Service-Learning Curricula in Eastern Pennsylvania’s K-12 Schools: Educational Decision-Makers’ Experiences Through a Critical Lens

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Service-Learning Curricula in Eastern Pennsylvania’s K-12 Schools: Educational Decision-Makers’ Experiences Through a Critical Lens

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Doctor of Education

By

Megan A. Jerabek

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated first to my children who help to keep me curious. This research is rooted in my hopes for you all to be critical questioners, and deeply engaged in the uncomfortable, challenging, and critically important work of being active members of a community. I hope that you find your unique ways of contributing to change and let go of the relentless pressures your schools and communities are going to give you conform and perform. I hope this work has better positioned me to support you in this journey, despite the fact that I am still learning it myself. Morgan, Evelyn, and Caden thank you for supporting me through this program. You three bring me purpose, perspective, and more joy than I ever imagined. I love you.

And to my partner Steve who has supported me through every step of this and many other goals. You help me be brave, and this dissertation is, at its root, an act of bravery that I recognize is in part possible thanks to you. Thank you for stepping into all the roles I needed to step out of, and for all the grace you showed me when I failed to thank you enough over the last three years. I can’t wait to see what crazy thing we take on next.

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Abstract

This research examines the experiences of K-12 curricular decision-makers in their consideration of service-learning curricula within their schools and districts. Recent evidence indicates service-learning offerings have decreased in K-12 schools in the last decade (The Education Commission on the States), and this research utilizes qualitative inquiry and a critical theory framework to understand this phenomenon via the lived experiences of educators with service-learning and the conditions at play that impact its inclusion and exclusion from schools. The findings consider the similarities and contradictions educators face, the policies and experiences that frame their perspectives of service-learning, and its accessibility within their schools. The findings indicate a shared acknowledgement to the academic, developmental, and socio-emotional benefits service-learning curriculums afford students based on the first-hand and professional experiences of educators. Participants offered divergent perspectives around how their school incorporates service-learning, the drive behind its inclusion, and the challenges encountered in considering and offering service opportunities. Utilizing a critical theory theoretical framework, I conclude that hegemonic curricular priorities negatively impact the prioritization of service-learning curriculums and the potential impact this can have on student humanization, as well as the influences of power in curricular decision-making and where decision-makers find emancipation from these hegemonic forces.

*Keywords:* service-learning, educational leaders, decision-making, critical theory, qualitative inquiry.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Service-learning positively influences student engagement (Munter, 2002; Scott & Graham, 2015), motivation, learning outcomes (Brail, 2016), and their understanding and application of curricular content (Novak et al., 2007). Further, students report that the learning they experience via service-learning curriculums is meaningful (Brail, 2016) and has enduring impacts on their lives after graduation (Mitchell, 2015). In addition to this evidence, service-learning educators champion the curriculum as a critical tool to increase student social responsibility, personal growth, and self-esteem (Shumer & Belbas, 1996). Literature suggests that service-learning curriculums offer positive student benefits in and out of the classroom, and surveys suggest these findings are well understood by educational leaders (Skinner & Chapman, 1999).

Given these multi-layered benefits of service-learning, it could be assumed that it is regularly integrated into K-12 schools to provide students with experiential opportunities that support their learning, development, and preparedness to act with social responsibility. However, quantitative data indicates that the utilization of service-learning may have been declining over the past decade. The Education Commission on the States (ECS) conducted service-learning Policy Audits in 2000, 2010, and 2014. Between 2000 and 2010 the audits show an overall increase in service-learning policies and practices. However, the 2014 data indicates that service-learning offerings had declined since the 2010 results. For example, in 2010, 42 states had policies that supported service-learning efforts, and that number dropped to 33 in the 2014 data (The Education Commission of the States, 2010 & 2014).

Looking at this data it is hard to reconcile the literature that indicates the multi-faceted data on the benefits service-learning affords students, the positive perceptions educators have of service-learning, and its sudden drop in popularity. This research aims to better understand these
conflicting indicators via inquiry with educational leaders who have experienced service-learning and who have insight into the conditions that impact is inclusion or exclusion.

**Problem Statement**

Service-learning (SL) is a form of experiential learning that extends student education to non-classroom settings. Saal et al. (2019) distinguished service-learning from community service stating, “civic engagement is an inclusive term encompassing community service and service-learning. Service-learning differs from community service because it is a research-based pedagogical approach that includes reflection and extends the curriculum” (Saal et al., 2019. p. 3). Service-learning is one curricular approach to help promote student engagement which has been found to be decreasing since the 1970s (Reinke, 2003). With growing disengagement, curricula that help students develop the skills to identify the existence of inequities and understand the conditions that perpetuate them is essential (Berrera et al., 2017). Critical service-learning (CSL) curriculum in particular, aims to equip students with critical reflection and praxis skills by engaging in social-justice-oriented education that explicitly explores the “power and systemic inequality” (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019. p. 43). CSL is a form of social-justice-oriented civics education that equips students with critical capacities to understand the power systems that interplay to create inequities.

Nygreen (2010) explains that the point of CSL pedagogy is to empower students to “see change as possible and to see themselves as change agents” (p. 248). Given the problems our world faces, this shift to agentic, responsible, and capable change agents is and will be critically important for education moving forward (Broom, 2010). Our communities, political systems, and social networks continue to face challenges that have large impacts on individuals but also on the collective best interest (Heggart et al., 2018). Nkolakaki explains, “Through individualism and
competition people in society are marginalized, disempowered, and manipulated. Instead, communitarian values, solidarity and responsibility, for individual and community autonomy, need to be fostered” (Nikolakaki, 2014. p. 52).

This research examines how education can help to better foster a move away from individualistic ideologies to those that build community to consider the betterment of many. Specifically, I am interested in whether service-learning pedagogy gets a hearing in school districts to help cultivate an education that not only critically explores our shared humanity but also empowers students to be agents in activism to break down systems that have created inequality and oppression.

**Purpose of Study**

Service-Learning and Critical Service-Learning have been effective and popular curricular approaches for supporting student engagement and learning (Knapp et al., 2010; Mitchell, 2007; Munter, 2002). Supported by federal policy for over fifty years (Pollack, 2000), service-learning curriculum policies existed in 42 states as of 2010 (The Education Commission on the States). However, this popularity and support for service-learning has not been sustained, despite the critical educational importance of preparing and empowering students to be civically engaged. This research aims to understand this shift in popularity further by understanding what influences come to bear on education decision-makers as they consider service-learning pedagogy.

