled the desire to assist others and give a helping hand.

The study participants shared as they extended a helping hand they experiences a sense of spiritual and personal self-fulfillment. Harrington Smith, Angelina Cummings, and Janelle Evans spoke of the feeling of happiness they experienced after and during their service-learning participation. Two study participants in the focus group session referred to a feeling of pride after they participated in a service-learning activity. Another focus group study participant shared that she experienced a sense of completeness after she participated in her service-learning activities. Hurley London stated, “service-learning gives you a good feeling inside to help someone out.” Morris Jemison shared

this response, “service-learning brings out something that is inside of you, an accomplishment of who you are.” Kiana Underdo uses the term “humble” to describe the feeling experienced after service-learning participation. “I am more humble after a service-learning experience. I now realize the true value of being able to go and do stuff without expecting some type of something in return other than for your own spiritual benefit.” Parker Currie, Aubrey Timmons, and Hurley London used the term “joy” to describe the way they felt when providing service to others. “The reward from service-learning is the personal joy from helping others” (Parker Currie). “Seeing the joy in the faces of people at the nursing home and helping the community has slowly changed me by bringing joy in my heart. I am a better person” (Aubrey Timmons). Yvonne Nelson shared, “I like being able to do service-learning. It makes you feel good inside to help people and if you enjoy helping people that just the bonus.” The internal rewards study participants received from service-learning participation can be summarized with thoughts by Timothy Wallace. “Some people may think of service-learning as working and not getting paid. But you do get paid and the pay is personal that comes from the experience and learning from the experience of it” (Timothy Wallace). The study participants agreed that helping others availed them with a sense of personal satisfaction.

Researchers Isaacson et al. (2001) agree that helping others is an outcome from service-learning participation. “Helping people tends to increase awareness of, and appreciation of, others and their concerns. Service-learning helps make this part of your education possible” (Isaacson et al., 2001, p. 22). Researchers Eyler and Giles (1999) found that involvement in service-learning attributed to students valuing a career of

helping others. Supporters of service-learning, Hinck and Brandell (1999) believe students involved in service-learning find rewards in helping other and feel more connected with their communities.

McEwen (1996) suggests that students who engage in service may develop greater clarity about their spirituality. Howard (1993) reported high school students shared that they realized something personal in return for helping others. According to Howard (1993) one student shared, "In serving I received great personal satisfaction" (p. 42). Eyler and Giles (1999) examined college students' responses to open-ended questions about their service-learning participation. The responses of the college students revealed they grew spiritually from their involvement in service-learning. The study participants expressed that their service-learning participation provided them with a sense of personal satisfaction which they referenced as their reward for helping others.

**Service-learning enhanced and connected the study participants to their curriculum.** The enhancement of academic curriculum was a theme expressed by the study participants from their participation in service-learning. Academic growth for all students is the goal of our education system. Study participants enrolled in civics and economics and government courses shared that their service-learning experiences helped them to better understand the concepts they were studying in their classes. Kiana Underdo stated,

I am not a big history person who can keep up with politics very well. But after seeing the background work and process of voting and making it all happening it really helped me apply that in the classroom. I became a better student from it and it really helped me understand the government better.

Danielle Carson shared similar benefits and understanding of AP Government with this statement.

In that class we had to learn about civil liberties, civil duties and doing what is right for your community even though you are not required to do it. It is just what you should do. I have gained a better understanding of this from service-learning and I have become a better citizen in my community.

Hurley London studied civic responsibility in his civics and economics class. He also concurred he gained a better understanding of the concept of civic responsibility from his work at the polls during the election.

Alice Jessup spoke of her educational awareness of societal issues from her required research in an English class. Her research was focused on homelessness and her work with shelters for the homeless helped her to really understand the underlying reasons in society such as poverty which contribute to people becoming homeless.

Timothy Wallace explained that his service-learning experiences in the community were beneficial to him as a student in all of his classes. He stated, "It taught me to become more disciplined in my education and everything that I do." Service-learning participation greatly benefited the study participants by enhancing their ability to understand and connect to their courses.

Research by Marais, Yang, and Farzanehkia (2000) validates the experiences shared by the study participants. They state,

In service-learning, the entire world is transformed into a "classroom under construction." Learning is no longer seen as a scheduled activity from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. in which the teacher lectures and the student take notes. The community

is no longer seen as just the place where people live. As a result, students are more engaged in their learning. (p. 680)

Research by Billig (2000) validates the impact to academic learning from service-learning participation. She concludes the following from her research:

- High school students who participate in service-learning were more likely to think about politics and morality in society.
- Students who participate in service-learning increased their understanding of how government works.
- High school students increased their political attentiveness, political knowledge and desire to become more politically active. (p. 661)

In a study of 2000 K-12 students from 24 schools, University of Wisconsin researchers found that students demonstrated improved student performance from their service learning experiences (Hincks & Brandell, 1999). Conrad and Hedin (1991) discovered from their quasi-experimental study that students in their service-learning experiential learning group expressed higher interest in and motivation for learning than did students in the comparison group. The outcomes of their study were echoed by the Texas Council for Chief State School Offices report published in 1997. The report results revealed involvement in service-learning affects students' higher level thinking skills, motivation to learn, application of learning, insight, and basic academic skills (Hincks & Brandell, 1999). The involvement of the study participants in service-learning enhanced their academic growth by connecting their curriculum to real world situation in their communities.

**Service-learning influenced career aspirations and future endeavors.** Career aspiration and future endeavors were impacted by the high school students' participation

in service-learning. Many of the study participants shared that they discovered what they wanted to become from their service-learning participation. A majority of the study participants' career aspirations were in the helping fields associated with providing a service to others.

Abbie Woods provided service by working in an art room in her neighborhood library. From this experience Abbie Woods discovered that teaching would be her career. Kiana Underdo worked at a sports camp and the YWCA. She stated, "What I took from this is I love to work with children. I loved everything about it. I want to be an elementary teacher. I would not have realized this if I did not have that experience." Janelle Evans provided service in a Christian day camp with toddlers. She shared that this service-learning experience helped her to learn what she needed to work on and improve to reach her dream of teaching and owning a day care center. Linda Charles worked as a Teacher Cadet in an elementary school. She stated, "It benefited me because I know now I want to teach."

Hurley London provided service at an area hospital and spoke of this service-learning experience leading him to considering a career in the medical field. Danielle Carson shared how service-learning helped her to rethink her life's ambition. She explained, "I have always wanted to be a doctor or a dentist. Now I have kind of changed my perception of what I want to do when I get older and service-learning really helped me see that I really want to be interacting with people every day and giving back as much as I can." Danielle Carson career choice and further aspiration may be unknown but what is known is the career will focus on interacting with people and giving back. Service-

learning participation provided the study participants with a newly discovered sense of career awareness.

Researchers validate that service-learning participation broadens students' awareness of career options. Garth (as cited in Bergstrom, 2004) states the need for, "nurturing students to aspire not just for jobs but also for meaningful careers that can contribute to society" (p. 9). Isaacson et al. (2001) affirm, "Through service-learning, students gain skills, experience and confidence in their abilities and skills. Not only do they gain skills, but they also gain the ability to demonstrate those skills to prospective employers" (p. 7). Billig (2000) concurs with these researchers and states, "Students who participated in service-learning reported gaining career skills along with increased in knowledge of career possibilities and they develop positive work attitudes and skills" (p. 661). Eyler and Giles (1999) found similar results from survey responses which indicated that participants in service-learning valued a career in helping others.

Service-learning participation influenced the career aspirations and further endeavors of the study participants. These study participants all referenced an interest in careers in an area in which they would be interacting with people and providing services.

**Service-learning experiences developed students' leadership skills and abilities.** The study participants shared how their service-learning experience helped them learn how to become leaders in their classrooms and in the community. Timothy Wallace shared this newfound ability in this manner, "Service-learning taught me that I can be a leader because usually I just sit back and take a backseat but during service-

learning activities I stepped up and you know lead other people. So we could all figure out a good way to work together and stuff.”