The purpose of this research is to understand what factors might influence the popularity and utilization of service-learning curricula within K-12 schools, focusing on the eastern Pennsylvania region. The ECS audit indicates that policies and statutes to support service learning have decreased over the last decade. Additionally, research exploring SL at the elementary and middle school level is limited (Celio et al, 2011). This research fills a gap in the
literature by examining educational leaders’ familiarity with service-learning and how curricular standards developed by No Child Left Behind (2002) and other subsequent federal requirements may influence their thinking about the inclusion of service-learning in their districts and buildings (Munter, 2002). Additionally, it will examine educational leaders’ perspectives on the accessibility of service-learning in relation to available time and resources (Scott & Graham, 2015; Soslau & Gartland, 2021), the availability of service-learning curriculum, and the resources allocated to the program seem disparate based on school funding availability (Grossman & Duchesneau, 2021; Saal, 2019).

Incorporating a critical theory framework, this research will engage K-12 educational leaders who shape curriculums to determine what influences impact the inclusion or exclusion of service-learning pedagogy. It will aim to consider what factors create or oppress choice in pedagogy.

**Research Questions**

The questions addressed in this research include:

1. What are southeastern Pennsylvania school administrators’ experiences with service-learning curriculum?

2. What factors influence these leaders’ decisions to use or not use SL curriculum?

**Rationale for Methods**

No Child Left Behind regulations require schools to search for and interpret evidence about program effectiveness, emphasizing education programs and practices that have “clearly demonstrated to be effective through rigorous scientific research” (as cited in Farley-Ripple, 2012, p. 787). These quantitative research methods align with the educational landscape of the United States, where educational effectiveness needs to be justified to make space for some learning opportunities (Taubman, 2010). Service-learning curriculums have been constrained by
growing federal definitions of curricular priorities as federal influences such as A Nation at Risk (1983) and No Child Left Behind Act (2002) have defined educational priorities (Mulcahy et al., 2011). This measure of curricular effectiveness encourages the utilization of quantitative measurements in educational research (Farley-Ripple, 2012; Mulcahy et al., 2011).

Indeed, in service-learning research, there is a tendency to examine potential correlations between SL curricular practices and other measurable student outcomes. Given the policy environment’s outsized emphasis on quantitative data, past service-learning research has leaned into quantitative methods to understand the effectiveness of service-learning along various measures such as student self-efficacy (Gonsalves et al., 2019) and motivation for learning, and achievement (Munter, 2002). This service-learning research approach has considered the relationship between two variables—service-learning curricular elements and the student outcome measure being studied (Gonsalves et al., 2019; Munter, 2002). Research aimed to explore if the curricular elements within service-learning had an impact on some standard measures of student success and engagement (Knap et al., 2010; Mitchell, 2015).

To fully understand service-learning pedagogy, the impact curricular standards may have on influencing its offering, and the age in which it might best be introduced, research methods need to consider more than the effectiveness of the curriculum. There is a lack of qualitative research in this vein, leading to a lack of understanding about the experiences of those in charge of implementing these curricula. Additionally, given the decline in service-learning policies since 2010 (The National Commission on Education), research needs to consider the influences that may be impacting the shift in service-learning popularity.

**Limitations**

There are limitations in the current study. School and district administrators may be unfamiliar with service-learning as a curricular approach or may have limited experience with it.
This may influence their willingness to engage in the research or the depth of engagement they are able to offer. Additionally, despite a commitment to maintaining participant confidentiality, participants may feel uncomfortable speaking openly about the constraints that may influence the ability to or decision to include service-learning pedagogies within their schools and districts.

**Definition of Terms**

**Service-Learning**

Dewey’s experiential learning model is the foundation from which much of service-learning and other experience-based curriculums have been built (Broom & Bai, 2011). The pedagogy explores the lived experiences of students and ensures student learning is done through student experiences instead of teachers imparting knowledge onto students. Leveraging the social process embedded within learning, service-learning explores the lived experiences of students to expose them to multiple perspectives, engage in meaningful dialogue, and build connections. Munter (2002) explains the shift students experience via the SL curriculum, “Individual moves from being a passive consumer of information to becoming an active, aware, responsible citizen, focused not only on his/her own personal development but also on becoming an agent of change” (p. 154).

By extending student learning to non-classroom settings, service-learning integrates curricular components with hands-on experiences. Saal et al. (2019) distinguished service-learning from community service stating, “civic engagement is an inclusive term encompassing community service and service-learning. Service-learning contrasts starkly with community service because it is a research-based pedagogical approach that includes reflection and that extends the curriculum” (Saal et al., 2019. p. 3). Some key components of service-learning pedagogy include student reflection, centering student voice, service that is meaningful to the community, and attention to diversity.
Critical Service-Learning

Critical service-learning (CSL) is a form of SL that intentionally considers the conditions at play that may influence the community's need. CSL engages students in critical reflection and praxis by engaging in social-justice-oriented education that explicitly explores the “power and systemic inequality” (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019. p. 43). A key component of CSL is reflection, which encourages students to examine themselves and their privileges and disadvantages within the broader social and political structures. Reflection in CSL is both individual and systemic to help “students move from individualistic to structural understandings of societal problems and passive acceptance to collective action” (Butin, 2011. p. 31).

First emerging from Robert Rhoads in 1997, CSL reframes the SL inquiry of how one can help to a more critical inquiry to intentionally consider the conditions that created the need for help. Like SL, CSL aims to equip students to “see themselves as agents of change” (Mitchell, 2007. p. 102).

Educational Decision-Maker

Curricular decisions are made at various levels including district-wide, school-wide, and within individual classes (Blazar & Schueler, 2022). Where decisions take place may be impacted by a variety of factors such as policies, regulations, resource distribution, and training (Blazer & Schueler, 2022; Curry et al., 2019; Soslau & Gartland, 2021). For the purposes of this research, educational decision-makers will be identified as district or school leaders who have opportunities to influence the inclusion or exclusion of service-learning curricular supports such as policies, curricular guides, community supports, and professional development.