Griselda Jones expressed the same influence of service-learning on her leadership development. “I am more active in my classes and community. I am now a leader versus somebody who is just in the background.” Abbie Woods also shared that she is learning to become a leader from her service-learning experience and feels many of her peers are beginning to lead as well. Janelle Evans stated, “When I came into high school my leadership skills were very poor, these past four years doing service-learning has improved my leadership skills.” Linda Charles also credits service-learning to developing her leadership skills. She not only feels she has grown as a leader, but points to learning to be comfortable speaking in front of people and developing confidence in her abilities as contributing to the improvement in her ability to lead others. The study participants’ abilities to become leaders were enhanced through their service-learning participation.

Researchers such as Payne and Edwards (2010) concur that service-learning allows students to develop leadership and interpersonal skills while they are helping others. They further state, “When trusted to lead, students take more ownership for the outcomes” (p. 30). Researchers Isaacson et al. (2001) view service-learning as an opportunity to enhance one’s learning and leadership with this statement, “Service provides a chance to practice sharing your knowledge and experience for the benefit of others. That’s leadership” (p. 21). Marais et al. (2000) state,

The most powerful aspect of service-learning is the opportunity it provides to all young people to be leaders now, today, in their own lives and in their communities. Our experiences as young leaders in service-learning have had a

profound impact on our learning, our decisions, and our perspectives on our communities. (p. 680)

Eyler and Giles (1999) agree with the statement by Marais et al. (2000). They consider leadership development just as much as a goal of service-learning as is information and skill acquisition. The study participants realized the connection to learning and becoming leaders in their schools and communities from their participation in service-learning.

### **Research Findings of the Impact of Service-learning on One's Character**

The research study also sought to determine if service-learning impacted the character traits of students. I felt it was important first to gain an understanding of the participants' views and opinions of character and the development of one's character traits. The study also sought to explore if the study participants' character was impacted by their participation in service-learning.

Study participants were asked to define the term character. Most of the study participants defined character with a similar statement; Character is doing the right thing when no one is looking. Harrington Smith adds another dimension to this statement, "Probably doing the right things even whenever you don't think anyone will return that thing back to you." Hurley London's view of character is very similar with this statement, "Character is doing the right thing when no one is looking at you or going to reward you for what you did." Both study participants views focused on doing what was right without regard or expectation for some external reward for their goodness. Sheridan Ellis defined character as an internal drive or mechanism. "Character is what makes us up. Character is more of what drives us, what we are." Alice Jessup's definition agrees

with the internal drive associated with character with this statement, “Character is your personality and being able to do what you set your mind to do.”

The study participants were also asked to share the character traits that defined them as a person and to reflect on how they developed these traits. I grouped the character traits shared by the study participants in three major categories. The categories were compassion, self-determination, and integrity. Under the category of compassion I placed traits such as kind, nice, caring, generous, serving, and helpful that the study participants used to describe their character. I placed the traits, confident, insightful, outgoing, driven, focused, motivated, and leader used by the study participants to describe their character under the category self-determination. The character traits of honesty, respectful, trustworthy, and responsible that were shared by the study participants I grouped under the category integrity. Study participants were then asked to reflect on how they developed the above character traits. Hurley London, Yvonne Nelson, Janelle Evans, and Abbie Woods all stated that they developed these character traits from their parents, family members (brothers, sisters, and grandparents), and friends. Griselda Jones and Abbie Woods shared their character traits were developed through church. Life experiences were cited by Alice Jessup, Sheridan Ellis, Kiana Underdo, and Morris Jemison as the manner in which they developed their character. Sheridan Ellis stated, “I developed my character through experiences because growing up I was a rebellious child, so when I saw the consequences that came from it I just totally changed my whole view on life and how I wanted to be.” Alice Jessup shared, “I developed the character trait of honesty and confidence from my experiences in life. I

was pretty closed minded and did not care what people thought about me. Like my mom passed away and I had to be strong and open up pretty much. I learned to care and give people a chance.” Morris Jemison shared, “I probably developed my character as I grew up. I was placed in different situations and gained different experiences. It is just natural to be kind and generous, you just do them.”

It was evident that the study participants understood that character was the way in which a person acted; it was who they were, what defined them. They all concluded that life experiences as they grew up including family influences and church contributed to their character development.

Fairchild (2006) refers to character as “the attributes or features that make up and distinguish the individual, the complex of mental and ethical traits making a person” (p. 9). Researchers Davidson et al. (2007) define character as being two interconnected or linked parts which they refer to as performance character and moral character. Performance character was inclusive of the character traits shared by the study participants which I grouped under the category of self-determination. Performance character is described as “mastery orientation” and is needed to realize one’s potential for excellence in any performance environment (Davidson et al., 2007, p. 373). Moral character is a “relational orientation” (Davidson et al., 2007, p. 374) and is inclusive of the character traits shared by the study participants that I grouped under the categories of integrity and compassion. “Moral character enables us to treat others—and ourselves—with respect and care and to act with integrity in our ethical lives” (Davidson et al., 2007, p. 374). The study participants possessed both performance and moral character

traits which are essential for them to not only do what is right but do their best in any endeavor.

The emphasis of life experience shared by the study participants in the development of their character is affirmed by researchers of character development. Fairchild (2006), CEP (2009), and Gray (2009) state that one's life situations is an important element in the development of character. Fairchild states, "Any definition of character is as much a function of the surrounding moral culture as it is a manifestation of the individual person" (2006, p. 9). The life events experienced by the study participants were fundamental in the development of their character.

### **Recurring Themes for the Impact of Service-learning on Character Development**

This research explored the relationship of service-learning participation on the development of character traits in the study participants. During the coding process themes emerged to answer the following research question: Does service learning participation impact students' development of character traits? The study participants all agreed that service-learning participation enhanced the development of their performance and moral character. The following themes emerged from the study participants' responses to the above research question.

- a. Service-learning participation contributed to the development of students' self-confidence.
- b. Service-learning enhanced students' ability to become empathetic toward others.

- c. Service-learning increased students' ability to be compassionate, caring, and kind.
- d. Service-learning enhanced students' abilities to be responsible and respectful.

**Service-learning participation contributed to the development of students' self-confidence.** The study participants shared their self-confidence was developed through their participation in service-learning. Some study participants related this development to their being able to speak in front of groups, becoming more outgoing, and more open to explore opportunities. Abbie Thomas spent many hours working in the library and tutoring students in math. She explained that her self-confidence was enhanced from her service-learning experiences working with students. She stated, "Service-learning has helped me develop world smarts." When questioned about the meaning of world smarts she explained that the service-learning experiences she gained from working with younger children in math helped her develop self-confidence to know that she could be successful throughout her life which she refers to as "world smarts. Abbie wants to become a teacher and tutoring students and seeing their success boosted her self-confidence for this career choice and success in life.

Linda Charles was enrolled in an Early Childhood Class and worked as a Teacher Cadet. She shared her self-confidence was developed from her service-learning experiences at an elementary school and serving as a guide or hostess at conferences for directors and teachers of child care centers. She shared that prior to becoming a Teacher Cadet her mother and family members would always remind her to hold her head up and to speak up. She also shared her teachers would always ask her to speak up when she

answered questions in class, and she rarely volunteered to speak in class. Linda explained that her inability to stand in front of a group, and speak up began to change over the semester as she worked with special needs students at an elementary school. It became easier and easier for her to stand in front of the group of students and their teachers to read a book or teach a lesson. Serving as a hostess or guide for the Early Childhood Conference really took her out of her comfort zone. Linda shared during the Early Childhood Education Conference she was able to direct people who were much older than she was and they actually listened to her and followed her directions. Linda Charles shared,

I noticed I'm more comfortable speaking in front of people. Like now I can just get up there and speak, I have so much confidence. And people see that in me and they just smile. Like wow you have so much confidence. And that's one of the things I thought I'd never be able to do get up and speak in front of people because I would I don't know I get real nervous but being in service-learning has helped me with that a lot.