Summary

Given all the ways service-learning may help prepare students to engage fully with content and later within their communities, research needs to consider what factors may be
influencing its offering in K-12 schools. Qualitative inquiry with educational leaders may help to
give insight into the contradictory data available that indicates the *possibility* service-learning has
with the *popularity* it is experiencing. This research aims to explore how education can help to
better foster a move towards service-learning pedagogy by exploring the experiences of
educational leaders in considering this pedagogy.
Chapter II: Literature Review

This research aims to understand kindergarten through 12th administrators' experience with service-learning and decisions to include or exclude the pedagogy. Through qualitative inquiry, I will examine the experiences of education leaders at public, private and charter schools within the eastern Pennsylvania region. Service-learning is a curricular approach aimed at promoting student agency in addressing social challenges, and this research aims to understand what influences utilization of this curriculum to achieve these learning outcomes.

This literature review will begin by unpacking the history of service-learning policies and how they have impacted access to the pedagogy. With an understanding of the history, the second section will explore some of the challenges service-learning curriculum faces, particularly in the wake of federal education regulations. Next, there will be a review of the literature to summarize how service-learning curriculum has been found to benefit student learning and development. Since service-learning research and curriculum are most often explored within the collegiate curriculum, the fourth section of this chapter will specifically consider service-learning at the kindergarten through twelfth grade level, the challenges that can occur therein, and demonstrate why inquiry needs to specifically consider this age group. The next section will consider the importance of critical service-learning (CSL), which critically examines communities, policies, and conditions of power. This critical lens will extend into the final section, in which I will detail the theoretical framework that guides my inquiry and the study.

Service-Learning Policy and Access

Federal support for service-learning has existed for fifty years (Pollack, 2000). University policies were the first to be established via the National Student Volunteer Program in 1969 which included components of Vista and the Peace Corps (Saal, 2019). These policy supports
were further institutionalized in 1973 when funding was allocated via the Domestic Volunteer Service Act, which also introduced college-level credit for service activities. The National Community Service Act, in 1990 established SL policies for K-12, and later grant-funding support was passed in 1993 via Learn and Serve America. This legislation was later renamed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act in 2009 which established group/school support for service engagement (Saal, 2019).

Service-learning policies began to grow at the state level in the late 1990s. The National Commission on Service-Learning defined three different types of state policies, each with a growing scale of influence (Fiske, 2002). Base policies encompass a mandate requiring students to engage in a certain number of hours of service-learning or community service as a requirement towards graduation. Mandates do not typically come with financial or curricular support for school districts to effectively influence service-learning pedagogy. A more robust policy includes service-learning support within curriculum standards. This approach helps to demonstrate how various curriculum requirements can effectively engage service-learning activities to meet learning outcomes (Fiske, 2002). The most robust policy framework is to layer on funding support for service learning. Policies that include funding ensure there are appropriate resources at the state and district levels to facilitate success.

The popularity of service-learning policy has changed over time. The Education Commission on the States (ECS) conducted SL Policy Audits in 2000, 2010, and 2014. The audit intent “was to capture all legislation relating to service-learning and community service,” to do so ECS examined state statutes and codes in addition to state board of education documentation to identify relevant policies (The Education Commission of the States, 2000. p. 1). The audits of 2000 and 2010 show an overall increase in service-learning engagement at the K-12 level. For
example, in 2000, 27 states had some mention of service-learning in state policy, and by 2010 that number jumped to 42. In addition, in 2000 seven states awarded credit toward graduation for service-learning or community service, and by 2010 that number increased to 18. Additionally, the 2010 audit indicates that twenty-one state education policies/statutes indicated student educational engagement is positively affected by participation in service-learning. These audits indicate a growing understanding, appreciation, and valuation of service-learning pedagogy. The subsequent 2014 audit showed little growth and in some areas a decline in service-learning policy at the state level. Where in 2010, 42 states had policies that mentioned service-learning, that number dropped to 33 in 2014 (The Education Commission of the States, 2010 & 2014). Further, the 2014 audit shows 17 states naming service-learning as an instructional strategy that increases student achievement, compared to 21 in 2010. In examining the ECS public materials, I have found no subsequent SL Policy Audits since 2014. Some of these shifts may be a result of the challenges service-learning policies have faced.

**Challenges Faced by Service-Learning Policies**

Service-Learning policies have faced many political, legal, and social challenges in the last several decades. Court cases have been filed against service-learning requirements, arguing the requirements violate students' 13th or 1st amendment rights (Smolla, 1999). Lynn Ann Steirer and David Stephen Moralis from Liberty High school in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania filed a suit against the legality of their school’s 60-hour service-learning graduation requirement (Charters, 1994). They argued the requirement violated first amendment rights as it included a list of pre-approved community organizations at which service could be conducted, and because the requirement went against their beliefs that community service should be voluntary instead of required (Charters, 1994). Further, the students claimed violation of their thirteenth amendment right by requiring involuntary servitude by requiring unpaid service (Smolla, 1999). Though the
courts concluded there was neither a violation of the student’s 13th or 1st amendment rights, the case does challenge perceptions of service-learning value or place within schools.

Further, political and financial support for service-learning has changed based on the standing of their champions within government. Toppo (2020) writes that the elimination of funding for Learn & Serve America coincided with the ailing health of one of its greatest political champions Edward Kennedy: “...with interest in public service-learning flagging and one of the program’s main champions, Senator Edward M. Kennedy, ailing from a malignant brain tumor, Congress zeroed out funding for Learn and Serve America” (Toppo, 2020. p. 4).

Before being defunded, Learn & Service America was investing approximately $45 million in service-learning programs each year (Toppo, 2020).

**Service-Learning Access Case Study with Maryland Policy**

With an understanding of the various levels of support incorporated within service-learning policy frameworks, it is possible to consider how various policy approaches may affect student access to service-learning. Saal et al. (2019) examined the implementation of the Maryland state’s service-learning policy in two neighboring counties to consider how a common policy may have disparate implementations. In 1993, led by lieutenant governor Kathleen Kennedy Townsend Maryland became the first state to adopt a service-learning graduation requirement. Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) 13A.03.02.06 states that students must engage in 75 hours of student service as a condition for graduation. Maryland leveraged a mandate-model policy that did not provide Maryland’s local school systems (LSS) with the framework, resources, or fiscal support necessary to achieve the outcomes communicated in the policy rhetoric.

Each of the local school districts (LSS) in Maryland was charged with designing and implementing the service-learning policy. The State required significant infrastructure to be
established by the LSS, including developing a comprehensive service-learning plan, annual service-learning timelines, and documentation regarding how the LSS would support/enhance service-learning. The requirements later grew in 2004 when the state introduced additional best practices for service-Learning that each LSS needed to ensure were met. The policy did not provide any financial or administrative support to LSS for implementation (Pollack, 2000).