Yvonne Nelson also shared that her service-learning participation enhanced her self-confidence. But unlike Linda Charles she possessed the ability to stand up, speak out, and lead in her classroom which she considered a safe environment because she was around people with whom she felt comfortable. Service-learning experiences forced Yvonne Nelson to leave this safe environment and interact in her community. From her service-learning experiences Yvonne Nelson has become more balanced and well rounded. She attributes her service-learning participation for the development of her self-confidence to interact with others outside of her classroom and school community. She stated, "I now know it's important for people to be well rounded and balanced and service

learning has definitely done that.” Griselda Jones also concurs that service-learning participation has developed her self-confidence. She shared that she was very reserved prior to participating in service-learning. Service-learning participation has offered her the opportunities to become involved in her community and the more she interacts in her community the more confident she becomes to be open to more opportunities. She stated, “I now feel I have the ability to be involved and to help others.” Timothy Wallace had a very similar experience with service-learning participation contributing to the development of his self-confidence. “I would say it has helped me realize I can do certain things. It helped me get out of the mindset that I can’t do this because of this and I can’t do that because of that.” Aubrey Timmons shared that he was always outgoing and liked talking with people. Participation in service-learning has also enhanced his self-confidence for his future. Aubrey stated, “I always had goals for my future but now I am confident that I will reach them.”

These study participants developed the character trait of self-confidence from the successes they experienced from service-learning participation. A review of literature speaks to the impact of service-learning on the character development of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence. Researchers Marais et al. (2000) explain the development of self-confidence in students who participate in service-learning as a feeling of making a difference. They describe the development of confidence from service-learning participation as “the feeling of knowing that one has made a difference; the feeling that one’s contribution is important, even critical to the success of a service-learning project” (p. 680). This feeling of making a difference according to the

researcher results in confident students who are more engaged in their learning. The Corporation for National and Community Service also found that students who participated in service-learning reported that they thought they could make a great deal of difference in their community (Billig, 2010). Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) agree with the above researchers that students who volunteered in their community developed a greater sense of efficacy and a belief that they can make a difference in their own lives as well as in their community.

Billig (2000) reports that students who engage in service-learning were more likely to increase their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Thoits and Hewitt (n.d., as cited in Billig, 2010) conducted a longitudinal survey of young adults and found that those who participated in continuing service reported higher levels of self-esteem and sense of control over their lives. Conrad and Hedin (1981) conducted a quasi-experimental study involving 1000 students ages 12–19. They found that engagement in community based experimental learning activities exposed students to factors and opportunities known to boost their self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy. Eyster and Giles (1999) found similar results from a survey of open ended questions to college age students. The survey responses indicated that service-learning experience positively affected the college students' personal efficacy. A study by Yates and Youniss (1996) reports service-learning to be an effective instructional strategy for developing students' self-esteem and self-efficacy. Numerous studies affirm that community service programs have the capacity to meet adolescents' needs for self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-confidence (Billig, 2010; Billig & Jesse, 2008; Melchior & Balis, 2002). Issacson et al.

(2001) state, “Though service-learning students gain skills, experience and confidence in their abilities and skills” (p. 7). Service-learning participation by the study participants enhanced the development of their confidence. The opportunities presented to them and the skills they acquired equipped them with the confidence to believe that they can make a difference in their own lives and their community.

**Service-learning enhanced students’ ability to become empathetic toward others.** The study participants developed empathy as they participated in service-learning activities. Angelina Cummings spent many hours tutoring at a Korean School. She received most of her service-learning hours from her work at the Korean School and continued tutoring at the school after she had earned enough hours for her service-learning diploma. When asked why she continued providing service at the Korean School she shared that she wanted to help two little girls who were newcomers to America. She remembered learning English when she came to the United States and she wanted to help them with their English. She also shared helping them with their English also helped her to develop her language. Angelina became empathetic to the needs of the students who were in a situation in which she could easily identify. Parker Currie shared a service-learning experience he had working with mentally handicapped children. He worked with the students at the school for several months and his group was responsible for planning an end of the year party for the students. He explained the planning of the party became very personal for him. He felt the students wanted to have fun, and he felt that they deserved it. Parker stated, “Planning the party for the students was a good thing to do, and they should dress up and have fun just as much as any other student.” Danielle

Carson also developed empathy during her service-learning participation as a coach at the YWCA. She played volley ball for six years and began coaching with one of her very good friends. She described the experience in this manner,

It's not just teaching volley ball but it's something I'm very passionate about and working with girls not just to improve their skills but also I teach them how to work as a team and build their character through sports. I see myself in them and know the change sports made in my life.

Sharon Ellis, Hurley London, and Morris Jeminson all shared that they developed empathy for others during their service-learning experiences as they were able to see situations through the eyes of others. Morris Jeminson developed this skill during his work with Habitat for Humanity. "Building a house for and with a family in need opens your eyes to what you can do." Hurley London shared,

Service-learning has enhanced my character because I used to think or always complain about something so little in life but when you go out there and help someone who is less fortunate than yourself you realize how well or how good you have it and how some people don't have it as good as you. Little things that I complain about don't need to be complained about. They are not worth the time.

These feelings of empathy were shared by the study participants as they described having feelings or emotions which allowed them to truly understand and relate to the experiences of the receivers of their service.

The enhancement or development of empathy in the character of the study participants is consistent with studies conducted on intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits from service-learning participation. Results from a study conducted by McCarthy and Corbin (2003) showed participants in the study developed empathy as they

established an understanding of the perceived feelings of the individuals with whom they were working. McCarthy and Corbin (2003) view service-learning “as the principal means for transmitting the core values of empathy, ethics, and service” (p. 53).

Billig (2000) reports students who engage in service-learning showed greater empathy than the comparison group who did not participate in service-learning. Cantor (1995) (as cited in Bergstrom, 2004) suggests through experiential learning participants could attain such skills as interpersonal loyalty and empathy. Similar results of other studies conducted by Billig (2000) showed service-learning produced sensitivity to the plight of others and empathy. According to Howard (1993) students during their high school years talk about developing empathy as they reach a “new understanding of others in less fortunate circumstances” (p. 42).

“Empathy can be achieved best through experiential and academic preparation that develops in the students an understanding of the strange, an understanding that makes empathy available in the interaction” (Sheffield, 2005, p. 49). Service-learning participation has provided students with the opportunities to interact with others. These interactions may be with people whose situation they fully understand or began to understand from their interactions. Study participants shared that from these interactions they have developed empathy for those whom they interacted with.

**Service-learning increased students’ ability to be compassionate, caring, and kind.** The study participants reported an increase in their ability to be caring, compassionate and kind to others. Harrington Smith participated in a service-learning project at an animal shelter. He shared how he became attached to the animals and how

compassionate he was for the rescue animals that had been mistreated. He shared he would always spend extra time with them. “I would take them out of their cages and play with them, pat them, and talk to them. I really became attached to them and wanted them to find loving homes.” Morris Jeminson always considered himself a generous person. He was taught to share with others from his mother. He shared he really learned the meaning of the golden rule, “Treat others as you want to be treated”, from his service-learning experience as a restaurant server. He described his experiences working as a server at a dinner for a non-profit organization. He stated, “Maybe they thought this was my job but the people at my tables were not nice to me. I learned the best way to serve the people was to be kind to them even when they were being mean to me.” Johnelle Evans tutored children after school at a daycare center. She was assigned a little girl to tutor during the fall semester. She shared she liked working with the little girl and wanted to help her. “I really cared for her and wanted her to do well and learn her sight words. I made sure I was there because I wanted her to learn.”

During a field observation to Safely First I observed Cindi Smith showing compassion toward one of the students in her group. A small boy was crying because he did not have his permission slip to ride a big wheel through the safety village. Cindi immediately went to the little boy and stated, “Don’t cry, you can sit with me while they ride and we can play some hand games. I will make sure your mother signs the permission slip when she picks you up and you can ride first tomorrow.”

Parker Currie, Darnella Carson, and Kiana Underdo all stated that they were caring, kind, and nice. They shared that they displayed these characters traits all the time.

Parker Currie shared that his service-learning participation helped him to understand how important it is to be kind to people you do not know. Kiana Underdo shared that she is a member of the KARMA club. KARMA is an acronym for kind, altruism reverent, moral and ardent. The experiences Kiana received from working at the polls during the 2012 elections helped her become kinder. She described herself as overflowing with kindness as she assisted first time voters at the polling booths. Darnella Carson participated in a variety of service-learning activities which included Kid's Voting, camp counselor, book buddies, and Special Olympics. She shared she displayed the character trait of kindness at all of these activities. She remembered her work with students during the Special Olympic as a special time for her. Darnella stated, "The excitement of the students at the Special Olympics and the smiles on their faces made it so easy to feel compassion for them and celebrate with them when they finished games." The study participants displayed compassion, care, and kindness in their interactions with animals, children, and adults during their service-learning experiences. Their service-learning participation cultivated these character traits and helped the study participants understand the importance of being kind, compassionate, and caring toward others.

Researchers Billig and Jesse (2008) reported that middle and high school students who participated in service-learning are more likely than their nonparticipating peer to increase caring behaviors. Howard (1993) affirms service-learning impacts or reinforces commonly accepted values such as a sense of justice and compassion for others. The Alliance for Service-learning in Education Reform (1995, as cited in Hinck & Brandell, 1999) and Billig (2000) report school based service-learning helps to foster the

development of a sense of caring for others. According to Billig (2000), service-learning impacts the personal development of public school youths. She states, “Students who engage in service-learning were more likely to treat one another kindly and care about doing their best” (Billig, 2000, p. 660). Positive Youth Development asserts that external assets in the lives of youth such as service-learning in schools work to enhance character and caring in the development of young people (Zaff & Lerner, 2010). Billig and colleagues (2008) assessed pre-post changes in the development of values in middle and secondary school students over a three year period. The study results affirm service-learning may help students retain their character assets including caring as they mature (Furco & Root, 2010).

Vincent (1994) asserts by providing opportunities for service at school and in the community we help students develop positive caring attitudes toward others. “It is my belief that to learn truly to care, students must become involved in service towards others. One cannot learn to be a caring person unless one practices the art of caring” (Vincent, 1994, p. 135). These sources all support the enhancement of caring behaviors in students from their participation in service-learning. The enhancement of caring by students’ participation in service-learning can be summed up with this statement by Billig (2000), “Finally, their work is, by its nature, about caring” (p. 2).

### **Service-learning enhanced students’ abilities to be responsible and respectful.**

The study participants shared that their respect for others and their civic and personal responsibility was heightened by their service-learning participation. Angelina Cummings viewed herself as a respectful person. She stated, “Service-learning kind of

forced me to go to my assigned projects to get my hours. I learned that people were counting on me and this helped me to become more responsible and show up to volunteer.” Timothy Wallace shared that he could not describe himself as respectful and responsible before he started participating in service-learning. “I was a little rebellious growing up and service-learning changed my view on life. My summer trip with Outward Bound helped me change my attitude. I am more respectful to my teachers and I am more responsible about my work.” Linda Charles considered herself as responsible and respectful, but very outspoken. She shared that her service-learning experiences have helped her to be more respectful of others. “During planning for service-learning projects I learned to become more open to listen to the ideas of others and to value their opinions” (Linda Charles). Aubrey Timmons has participated in a variety of service-learning projects during his years in high school. He shared he has developed respect for others from his service-learning experiences. “Like my mind was probably not the best in accepting people, now I look at people for who they are not their title or race.”

Alice Jessup considered herself as a very honest person. She shared she considered making a commitment to attend a service-learning activity, and then not showing up as lying. Alice Jessup stated, “I don’t like to be lied to.” So she would always attend her service-learning activities even when she wished she did not have to go, because she did not want to disappoint people who were counting on her. “I have always been responsible and honest pretty much; service-learning has just built on these traits.”

Some study participants developed an understanding of their civic responsibilities from their participation in service-learning. Kiana Underdo and Hurley London shared their experiences from working at the election offices and polls during the election of 2012. Both students were enrolled in A.P. Government and were required to provide service at the election sites as a service-learning requirement for the course. Kiana shared the experience helped her to understand the government better and that she wants to continue volunteering at local and national elections. Kiana stated, “It helped me to realize the importance of voting, that’s our civic responsible and it was rewarding.” Hurley London’s experiences from working at the election site also helped him to understand his civic duties and responsibilities. “I learned the importance of doing what is right for your community, even though you're not required to do it. I’ve become a better citizen in my community.” Aubrey Timmons provided service at a non-profit agency which promoted equality and social justice. He was a member of an all-male school club that provided service at this organization. He shared his eyes were open to bigotry, bias, and racism. “It made a major impact in my life. It is my responsibility to become a better person and make our community a better place for all people.” Yvonne Nelson learned of her civic responsibilities from her service-learning projects in her Environmental Science class and her Civics and Economics class. She shared that her Environment Science class studied the impact humans have on the environment by littering. They began a service-learning project to reduce litter at her school. She learned that it is everyone’s responsibility to care for our environment. In her Civics and Economics class she participated in a service-learning activity with Kid’s Voting. From

her experience she shared, “I learned that you have the right and responsibility as a citizen to vote and be an active citizen throughout your whole life.”

During my field observations at Living Healthy Middleton and Safety First I observed the study participants demonstrating responsibility. All of the study participants who were assigned to participate in the service-learning activities were in attendance and they arrived on time. Cindi Smith and Jori Mills who were serving at Safety First remained with the students in their group until all of their parents arrived. The study participants spoke to each parent about their child. The study participants shared they felt it was their responsibility to remain even though it was not a requirement. Abbie Thomas, Yvonne Nelson, and Darnella Carson were observed demonstrating responsibility at Living Healthy Middleton. These study participants adhered to their assigned tasks. They rotated to their stations at the assigned times and remained at each stations. While at their stations they performed their assigned duties and were attentive to the people who visited their stations.

The study participants’ civic and personal responsibility and sense of respectfulness was enhanced from their participation in service-learning. Researcher Howard (1993) states students who participate in service experiences with the focus on learning may impact or reinforce commonly accepted values or an acceptance of the responsibilities of citizens. Research by Billig (2000) reports the following:

- Service-learning has a positive effect on the personal development of public school youths.
- Middle and high school students who engaged in service-learning programs showed increases in measures of personal and social responsibility.

- Students who engaged in service-learning ranked responsibility as a more important value and reported a higher sense of responsibility to their school than did comparison groups. (p. 660)

Service-learning has a positive effect on students' interpersonal development

- Middle and elementary school students who participated in service-learning were able to be reliable and to accept responsibility.
- Students who participated in service-learning became more dependable. (p. 660)

Service-learning helps develop students' sense of civic and social responsibility.

- Students who engaged in service-learning showed an increase in their awareness of community needs and their commitment to service now and later in life.

Elementary and middle schools students who participated in service-learning developed a greater sense of a civic responsibility and ethic of service. (p. 661)

According to Garber and Heet (2000), “when service is part of a school’s program, students are challenged to define themselves through a larger sense of their community and of their responsibility to it” (p. 676). Conrad and Hedin (1982, as cited in Hinck & Brandell, 1999) conducted a study of 27 school-sponsored programs that were inclusive of students participating in community service. The study results concluded that the student participants gained in their social and personal responsibility. Metz and Youniss (2005) found that high school students who were inclined to participate in service-learning showed a greater likelihood of civic interest, understanding, and responsibility after their experience. According to RMC Research Corporation (2007) service-learning participation promotes the positive character traits of responsibility. “They learn not to let each other down or to disappoint those being served” (RMC Research Corporation, 2007, n.p.). Vincent (1994) asserts that schools must provide opportunities for students to perform service in their communities. From these opportunities “youth will develop a

sense of responsibility as they become involved in the lives of others” (Vincent, 1994, p. 134).

Billig and colleagues (2008, as cited in Furco & Root, 2010) assessed pre-post changes in values development among middle years and secondary school students over a three year period. The study results suggest that service-learning may help students retain their character assets of respect for self and others as they mature. Research conducted by RMC Research Corporation (2006) found that students who participated in character education programs which implemented service-learning components reported greater gains in prosocial behavior such as respect than their peer in the comparison groups. Lickona and Davidson (2005) reported research findings evidencing service-learning participation helps increase respect between teachers and students. Eyster and Giles (1999) found that students’ participation in service-learning fosters a sense of respect for community partners and other adults.

The study participants’ participation in service-learning enhanced their development of respect for others and their personal and civic responsibility. This enhancement of respect and responsibility as shared by the study participants is also evidenced in research on the interpersonal development of students from service-learning participation.