Additionally, Saal et al., (2019) indicate that Maryland did not provide any pre-service or in-service requirements for teachers to learn about service-learning or meaningfully engage with the pedagogy.

Without centralized resources, core implementation standards, or accountability SL policy becomes susceptible to unequal distribution of power resources, knowledge and power. Saal et al. (2019) examined the implementation of the state’s service-learning policy in two neighboring LSS- Baltimore County and Baltimore City. This investigation identified significant discrepancies in resources, knowledge, and impact. Baltimore City schools at the time of the study was a less wealthy district of 82,354 students (Saal et al., 2019). Of the students, 83.3% are title one recipients, and 63.9% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. In investigating the publicly available information regarding Baltimore City’s service-learning curriculum, Saal et al. (2019) found very little information on the curriculum infrastructure. The LSS website notes service-learning as a graduation requirement but has no publicly available implementation documentation, curricular guides, or program objectives. Further, there is no mention of a budget to support service-learning nor dedicated personnel or other resources.

Conversely neighboring Baltimore County is another large LSS of 112,139 students, with a wealthier student population. Students are 40.2% title one, and 50.5% free or reduced-price lunch. Saal et. al. (2019) research found that the LSS website includes a service-learning
curricular implementation plan with pathway curriculums, supporting policies, and corresponding resources. Additionally, it notes a $110,000 budget to support service-learning and provides central SL coordinators along with their contact information. In the case study, Saal et al. (2019) conclude that the policy perpetuated inequalities, despite Kennedy-Townsend’s rhetoric that it will empower disenfranchised students. Saal et al. found “significant discrepancies around access to effective, high-quality service-learning and civic engagement opportunities for k-12 students within each county. These access gaps paralleled other resource gaps across the districts within Maryland” (Saal et al., 2019. p. 10.). Investigating “the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege,” (Diem et al., 2014. p. 5), found that the Maryland policy perpetuated already-existing inequities among students in various LSS (Saal et. al, 2019). In analyzing data from a survey conducted by The Corporation for National and Community Service, Grossman & Duchesneau (2021) found similar trends in access to service-learning, indicating “disparity means students in low-income areas have fewer opportunities to hone critical twenty-first century skills, and to sharpen their academic skills by applying them to real-world problems. Engaging in service learning also sends a message to students that they can and should be empowered to identify and fix problems in society” (p. 5). Service-Learning researchers have already identified the risk of SL furthering social stratification, and warn against this threat.

Clark & Nugent (2011) warn that poorly developed service learning that doesn’t include key components of reflection and social consciousness can be harmful. “Programs that fail to produce high quality service-learning will more than likely add to the social reproduction of inequality through the service-learning process” (Clark & Nugent, 2011 p. 5.). Service-learning that centers the learner as a savior to those being served can perpetuate perceptions of social
inequities. Learner-savior examples were ones used by Kennedy-Townsend in rhetoric in support of the policy, “A boy who might never have imagined that he could teach a younger handicapped child to count will have the chance to experience the satisfaction that comes from such an encounter,” (Kennedy Townsend, 1993). This rhetoric centered the privileged in the service-learning equation and perpetuated social inequalities.

Service-learning researchers have warned of the impacts school-based service-learning can have on the reproduction of inequities. “Service-learning that is enacted within the larger social institution of schooling is susceptible to the processes of social reproduction occurring with the system” (Clark & Nugent, 2011. p. 9). With this knowledge, service-learning policies that do not explicitly guard against this risk fail to address the root needs of the policy and perpetuate further social stratification. As will be explored in the following sections, research on service-learning offered at the K-12 level indicates that care needs to be taken to ensure that it doesn’t perpetuate existing inequalities.

**Service-Learning Opportunities in the Wake of NCLB**

The establishment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal regulations in 2002 created nationwide standards in curricular priorities at the K-12 level (Mulcahy et al., 2011). From these requirements, states adopted common core curriculums that set a priority for and “perception of good education” (Mulcahy et al., 2011. p. 124). With these curricular priorities set, some research demonstrates there is not a lot of space for experiential learning, service-learning, or teaching from a social-justice perspective which may impact the service-learning offerings explored in K-12 classrooms (Hart, 2011; Kawecka Nenga, 2011; Mulcahy et al., 2011).

No Child Left Behind regulations require schools to search for and interpret evidence about program effectiveness, emphasizing education programs and practices that have “clearly demonstrated to be effective through rigorous scientific research” (as cited in Farley-Ripple,
Service-learning research methods align with the educational landscape of the United States, where educational effectiveness needs to be justified to make space for some learning opportunities. With limited flexibility within federal curricular requirements, identifying time, resources, and support to offer service-learning pedagogy may be challenging. Service-learning curriculum may be limited because of the time and resources both teachers and administrators understand the curriculum to require (Scott & Graham, 2015).

Service-learning takes additional resources to facilitate, and Kawecka Nenga (2011) explain that the limiting educational standards brought on via No Child Left Behind, make curricula such as these harder for teachers to fit in or facilitate within the strict standards. Given the limited resources available to explore SL within K-12 classrooms, research needs to focus on understanding how to achieve the critical outcomes while balancing the resources that go into facilitating the curriculum. This is even more pronounced with Critical Service Learning. Soslau and Gartland (2021) studied the implementation of a Critical service-learning (CSL) professional development program with third & fifth-grade teachers to identify the strengths of the program for further utilization and to understand teachers’ perceptions when engaging with the program. The research found that teachers needed more tangible support to incorporate CSL into their curriculums. Soslau and Gartland (2021) found that “modeled lessons and clear examples” (p. 7) would be important tools in future professional development series. This finding articulates future research needs to help build CSL towards becoming a more accessible curriculum to allow it to be tapped into the same way schools have historically tapped into the volunteerism alternative.

Dedicating the time and resources necessary to implement service-learning may be a challenge for many educators and school districts (Hart, 2011; Yorio & Ye, 2012). These
challenges may contribute to utilizing programs that emphasize volunteerism over service-learning or deeper activism engagement. Volunteerism centers the learner by offering opportunities for the individual completing the service to be exposed to individuals of other backgrounds and focuses on the individuals being served (Munter, 2002; Bickford & Reynolds, 2002). Whereas activism focuses on the structures that interplay to create the social challenges (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002). Endres & Gould (2009) examined student writing samples to understand how course discourse about white privilege informs students’ service-learning programs. Their findings reaffirmed Bickford and Reynolds’ (2002) findings that students tended to lean into volunteerism instead of activism. While Endres & Gould’s research does not identify the reason why students tend toward volunteerism instead of activism, other research suggests that volunteerism tends to serve as a readily-available default to harder to achieve activism. For example, volunteerism is easy to measure by recording the number of hours students' volunteer. It is easier to coordinate as it does not require the pre-service requirements outlined in SL pedagogy such as redistribution of power, self-awareness, and fostering lasting social change (Mitchell, 2008). As Bickford & Reynolds (2002) offer, volunteerism is logistically easier, more measurable, and more comfortable for participants to engage with. Seider et. al., (2010) also found that students tended to lean into volunteerism as an alternative to politics as it channeled their efforts in addressing societal problems in the path of least resistance. Given the ease at which volunteerism is introduced, it is critical researchers consider how best to make SL accessible to students at multiple grade levels, for it to become a legitimate alternative to educators.

**Service-Learning Curriculum Benefits**

Service-Learning (SL) is a form of active learning rooted in Dewey’s experiential learning model (Broom & Bai, 201; Crabtree, 2008; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). Pedagogy such as SL
that is intentionally learner-centered, allows students to center their own interests and establish their own goals within their learning (Munter, 2002). Learner-focused pedagogy is understood to impact student engagement and motivation to learn (Munter, 2002; Scott & Graham, 2015). The National Commission on Service Learning (2002) reported that student engagement with service-learning “reverses student disengagement” (p. 7). Understanding the impacts service-learning has on student engagement in education and motivation for learning are two correlations often explored in SL research. One service-learning research focus is a tendency to examine potential correlations between SL curricular practices and other measurable student outcomes.

**Quantitatively Measured Benefits of Service-Learning**

In addition to impacting student motivation, service-learning has been studied along many other variables such as student self-efficacy (Gonsalves et al., 2019), agency (Mcintyre, 2006), community engagement (Knapp et al., 2010) and achievement (Munter, 2002). Most often, this inquiry is made via quantitative measures. Arguing that student engagement has been in a steady decline, Knap et al.’s. research (2010) looked to consider how different components of the service-learning curriculum impacted students’ civic and community engagement. The study engaged college students via a pre-post test design with 52 service-learning courses utilizing the Civic Attitude and Skills Questionnaire (Moley et al., 2002). The research found that SL courses that had elongated student service (at least seven weeks), allowed students to select their service site, and encouraged deep reflection had the most meaningful impact on students’ indication of future community service engagement. This finding is slightly different from the research of Gonsalves et al. (2019) found that course-specific variables did not impact student self-efficacy utilizing the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). Gonsalves et al. (2019) aimed to compare nineteen different service-learning college courses to see which course attributes had “higher motivating potential” (p. 22). Utilizing the Job Characteristic Model
(JCM) that has five dimensions to explore students’ perceptions of meaningfulness of task, responsibility of outcomes, and knowledge of results; the research aimed to understand if course components that include higher motivation scores via the JCM model correlated with higher self-efficacy and motivation for student participants. Using a pre-post test model with six service-learning courses, the results showed that it was not specific course characteristics that impacted student self-efficacy and motivation but rather the motivating potential of the course on the JCM scale.

Novak et al., 2007 conducted a meta-analysis to examine the relationship between service-learning and student academic outcomes based on quantitative measures. Their findings showed,

Service learning improves academic understanding of subject matter, skills learned, and ability to apply knowledge and reframe complex social issues. The results of the investigations indicate that service learning consistently provides improvement in these desired outcomes when compared to programs or courses without such service learning opportunities. (p. 153)

These outcomes the authors advocate align with what are considered the best practices within service-learning curriculum, such as providing students with opportunities to take responsibility for their learning, apply critical thinking skills to a real-world setting, and connect with a broader community.

Brail (2016) used a case study approach to quantify the impacts of service-learning by utilizing grade achievement as a proxy for student learning. The cases included four sections of a college course, of which some had the option of a service-learning module. In looking at earned grades, which the researchers acknowledge is an imperfect measure of student learning, there
was a statistically significant increase in student grades for service-learning participants. This research indicates that the hands-on nature of service-learning may help students more completely obtain content knowledge goals and help them identify the learning as meaningful (Brail, 2016; Smith, 2006). Smith (2006) utilized a quasi-experimental design that utilized both quantitative and qualitative data to understand the learning differences that may occur among students engaging in service-learning. This research found that the “active learning involved in participating in service seemed to have impacted the students' overall levels of knowledge gained more so than did writing a research paper” (p. 162).

Pivoting from in-school impacts of service-learning, another research area examines student effects that extend beyond the classroom by studying post-course outcomes, and community and civic engagement impacts. Looking at student civic engagement via another perspective Mitchell (2015) examined the longer-term effects of service-learning on civic engagement. Alumni were engaged to understand the long-term effects of extended critical service-learning curriculums. The study looked at multiterm curriculums from three institutions of higher education. The researchers took a purposeful sample to allow for gender, race, and cohort diversity of 400 participants across the three programs. Thirty-three alumni participated in the mixed-method study that included loosely structured interviews. From the interviews, the researchers developed a subsequent survey sent to all 400 alumni and resulted in a 49% response rate. The researchers found that the survey responses capturing the alumnus’ current political engagement and community engagement “indicated an enduring influence of the programs in participants’ lives after graduation” (Mitchell, 2015. p. 22). In particular, two elements of the program curriculum that were found to be most impactful to alumni’s long-term civic identity
included the deep community engagement required as well as the cohort model in which participants participated in sense-making together.

The long-term impact of service-learning on student engagement, agency, and empowerment is another area of focus. Acknowledging the importance of community and political engagement following college, research aims to examine if students who have service-learning experiences demonstrate higher levels of agency and engagement (Astin et al., 2000; Smith, 2006). Astin et al. (2000) completed a longitudinal study of over twenty-two thousand college students and found that students who engaged in service-learning during college cited higher levels of empowerment after college than their peers who did not volunteer.

The perceived educational benefits of service-learning were well-understood according to a 1999 quick response survey distributed to school principals at the elementary and secondary by the U.S. department of education. The survey "National Student Service-Learning and Community Service Survey" (FRSS 71), found that

About one-fifth (19 percent) of schools with service-learning said that one of their top 3 reasons for encouraging student involvement in service-learning was to teach critical thinking and problem solving skills. In addition, 12 percent of schools with service-learning said that improving student achievement in core academic courses was one of their most important reasons for encouraging student involvement in service-learning.