### **Research Findings on Why Students Participant in Service-learning**

This research also sought to understand why high school students desired to earn the service-learning award or diploma. I began to explore the meaning of the service-

learning award or diploma by asking the study participants why they devoted hours of their time to participate in service-learning.

Study participants were asked to share why they desired to participate in service-learning. The majority of the study participants shared that they volunteered in their community prior to their school system offering the service-learning diploma. Danielle Carson stated, "I kind of always done it. I am involved in Girl Scouts and my troop focuses a lot on giving back to the community." Kiana Underdo response was similar, "To be honest I have always been big in volunteering and doing service type things." Angelina Cummings stated, "Volunteering is something that I always did, it comes from the bottom of my heart." Parker Currie shared, "Volunteering is like a big part of my family. My mom volunteers at the school all of the time and this is what I have grown up to do, help others." According to Morris Jemison, volunteering was what he did growing up because his parents always exposed him to opportunities in which he could volunteer. Abbie Woods stated, "Volunteering was instilled in me when I was little. My dad told me if I wanted to get a good job I needed to volunteer." The study participants who were participating in volunteering in their community transitioned to participation in service-learning opportunities in their schools.

Researchers state that students greatly benefit from their participation in volunteering in their community (Mueller, 2005; Taylor & Pancer, 2007). Benefits include an increase in students self-confidence (Mueller, 2005), improved social and leadership skills (Taylor & Pancer, 2007), and an expanded sense of community (Johnson, Foley, & Elder, 2004). Bloomberg et al. (as cited in Storm, 2010) indicated

that studies reported an increased rate of high school graduation and enrollment in postsecondary education and reduced rates of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use for students who volunteered in their community. Community involvement through volunteering ingrains ethical values with a high value on integrity (Sergiovanni, 2003, as cited in Storm, 2010). The study participants who volunteered in their community gave of their time prior to service-learning but also were on the receiving end.

### **Recurring Themes for Earning the Service-learning Diploma or Exemplary Award**

This research study explored the reasons why high school students desired to participant in service-learning and earn the service-learning diploma or exemplary award.

The following themes emerged from the coding process to answer the research question:

Why do students desire to earn the service-learning diploma or exemplary award?

- a. Service-learning diploma or exemplary award is an extension of who I am.
- b. Service-learning diploma or exemplary award is a type of reward and recognition.
- c. Service-learning diploma or exemplary award encourages me to make a difference.
- d. Service-learning diploma or exemplary award will enhance my future plans.

#### **Service-learning diploma or exemplary award is an extension of who I am.**

Study participants were asked why they desired to earn a service-learning diploma or award. The study participants who were volunteering stated that the service-learning diploma simply encouraged them to do more. Darnella Carson volunteered before service-learning was started in her high school. She stated, "I already do all of this and I

would probably still do it even if I didn't get the diploma." Harrington Smith also volunteered prior to participating in service-learning. He shared that his service-learning participation meant so much more to him than receiving a diploma. "I have always volunteered out there. When service-learning began I just stuck with what I was doing. If it was about hours I would have stopped a while ago." Yvonne Nelson also volunteered in her community prior to her service-learning participation and enjoyed being a part of the groups that she volunteered. She explained her desire to earn the diploma was simply continuing what she was doing. "I want to continue to volunteer and being able to participate in service-learning with it makes you feel good" (Yvonne Nelson). The study participants all viewed acquiring the service-learning diploma as an extension or continuance of the work that they were currently performing in their community.

Research confirms that high school students who volunteered in their community usually continue providing services to their community. Hinck and Brandell (1999) reported that students who participated in Learn and Service programs were more committed to service now and later in life. The participants in the Learn and Service Programs were "20% more likely than comparison group members to have been involved in some form of volunteer service during the previous six months and provided more than twice as many hours of service during that period" (Hinck & Brandell, 1999, p. 21). According to Kielsmeier (2000), the results of a nationwide survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA reported that 75.3% of college freshmen are volunteering even when only 21.3% of them attended high schools that require

community service for graduation. “These findings suggest that the majority of students who engage in volunteer work do so of their own volition” (Kielsmeier, 2000, p. 653). Metz and Youniss (2005) reported that high school students who volunteered to participate in community service were not negatively affected by mandatory service. In essence, required service did not have much effect on high school students who were already inclined to volunteer.

The study participants who volunteered prior to logging hours in NobleHours were already committed to providing service in their community. Earning the service-learning diploma or award was simply a continuation or extension of their current work in their community.

**Service-learning diploma or exemplary award is a type of reward and recognition.** The majority of the study participants stated they desired the service-learning diploma or award as a type of recognition for doing something good in their community. Morris Jemison shared, “The diploma is a way to give recognition to students who are doing good work in service-learning in high schools.” Parker Currie shared the similar opinion for earning the service-learning diploma or award. Parker Currie stated that the diploma or award was his recognition for having so many service-learning hours. Griselda Jones shared, “For me it’s just recognition of the fact that you are doing something good. And I like that people are going to recognize what I did and it’s not just going to be something that goes unnoticed.” Sharone Ellis is also working to earn her service-learning diploma as a way for her community to recognize that she is doing great things. Alice Jessup stated, “I really, really want it. It’s not really much but I

just want to be announced for it because I volunteered and I want people to recognize what I did.” Niya Ruff and Timothy Wallace both explained their desire to earn the service-learning award or diploma as a way to be rewarded for taking their time to do service and learn from it. Kiana Underdo shared, “the service-learning diploma is a reward for the time I spent learning from the activities I participated in.” Aleya Ingram stated she was participating in service-learning for the diploma. She shared, “People do stuff to get something out of it, anything.” The meaning of service-learning and the purpose for working toward earning the service-learning diploma was summed up by Abbie Woods.

Some people are driven by rewards and things such as those hours, or a cord, or sheet of paper. Some peoples have not been taught the true meaning of service-learning. It is great to serve and give back to others. Even though it may start with the award but it soon changed to giving to others.

Din (2010) shares the same view as Abbie Woods. She states, “I volunteered in order to receive membership points or simply because it was something asked of me. Soon after, however, the points and the material benefits fade, but not the passion” (p. 36).

**Service-learning diploma or exemplary award encourages me to make a difference.** Some study participants who had previous experience volunteering as well as some students who had no prior volunteer experience shared they were not focused on earning the diploma or award. These study participants’ focus was on making a difference in their communities and the diploma and or award was the byproduct not the reason why they participated in service-learning. Morris Jemison and Angelina Cummings both shared they wanted to make a difference in their communities. Morris

Jemison furthered explained, “In a school of 1200 students, in a community of tens of thousands of people, you can make a difference just one single person.” Hurley London had a similar opinion concerning the difference one person can make in the community. Hurley stated, “The meaning and purpose of the service-learning diploma is to show others and to show yourself that you can make a difference, even one person can make a difference.” Johnelle Evans participates in service-learning because she enjoys everything about it. She stated, “To have a service-learning diploma or award means you have impacted somebody’s life.” Aubrey Timmons shared that he wanted to be more than just the average student. “I feel like the diploma says to me, you’ve done a lot in the community, you have helped people. I did what I needed to do to be productive in my community.” Yvonne Nelson shared that her desire to earn the diploma or award was as a kind of reward for what she has done in her community. She concluded, “Even without the diploma or recognition you as a person still know you have impacted your community.” It was the opinion of the study participants that making a difference in their community outweighed receiving an award for their times and service to others.

Researchers Billig and Jesse (2008) report that high school studies showed that young people who engaged in service-learning felt good about giving back and making a difference. RMC Research Corporation (2003) affirms Billig and Jesse’s (2008) report with this statement. “Young people who engage in service-learning often come to believe that they can make a difference in their schools, communities, and society” (n.p.). Billig (2000) states the following:

Service-learning participation provides an avenue for students to become active, positive contributors to society.

- Service-learning participation helps students to feel that their work is important and valuable to others.
- Students who engage in service-learning feel that they can make a difference.
- Over 80% of participants in high-quality service-learning programs felt that they had made a positive contribution to the community. (p. 661)

Garber and Heet (2000) affirm, “In the best situations, when service is part of a school’s program, students are challenged to define themselves through a larger sense of their community and to their responsibility to it” (p. 676). Kielsmeier (2000) states, “By engaging actively as citizens, students today shed the passive mantle of dependence for the more active roles of contribution and influence” (p. 652).

The study participants who desired to earn their service-learning diploma viewed their participation in service-learning as a means to become active members of their community. Earning the diploma or award was not their main goal but viewed as a way for them to make a difference and impact their communities.

**Service-learning diploma or exemplary award will enhance my future plans.**

The study participants who were not volunteering prior to service-learning had a different view on service-learning participation and the diploma and/or award. These study participants viewed earning the service-learning diploma or award as a personal benefit. Linda Charles shared she had not participated in volunteer activities or given volunteering any thought prior to her service-learning participation. Linda stated, “My counselor told me it would be a good idea for me to do service-learning and it would also look good on my resume.” Linda also shared that she was glad that she had participated

in service-learning because she had fun. Lynn Stevens also stated she wanted the diploma because it would look good on her resume.

Aubrey Timmons felt that service-learning participation was all about getting the hours needed for the diploma. Danielle Carson desired the service-learning diploma as a way to help her get into college. Morris Jemison performed his service-learning activities in health related agencies. He viewed the service-learning diploma as a way to market himself and his career choices in the health field.

Greselda Jones volunteered prior to participating in service-learning. She gave several reasons why she wanted to earn the service-learning diploma or award. One reason she gave was, "It looks good on your resume and people will see that you have dedication." Angelina Cummings expressed her concern with students working toward earning the service-learning diploma for their personal benefits. "I feel one of the flaws right now is people go after this diploma because they think it's going to get them into college automatically and they do service-learning not to its fullest extent." These study participants shared the diploma or award would help them in some aspect of their future from having an impressive resume to college acceptance.

Researcher Billig (2000) states service-learning participation leads to lifelong benefits. RMC Corporation (2003) reports that service-learning offers many students the opportunity to come in contact with adults in careers that may have an impact on their future career choices. Furco and Root (2010) state some of the robust effects of service-learning have been found in the personal development of students through preparation

into the workforce (Yamauchi et al., 2006, as cited in Furco & Root, 2010) and transitions to adulthood (Martin et al., 2006, as cited in Furco & Root, 2010).

The study participants who desired to earn the diploma or award for their future had goals and aspirations. They viewed earning the service-learning diploma as an opportunity to help them reach their future goals.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter shared the findings from the research about the experiences gained by high school students from their participation in service-learning. The chapter shared the study participants' views on the concept of service-learning and character development. Study participants' opinions about service-learning and community service were also discussed in the chapter.

Themes were shared that answered the research questions of the study. The study participants shared that participation in service-learning enhanced the development of their interpersonal skills, leadership, career awareness, academic development, and their moral and performance character. Research and information from other sources which validated the responses of the study participants was also shared in this chapter. Themes were also shared that spoke to the meaning study participants attached to desiring to earn the service-learning diploma.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS**

Service-learning is an instructional strategy which connects the academic curriculum beyond the walls of the classroom to real life issues and needs in communities (Anderson, 1998; Billig, 2000, Billig, 2002b; Kaye, 2010; NYLC, 2010). The findings from this study describe the benefits students received from their participation in service-learning and validate the use of service-learning as an instructional strategy in our schools. This chapter will present recommendations for actions and future research based on the study findings. The chapter will conclude with my personal reflections and conclusion about this research study.

#### **Summary of Research Findings**

This research study was designed to evaluate the benefits high school students received from their participation in service-learning. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What influence does a service requirement have on high school students' development?
  - A. Does service learning impact students' development of character traits?
2. Why do students desire to earn the service-learning diploma or exemplary award?

Qualitative data were collected through face to face interviews, focus groups sessions, and field observations. Data collection was conducted over a 14-week period.

The findings from this research study validate the benefits students receive from service-learning participation as reported by previous researchers in the field of service-learning. The work of these researchers is discussed in the review of literature.

Research question 1 focused on the impact service-learning had on the development of high school students. The following themes were discovered during the research process to answer the research question:

- a. Service-learning experiences increased student consciousness and awareness of others.
- b. Service-learning increased students' ability to communicate, cooperate and collaborate.
- c. Service-learning helped students appreciate the personal satisfaction of extending a helping hand.
- d. Service-learning enhanced and connected the curriculum.
- e. Service-learning influenced career aspirations and future endeavors.
- f. Service-learning experiences developed students' leadership skills and abilities.

The study participants revealed the enhancement of their interpersonal and intrapersonal development from their participation in service-learning. Service-learning participation afforded the study participants an avenue to the world around them. It provided opportunities for the study participants to become involved in their community.

Their involvement opened the eyes of the study participants to the problems and needs in their community. This consciousness of the world allowed the study participants to view people in a different manner. They began to accept and embrace diversity in others. From this awareness and consciousness of others the study participants developed a “sense of purpose and support” (Payne & Edwards, 2010, p. 29).

This newfound awareness by the study participants supported their desires and needs to communicate and work collaboratively with others to achieve a common goal. Their ability to work effectively as a team or within a group allowed them to plan activities that would benefit people in their community. Service-learning participation heightened the study participants’ desires to help others. They discovered the value of helping others and giving back during their service-learning experiences. The study participants began to feel the need to help and began to feel more connected to their communities.

Service-learning also enhanced the students’ academic development. Students were better able to understand and connect concepts they learned in their social studies classes to their service learning activities because of links between the activities and course curriculum. The study participants also gained an awareness of career choices they were interested in pursuing upon graduation from high school. The majority of the careers that the study participants were interested in pursuing were in the area of providing service to others.

The study participants developed leadership skills as they planned and provided services helping others. Providing service gave them the opportunity to become leaders

in their communities. As they provided services in their communities they experienced a sense of internal and spiritual self-fulfillment. This internal self-fulfillment manifested itself as the personal rewards the study participants shared that they received from their experiences. The intrinsic rewards experienced by the study participants became priceless.

Question 1A focused on the development of the character of the study participants from their service-learning participation. As shared in the review of literature, character traits are developed over time and one's environment can impact one's values. The goal of this study was to listen to the voices of the study participants as they shared their personal development from service-learning participation. The following themes were revealed from the research about the development of student's character from service-learning participation.

- a. Service-learning participation contributed to the development of students' self-confidence.
- b. Service-learning enhanced students' ability to become empathetic toward others.
- c. Service-learning increased students' ability to be compassionate, caring, and kind.
- d. Service-learning enhanced students' abilities to be responsible and respectful.

Study participants shared that their moral and performance character were enhanced or developed through their service-learning participation. The study participants began to internalize the true meaning of unselfishly helping others and the

personal benefits one receives from giving of self in service to others. Lickona et al. (2005) affirm that moral and performance character are interdependent sides of character and are necessary for all academic and ethical endeavors.

Students learned how to work effectively with others which promoted and increased their self-confidence. The increase in their self-confidence directly impacted their ability to step up and take on leadership roles. The enhancement of self-confidence in the study participants was evidenced by their desires and willingness to make a difference in their communities.

The study participants developed empathy as they interacted with others during their service-learning experiences. The interaction connected the participants with those they collaborated with from a personal or vicarious experience. Providing service to others offered them an empathetic understanding of individuals in less fortunate situations. The study participants' ability to be compassionate, kind, and caring was increased from their service-learning participation. The enhancement of caring, compassion, and kindness in the participants occurred seamlessly as they provided helping services to others. It was evident from their involvement that service-learning participation impacted their ability to truly care about people and issues in their communities.

The study participants' understanding and awareness of their civic and personal responsibilities was impacted from their service-learning participation. Students began to develop an understanding of their civic rights and duties as they worked at the polls during the election. They gained confidence, became more outgoing, and gained a

greater understanding of the depth of responsibility when they were depended upon to perform their service. As they learned to communicate, cooperate, and collaborate they developed and practiced the concept of respect for others and valuing all people as human beings. They learned to be in control of their words and actions as they worked effectively with others and learned the true meaning of being a respectful and responsible team member. The experiences the study participants received from their participation in service-learning helped them to grow and develop as responsible and productive individuals. Harkavy (2004) affirms as students relate to others in a global or task-oriented manner versus an ego-centric way, they acquire skills associated with citizenship and positive character traits.