(Skinner & Chapman, 1999)

However, academic outcomes were cited as a secondary motivator to the primary focus of growing student engagement and involvement. This aligns with Shumer & Belbas’ 1996 findings that indicate service-learning program directors cite program goals that aim to increase student social responsibility, personal growth, and self-esteem.
Smith (2006) was interested in “Challenging students to consider the relevance of politics to their world and to consider the role they can/ought to play in the political world” (p. 149). They aimed to introduce students to this frame by incorporating service-learning into their introductory American Government course. The research utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods to understand how service-learning may influence student learning, engagement, as well as interest, and preparedness of political engagement. While the research did find quantitative indicators that students who participate in the service-learning component showed higher levels of content expertise, the use of both quantitative and qualitative measures demonstrated how each method could potentially contribute to our understanding of service-learning’s impact. Smith (2006) argues that the quantitative data demonstrated less definitive results of service learning, arguing that the changes that may occur for students are best assessed in a more qualitative way with students able to express themselves more freely without being confined to forced-choice, researcher-created responses. For many students, it seems the experience is an awakening where new connections and insights are constantly being made and being discovered through reflection. (p. 164)

In the following section these qualitative research outcomes will be considered further.

**Qualitatively Measured Benefits**

Researchers such as Kiely (2005) warn that research focusing primarily on the outcomes of service-learning may fall short. Kiely argued that service-learning impacts exist beyond student knowledge development,

Measuring students’ acquisition of disciplinary knowledge means service-learning research tends to neglect important community and institutional impacts, learning processes, theory development, and values unique to service-learning contexts. As a
result, there is a deficit in studies that generate theory and/or investigate the contextual factors and learning processes.” (Keily, 2005. p. 5)

Service-learning research exploring more qualitative areas tends to explore the student transformations that can occur in behavior, empathy, agency and other factors.

To explore student transformation Robinson & Levac (2018) aimed to understand student experiences as they integrated pre-service learning that encouraged them to examine their own privilege and how it may interplay with their later service-learning. In particular, the curriculum aimed to facilitate objective reframing for students, during which they are able to examine their own assumptions and consider the assumptions of others. Via pre-post tests and focus groups, the research aims to explore if students self-identify the service-learning curriculum and experience it as transformation. With a small sample size of six students, the research found limited instances in which students communicate the type of transformation the research anticipates.

Student transformation is one outcome explored in service-learning research, and this utilizes qualitative approaches (Smith, 2006). The service-learning component of student reflection is one key elements of the SL curriculum that often helps to demonstrate the types and extent of transformations students may experience. Studying student reflection, Sanders et al. (2016) aimed to investigate if structured reflection as compared to unstructured reflection influences the transformation students experience. Looking specifically to understand student transformation around measures of personal self-efficacy and personal growth, Sanders et al. analyzed student final reflection narratives to find that students who engaged in structured reflections demonstrated greater growth in personal self-efficacy.

As seen in the research by Robinson & Levac, the qualitative findings of service-learning impact may be inconsistent across students and across programs. There are many different
definitions of service-learning and variations in the components of the curriculum (Pollack, 2000; Novak et al., 2007). This differentiation in program design and student engagement may result in inconsistent findings around program effectiveness and impact. Gartland (2021) aimed to employ an asset-based inquiry approach that emphasized further exploring what is working instead of posting questions that emphasize what does not. In doing so, Gartland considers the meaning students make from their service-learning program particularly in regards to curricular attention on amplifying student voice. The research was conducted via a case study with two third-grade students participating in a year-long student-led service-learning project. Students reported feeling a sense of community and safety within their classroom because their voices were priorities and a greater sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to achieve their goals from their service-learning engagement. These outcomes, despite just being studied with two students, indicate the potential service-learning has to impact students, especially at a young age.

As Garland’s (2021) research indicates, prioritizing student voice can have a meaningful impact on student self-perception. To explore further the conditions that can contribute to student voice. Serriere et al. (2011) studied how teacher styles may influence student voice and engagement with service learning. Working with three different classes at a single elementary school, analysis was conducted from observations, teacher interviews, student interviews, and teacher focus groups. Serriere et al., argue that successful service-learning programs must pay attention to two objectives, the first being accomplishing the service project goals, the second developing student agency, skill, learning, and empowerment. To accomplish both goals, the research found that teaching styles that integrated components that were teacher-lead with components that were student-lead provided the best balance for meeting the two objectives.
Within the three case studies analyzed in this research, those that were to teacher-focused were found to lead to “tokenistic service” (p. 565), meaning they did not successfully elicit a deep interest from student or allow for adequate student reflection and meaning.

The effects of service-learning are typically understood via an “outcome based” approach that looks specifically at student outcomes (Santigo-Ortiz, 2019). While service-learning curriculum may produce positive participant impacts (Conway et al., 2009), the impact on civic engagement remains small. Research does indicate that not all service-learning produces the same impact. Studies demonstrate that required versus optional service-learning curriculums may impact outcomes, as well as the types of service impact long-term civic practices among participants (Mitchell et al., 2019). The following section will consider how student transformation may be impacted based on the age at which they are introduced to service-learning.

**Service-Learning Inquiry with Youth**

Service-learning programs initially grew in popularity among collegiate-level students (Kenny & Gallagher, 2002). Service-learning research tends to focus on college participants or the teachers that design and offer the programs. A meta-analysis completed by Celio et al. (2011) looked at service-learning research, finding that only 4.6% of research populations included elementary and middle school children. One reason in which service-learning may be understudied at the K-12 level is due to the curricular requirements discussed above, leaving little opportunity for teachers to employ curricular techniques beyond the standard requirements (Saal, et al., 2019). However, research at the college level does indicate that the pedagogy may not have the transformative impact anticipated because students' worldviews are formed instead of forming (Kiely, 2005; Robinson & Levac, 2018).
Service-learning is a form of transformative learning, engaging students in self-examination and incorporating disorienting experiences by introducing students to new experiences, information and cultures (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning experiences create internal dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991) that contribute to student learning and development. Kiely (2005) explains, “The ideal end result of transformative learning is that one is empowered by learning to be more socially responsible, self-directed, and less dependent on false assumptions” (Kiely, 2005. p. 7). Transformative learning theory researchers question if transformative learning can fully occur until the learner acts in a way that exercises their new knowledge (Robinson & Levac, 2018).

In understanding the transformative learning experience of a college service-learning curriculum, Robinson & Levac (2018) how students’ exploration of their own privilege and oppression impacted their service-learning engagement. In the course, students were expected to explore conditions of privilege, power, and positionality and then consider how to apply this learning to their selection of a service experience. The research found that some participants seemed to engage in a transformative learning experience, and their writing reflected changes in mindset and a deeper understanding of their position and choice. However, Robinson & Levac (2018) did not find that this learning impacted students’ decisions around service-learning sites or their role within the service-learning experience.

We also found limited explicit examples of students relying on their seemingly transformative learning experiences in planning their engagement opportunities. The textual evidence suggests that students participated in the kinds of reflection necessary for transformative learning and changes in habits of mind. However, it remains unclear
whether their choices of engagement opportunities really reflect their experience in the course (Robinson & Levac, 2018, p. 123).

In the research reviewed, tensions exist around the effectiveness of service-learning in preparing and empowering students to act independently to address social challenges. Some analyses found that students could not apply their critical pedagogy to their service (Kawecka Nenga, 2011; Robinson & Levac, 2018). Future research needs to specifically investigate the age at which the introduction of CSL may prove most effective in equipping students with the inquiry, voice, power, and agency to address structural inequality. Seider et al. (2010) found that college students engaged with curriculums that teach about structural causes of inequality did not typically adjust their worldview in response to this learning. Instead, students adopt what Kluegel and Smith refer to as “compromised images” in which they simply append their newfound understanding of inequality to existing beliefs” (p. 14).

Given the propensity to append new information to already established worldviews, inquiry needs to expand to investigate the age at which CSL has the most meaningful impact on informing students’ worldviews. For this reason, inquiry into transformative service-learning at the K-12 level may have valuable. Further, younger students may possess additional curiosity and imagination that may be valuable to employ early in considering the remediation of structural inequalities. As Serriere et al. (2011) reference, there is a “youthful window of wonder” (p. 542) that may be valuable to tap into for the service-learning curriculum. In the following section I will discuss a form of service-learning pedagogy that aims to introduce critical inquiry into service.

**Service-Learning Through a Critical Lens**

Critical service-learning (CSL) is a type of service-learning pedagogy that aims to incorporate additional pedagogical intentions such as purposeful redistribution of power among
the student participants and the community of service and focusing efforts to effect social change and address structural inequalities (Mitchell, 2008). It aims to not only prepare students to engage with the broader community, but to do so in a way that intentionally explores the conditions of power, privilege, policy, and resources that may be contributing to or perpetuating social challenges. With growing political disengagement, (Reinke, 2003; Smith, 2006) critical service-learning curricula aims to help students develop the skills to identify the existence of inequalities and understand the role power, privilege, and social justice play in creating and perpetuating inequalities become essential (Berrera et al., 2017). A critical service-learning curriculum emphasizes service that creates lasting social change rather than focusing on mitigation of existing social challenges by preparing students to identify and dismantle structural inequalities (Mitchell, 2007).

Taking a critical approach to service-learning curriculum may be important to helping ensure that service-learning does not “perpetuate racist, sexist, or classist assumptions about others and reinforce a colonialist mentality” (O’Grady, 2000). One reason why research needs to intentionally consider the impact of service-learning done without a critical lens is to understand the potential unintended consequences it may produce. As youth are encouraged to complete volunteer work via curricular requirements, or other formal structures, it would be valuable to better understand the impact of volunteerism without critical examinations of structural inequalities.

Kawecka Nenga (2011) explored how middle-class and upper-class youth choose to exert individual agency in response to service experiences that expose them to their systemic class privilege. This research moved beyond measuring the learning acquired to reflect on how students chose to employ this learning when engaging with their service environment. Through
this research, Kawecka Negna cautioned that volunteer work alone, without education about systemic challenges impacting social problems, could only perpetuate inequalities and students’ ignorance of structural inequalities. If that is the case, Kawecka Nenga recommends that “advocates of youth service need to stop encouraging youth to volunteer” (p 283). Without careful consideration of the impact of current service, volunteerism, and curricular practices, educators may be unintentionally perpetuating and, in some cases exacerbating issues of privilege, inequality, and victimization (Bolea, 2012; O’Grady, 2014).

Nygreen’s (2010) ethnographic study of youth’s design and teaching of a social-justice class how student’s individual voice in the classroom may have manifested feelings of individual empowerment that did not demonstrate the development of student’s “politicized voice” (p. 258) which was the curricular goal. A critical service-learning curriculum aims to empower students to “see change as possible and to see themselves as change agents” (p. 248). Measuring the distinctions between a student feeling like a change agent, being prepared to be a change agent, and feeling compelled to be a change agent is challenging (Gonsalves et al., 2019) but one of the areas of attention in critical service-learning inquiry.

As service-learning curriculum often aims to support student political and community engagement (Moely et al., 2002; Nygreen, 2010; Scott 2015; Smith, 2006), it is important that this engagement be framed within critical inquiry to ensure that students don’t “neglect the critical questions and political foundations central to pedagogy’s influence and effectiveness (Mitchell, 2007. p. 101). This critical inquiry associated with service-learning is what guides the theoretical framework associated with this research.

**Theoretical Framework**

My research adopts critical theory as a theoretical framework to situate the examination of educational leaders’ perceptions and experiences with service-learning pedagogy. The
framework includes three fundamental principles of critical theory (CT): emancipation, humanization, and reflection with praxis. I will apply these three principles to the lived experiences of educational leaders as they consider the inclusion, exclusion, and potential impact of service-learning for their students. In the following, I’ll start by introducing critical theory, followed by an examination of the three principles relevant to this research. Lastly, I’ll discuss the connections between critical theory and service-learning.

Critical theory (CT) intentionally looks to, understand, and be inclusive of the ideas, perspectives, and experiences of those on the periphery or those that may not be part of the privileged or majority (Horkheimer, 1972; Stromquist, 2014). This purposeful examination brings light to oppression, gives voice to the marginalized, and promotes action to alleviate harm. Service-learning (SL) pedagogy, and in particular critical service-learning, is rooted in critical theory focusing on “the root causes of inequalities by addressing power, privilege, and oppression through a social justice-based approach” (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019. p. 43). As will be explored throughout this section, a critical theory framework provides an opportunity to frame service-learning for the participants, researcher, and advocates of service-learning.