The study participants developed the values of respect for, and acceptance of, others and a sense of purpose and responsibility. These values inspired them to continue providing service, sharing their experiences with their peers, and evaluating and rethinking their career choices.

Research Question 1 and 1A focused on the benefits students acquired from service-learning participation. Billig (2000) affirms service-learning makes a difference in the development of positive character traits in high school students. It provides students opportunities to engage in meaningful activities, work with others in teams and groups, and collaborate about solutions to authentic problems. In this study, as a result of such opportunities the study participants became self-confident in their abilities to be successful in their lives and to make a difference in their communities.

Research Question 2 was designed to gain an understanding of why students desired to participate in service-learning. The following themes were revealed from the research to answer the question: Why do students desire to earn the service-learning diploma or exemplary award?

- a. Service-learning diploma or exemplary award is an extension of who I am.
- b. Service-learning diploma or exemplary award is a type of reward and recognition.
- c. Service-learning diploma or exemplary award encourages me to make a difference.
- d. Service-learning diploma or exemplary award will enhance my future plans.

Volunteering and providing community service for the majority of the study participants was not a new concept. The study participants shared that volunteering or being of service to others was instilled in them when they were younger by their families and through their churches. When the opportunity came for students to earn an award for their hours from service-learning the study participants were able to transition from volunteering in the community to service-learning by the documentation of their hours and obtaining approval to continue their work at agencies and or organizations. The study participants who were volunteering viewed the service-learning diploma as an extension of what they were doing. It was encouragement to make a difference and to do more in their communities.

Some study participants viewed the service-learning diploma as recognition or a reward for their work in their community. They shared that they enjoyed their service-

learning experienced and grew and developed as a result of the experience. It was their desire and important to them for others to know that they had gone beyond what was required for high school graduation. The diploma and cord they would wear at graduation would be a symbol of their achievement, and provide recognition in their school community.

Students who had no prior experiences in volunteering prior to service-learning admitted that they began their service-learning participation solely for the diploma. Their focus was on the benefits the diploma would provide for their future. The study participants shared that the diploma was the incentive or push for them to begin service-learning. However, they shared that soon their work was not solely about the diploma, but the service and personal growth that they received from their interaction within their community.

As the study participants reflected on the experiences from service-learning they all agreed service-learning is about helping others and making a difference in your community. Billig (2000) agrees with the study participants with this statement, “Finally, their work is, by its nature, about caring” (p. 2).

### **Recommendation for Actions**

The findings from this study validate the works of service-learning researchers on the benefits of service-learning. Based on the findings of this study I propose the following recommendations for K-12 schools and higher education institutions. I strongly recommend that service-learning be implemented as requirement for every student in every high school. Ideally, service-learning should be introduced in the

primary years of schooling. With this introduction in elementary school all young students will be given the same opportunity to begin to understand and internalize the concept of giving, helping, and serving. Data from NCES reported (a) the higher the level of parental education, the more likely a student is to engage in community service and the higher the level of parental education, the less likely a student is to engage in service learning; and (b) students are more likely to participate in service-learning and community service projects if their schools require and arrange the projects (as cited in Kleiner & Chapman, 2000). Study findings by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA suggest “that the majority of students who engage in volunteer work do so of their own volition” (Billig, 2000, p. 653). Therefore, if schools, especially high schools, implement service-learning, all students regardless of their economic status will have the opportunity to experience the benefits gained from participating in service-learning.

For this recommendation to become a reality state and local departments of public instruction must endorse service-learning as an instructional strategy and incorporate this strategy in its curriculum. Billing (2000b) strongly affirms that a number of program characteristics must be present to produce positive student outcomes from their service-learning participation. These program characteristics are inclusive of (a) a high degree of student responsibility for the service; (b) a high degree of student choice; (c) a high degree of direct contact with the service recipient; (d) high quality reflection activities; and (e) well-prepared teachers who serve as active partners and knowledge mediators. To ensure that service-learning experiences are implemented with fidelity and are aligned with these characteristics, I recommend teachers are provided on-going professional

development opportunities focused on service-learning. This professional development must include using service-learning not as a stand-alone program but as an instructional practice which is directly linked to the taught curriculum. The professional development must also provide teachers with the knowledge of community agencies whose missions are aligned with their curriculum standards and the avenues for connecting and developing these needed community's partnerships. The opportunities for discussing service-learning as a best practice should be in individual schools, within school districts as well as the opportunity provided for teachers to attend local and national service-learning conferences. School districts should incorporate the practice of service-learning in new teacher induction programs and also train new teachers' mentors and induction coordinators in the effective implementation of service-learning as an instructional strategy. Research by Billig (2000) affirms, "service-learning improves the overall school climate and leads to discussions of teaching and learning and of best ways for student to learn" (p. 662).

I also recommend that schools, especially high schools are staffed with a service-learning coordinator. This person would work collaboratively with teachers in implementing the service aspect of service-learning in the community by researching and contacting non-profit agencies and organizations in the community. This recommendation is being made on behalf of the study participants who shared their frustration from unsuccessful attempts to contact individuals at the sites where they desired to provide service. They shared that it was difficult to reach the contact persons at the agency to set up times to meet with them due to the schedules of both the contact

people and the students' availability to contact them. They also shared that they had experiences arriving at their service-learning placement to find out the person in charge had not been made aware that they would be providing service. They stated additional support was needed from the agency or organization in which they were providing service. Although this can be turned into a learning experience for the students it can also discourage students from providing service. A service-learning coordinator can remove this road block of providing service for the students.

Finally, I recommend that teacher education program incorporate service-learning as an instructional strategy in their methods classes. Anderson and Erikson (2003) conducted a national study to determine the prevalence of service-learning in pre-service teacher education programs in the United States. The study concluded that service-learning was a familiar concept but not a fundamental component of most teacher education programs in the United States. I recommend that education majors receive instruction in service-learning using the IPARD standards as part of their program requirement. After receiving this instruction I recommend that the teacher education majors participate in service-learning themselves under the supervision of their college instructor or professor. The implementation of a service-learning activity by the education majors is also recommended under the supervision of the cooperating teacher during their practicum experience in the schools. This will afford novice teachers the opportunities to have prior experiences with the implementation of service-learning as an instructional strategy prior to the beginning of their careers as teachers. The National Center for Accreditation of Teachers (NCATE) embraces the ideal of implementation of

high quality service-learning in schools of education, particularly in field experiences of teacher candidates (Kielsmeier, 2010). Loupe (2000) affirms that administrators in schools with effective service-learning programs cite community support and teacher training as key elements of success.

This research study will be made available for review by both State and Local Departments of Public Instruction. The findings from this research study and research in the field of service-learning provides evidence of the impact service-learning has on the development of high school students. Service-learning as an instructional strategy to enhance the curriculum is a viable solution for endorsement by state and local educators to reach the goal of public education to graduate students who are college and career ready. Billig (2010) affirms service-learning will propel school systems to reaching this goal. “Service-learning is a value-added proposition with young people benefitting academically, civically and personally” (p. 5).

The results of this doctoral study will be shared with Middleton County Schools’ Character Education Department and Curriculum and Instruction Departments. The intent is to share the findings from the research with the Character Education Department as evidence which addresses their program’s design of service-learning participation by enhancing the development of character traits in students. Sharing this information with the Curriculum and Instruction Departments at Middleton will afford them with evidence of the benefits high school students receive when service-learning is implemented as an instructional strategy. From this evidence it is hoped that the school system will enhance

their existing program design to ensure that all students graduate with the exposure to, and active participation in, service-learning.

I will also share the findings from this research study with Jobs for the Future and the National Early College Initiative. Both of these organizations are vested in the development and sustainability of innovative high schools. Their mission is to graduate students prepared for the future. Service-learning is an instructional strategy that will help schools develop a culture of serving and learning in which students become prepared for life and the future. Sharing information with these organizations will be for the purpose of information which may lead to the endorsement of service-learning as an instructional strategy in their curriculum and program designs.

Futrell, Gomez, and Bedden (2003) state “Every school, school district, and university has a responsibility to see that students are educated to be life-long learners, to become gainfully employed, and to contribute to and benefit from our democratic society” (p. 382). Service-learning as an instructional strategy will support educators in achieving their responsibility to every student.

### **Recommendation for Future Research**

Students who participated in this research study could earn service-learning hours from both service linked to their academic classes and service linked to school clubs. Therefore, I recommend that this doctoral study is replicated in other school systems which are similar to Middleton County Schools with a criterion that study participants must earn their service-learning hours solely from service linked to their academic courses. This will ensure that the services provided by the students qualify as high-

quality service-learning experiences. Furco and Root (2010) state the need for service-learning to become recognized as an evidenced-based education practice. Having a study of this nature can strengthen the evidence base for K-12 service-learning.

I also recommend that a longitudinal study be conducted which focuses on the long term benefits from high school students participation in service-learning. This study may research the behaviors of students who earned the service-learning diploma four to five years after their high school graduation. The study should examine whether the students are contributing members of their communities, whether they are working in or pursuing service orientated careers, whether they hold leadership roles in organizations, and whether they are active participants in community service. Billig (2000), Billig et al. (2005), and Stagg (2004) have shared the need for longitudinal studies focused on civic engagement, political and community involvement, and social sustainability of students who participated in service-learning.

Finally, to further investigate the relationship between service-learning and character development, I recommend a study which investigates the relationship between service-learning and character-development during the actual service-learning process. This study may be in the form of a case-study following the character development of students as they are involved in each aspect of IPARD components of service-learning. The case study would explore students' character development as they are engaged in a prolonged service-learning project over a course or semester. The results of this study could provide information to researchers and teachers of the impact and significance each component of service-learning has on the character development of students.

### **Researcher's Reflection of Research Study**

This phenomenological study provided me an amazing opportunity to listen and learn about service-learning from the perspective of high school students. I was able to explore how high school students derived meaning from their experiences with service-learning and how this meaning influenced their behaviors. The experience of interviewing, questioning, observing, transcribing, coding, and reflecting during and after data collection gave me a true appreciation for the work of the qualitative researcher. I realized early in my data collection process the need for organization to keep the wealth of data from becoming overwhelming. The data collected were used to discover common themes or links among the study participants from their service-learning experiences. I discovered that I truly began to understand the essence of service-learning participation from the direct experiences shared by the study participants.

As a qualitative researcher and educator my understanding and knowledge of service-learning, the components of authentic or quality service-learning, and the differences in service-learning and other experiential programs was expanded by conducting this study. Having the opportunity to attend national service-learning conferences and sit in on seminars conducted by researchers whose work I was studying provided me the opportunity to ask them questions about their research. This personal experience with the researchers was beneficial to me. Listening to them gave their written work more depth.

Data collection and data analysis were aspects of this doctoral study that truly stimulated me as an educator and researcher. I enjoyed and looked forward to interacting

with the study participants in interviews, focus groups, and observing them as they provided service. As I listened, transcribed, and reflected upon the words of the study participants I was able to truly understand the passion they had for their work with service-learning. The study participants were able to articulate the meaning of service-learning in their lives with so much confidence and authority. Their desire was to make a difference in their communities by giving back and helping others.

I also learned that writing is indeed a process. During my course work in a scholarly writing class I remembered the professor stating that the first step to writing was putting words on the paper. I also remember the professor stating that scholarly writers write each day. I found that this advice was truly applicable to me during my dissertation. I devoted a minimum of two hours each evening to writing. The next day I would edit my work and write more. This process kept me focused and allowed me to keep a sense of balance in my life with my work as a doctoral student, my career, and family.

This doctoral study has opened my eyes to the impact service-learning has on the development of high school students. It has invigorated me to become an activist for the implementation of service-learning in our schools. It is a strategy that will meet the needs of 21st learners. It removes them from the walls of a classroom to real life situations in which they can apply learned knowledge and skills in meaningful situations. Service-learning equips students with the skills needed to be productive and responsible citizens in their communities, regardless of their backgrounds or experiences. It is our responsibility as educators to provide this valuable lifelong experience to all students. In

the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Everyone can be great, for anybody can serve” (Martin Luther King, Jr., 2004, p. 8). All students in the high school in which I serve as principal will not only be given the opportunity to become great by serving, but encouraged to provide this service to others. It is my desire that this research study and my work at my high school will propel service-learning as an instructional strategy across my school district.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study provided me an opportunity to learn from the experiences of 24 high school students who participated in service-learning. Through the literature review, data collection, and data analysis I have developed a clearer understanding of the positive impact service-learning participation has on the lives of high school students. Findings from this study support the need for service-learning to be implemented in all high schools to provide opportunities for student to enhance lifelong skills in a manner that will empower them to make a difference in their communities. There is a growing need to keep youth engaged in their schools and in their communities or society. Kielsmeier (2000) believes “Service-learning offers a pathway of knowing and being that touches students of every background” (p. 654). Service-learning if embedded across curriculum areas will ensure that all students have equal access to develop or enhance skills needed to become responsible and productive citizens in the 21st century.

Service-learning is an instructional strategy that when implemented with fidelity provides opportunities for differentiated instruction and active engagement in learning. “Service-learning may work to motivate marginalized students and work to empower

students to feel like vital, contributing human beings, capable of making a positive difference using their skills, knowledge and interest” (McCafferty, 2011, p. 37). The academic, civic, personal responsibility, interpersonal character development, and career awareness benefits gained by the study participants evidences the need for schools to incorporate service-learning as an instructional strategy. Goleman (as cited in Kessler, 2000) states, “children’s emotional and social skills can be cultivated, and that doing so gives them decided advantages in the cognitive abilities, in their personal adjustment and in their resiliency through life” (p. xiv). Implementing service-learning will assist America’s schools in reaching their goal of preparing students to be civically responsible, globally competitive, and life-long learners prepared for life in the 21st century.

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**APPENDIX A****INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW***Background Information*

1. What is your name and current grade?
2. How many years have you attended this high school?
3. Do you participate in extracurricular activities at your high school? If yes, which activities?
4. What is your favorite subject in school?

*Service-learning Questions*

1. How would you define service-learning?
2. In your opinion, is there a difference in service-learning and volunteering in the community?
3. Tell me about the service-learning activities in which you've participated.
4. Why have you participated in service-learning?
5. Is your classroom learning connected to service-learning? If so, in what manner?
6. Since being in high school how many service-learning experiences have you participated in?
7. What were some key take a ways of your service-learning experience?
8. Reflecting back over our high school years describe one or two of your service-learning experiences.

*Student Benefits*

1. In what ways has service-learning impacted your life?
2. Have you noticed any changes in yourself that you feel are connected to your service-learning experiences?
3. Have you noticed any changes in any of your peers that you feel are connected to their service-learning experiences?
4. Can you share any concepts or objectives from a class that became more understandable or meaningful to you once you began providing service?
5. Have you continued your service at any organization after the service ended? If so, why did you decide to continue with the agency?
6. In looking back over your experience with service-learning what parts have been most rewarding to you?

*Character Development*

1. How would you define character?
2. Can you name the character traits that are a focus of your school systems' Character Development Initiative?
3. Which character traits define you as a person and why?
4. How did you develop these traits and when do you display them?
5. Has your participation in service-learning enhanced or contributed to the development of your character? If so, in what manner?

*Overall Comments*

1. What is the meaning and purpose of the service-learning diploma?
2. Have you shared your service-learning experiences with any of your peers? Why or why not?
3. Do you view service-learning as a part of your school culture?

**APPENDIX B**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP**

*Service-learning Questions*

1. Reflect upon your most recent service-learning activity. What type of emotions or feelings did you experience when you were traveling to perform your service?
2. At the completion of the service did these emotions or feeling change? If so, how did they change and when did the change occur during the service experience?
3. Reflect upon any changes that you could incorporate into your last service learning activity that may enhance the outcome for you the provider of the service and the agency or recipient of the service provided.
4. Have you learned any lessons from your service-learning participation that have impacted your life? If so, please explain.
5. Do you believe earning a service-leaning diploma or award has an impact on one's decision to participate in service-learning?