**Critical Theory Concepts**

Critical theory originates from the Frankfurt Institute for social research, created in the 1920s (Stromquist, 2014). My research considers three overarching concepts of critical theory. The three principles are emancipation, humanization, and reflection with praxis. These three pillars come together to critically examine hegemony, investigate oppression, and prioritize action to free society from oppression. Critical theory is rooted in a commitment to freedom from oppression (emancipation principle), but freedom not just for the benefit of the individual, but also for the benefit of the collective (humanization principle). Critical theory recognizes that to obtain freedom, one needs to engage in deep reflection and action (principle of reflection with
Framing inquiry within these three principles will provide opportunities for educational leaders to actively reflect on the decisions, ambivalence, or other conditions at play that may be impacting the availability of service-learning for students, and to consider the greater impact these conditions may plan on the development of student emancipation and humanization.

**Emancipation**

Emancipation serves as the first principle; it contends that reason has the power to free people from oppression. Societal norms and hegemony contribute to the creation and maintenance of oppressive forces. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is the control exerted by societal, political, and economic sources of power to maintain subjugation over the oppressed (Fischman & McLaren, 2005). To Horkheimer, critical theory considers every element within a society that may be assumed inherently true, and considers what may be irrational in these structures that may be causing or perpetuating oppression (Horkheimer, 1972. p. 207-208).

Emancipation from hegemony requires that people take steps to ask critical questions and explore counterarguments to those that may prevail in society (Stromquist, 2014). Gramsci understood that hegemony is taught and learned and as such and found in the education students receive in school, explaining that “every relationship of hegemony is necessarily a pedagogical relationship” (p. 350). Recognizing the relationship between hegemony and pedagogy requires that we critically explore how our institutions, such as schools, may contribute to hegemony and serve as a critical force in exploring counter-hegemony.

Apple & King (1977) further explored hegemony in the U.S. education system as they unpacked the knowledge taught in school via the explicit and hidden curriculums. Historically, school curricula were designed for socializing students to the social, political, and economic conditions they were expected to understand and maintain later in life. This curricular design
purposefully perpetuated hegemony and is the root context from which curricular design has been built in U.S. educational history (Apple & King, 1977). Understanding this foundation is essential in recognizing the lack of criticality in which historical education approaches were established. Service-learning curriculums intentionally aim to teach students how to critically consider the challenges within their communities and the oppressive forces of their curriculums and equip them with the experience necessary to overcome some of the oppressive forces at play. As Santiago-Ortiz (2019) explains, “CSL incorporates the explicit acknowledgment of power and systemic inequality in the classroom…by uncovering the political nature of education, providing deeper reflection on and critique of the supposed neutrality of education and its complicity with structural oppression” (p. 43). This exploration is rooted in the critical theory of emancipation as it encourages thoughtful inquiry into influences, circumstances, and conditions at play. Emancipation is possible through the acts of reflection and praxis, a second core principle of critical theory.

**Reflection & Praxis**

Reflection is an active exercise that examines current situations and contexts and conceptualizes them within the conditions of our past that have created them. This reflective practice requires that people critically consider the factors that have created conditions of power, oppression, inequality, and societal norms. Mezirow (1991) argues that critical reflection creates self-awareness. In addition to self-awareness, it contributes to a broader awareness of the experience of others.

Critical theory contends that for true critical reflection to occur, action towards societal transformation must take place. Giroux (1983) further the act of praxis, which is “theoretically oriented action” which aims to promote an “agenda for change” (Fischman & McLaren, 2005. p. 426). Gramsci also emphasized the need to engage in a regular praxis of counter-hegemony.
Fischman & McLaren (2005) described Gramsci’s mission as the creation of a “community-based liberatory praxis” (p. 433) that involves everyone, not just those identified as ‘intellectuals’ but by all, as a means of achieving liberty.

Reflection and praxis are corequisites in a critical theory framework, “It is the idea that both theory and practice by themselves are incomplete and one-sided - that theory without practice is abstract, inert, and socially detached, while practice without theory is myopic, superficial, and undirected” (Cunningham & Vachta, 2003. p. 30). Emancipation and reflection contribute to the freedom of oneself from oppressive forces. Service-learning curriculum includes reflection as students consider the conditions at play that create societal challenges, and introduce praxis as students engage in service to address these challenges. However, the root of critical theory is not to create individual freedom but rather to create freedom from oppression for others, which extends to a more full humanization in the face of dehumanizing systems. Utilizing a critical theory framework within this research will encourage educational leaders to reflect both on the theories or abstract curricular intentions of education alongside the practical conditions that may impact those aims.

**Humanization**

Humanization, the third principle of critical theory, aims to diminish the marginalization and suffering of others collectively. To do so requires a commitment to society's collective well-being, not just the prioritization of one’s personal well-being. In application to this inquiry, humanization is highlighted by empowering educational leaders to reflect on the impacts of curricular decisions and consider how both individual actions and structural conditions impact access to service-learning curriculums. Humanization may also intersect in this research by bringing to light absences in educational leaders' agency, or a lack of collective educational objectives for students. Additionally, in exploring the absence of service-learning, a critical
theory framework may be used to identify sources of oppressive, unreflective, and dehumanizing practices in educational policies and practices. To achieve humanization, we return to the principle of reflection, which is an active, not passive, activity (Brown, 2004). Reflection is meant not just as an act of intellectual consideration but of practical action to produce change.

**Critical Theory, Education, and Critical Service Learning**

These three critical theory principles—emancipation, reflection through praxis, and humanization—guide my research. In particular, my research examines school curricula that intentionally develop students’ skills and capacity toward critical action for social change towards social justice. The foundation of CT maintains that teaching for individual transformation alone is not sufficient; it is the betterment of many that our students and educators have a responsibility toward.

Freire was a pivotal contributor to applying the principles of critical theory to the study of education and the development of critical pedagogy. Freire’s Critical Pedagogy explores how traditional education may further perpetuate oppression for disenfranchised populations and considers how alternative education models can prioritize the critical theory principles of emancipation, reflection, and praxis. The social-justice-oriented nature of CSL connects to the CT principle of humanization by which students are learning about more than just their individual responsibilities within society, but also their collective responsibility to act in ways to address social-justice challenges. Further, the CT principle of emancipation is echoed as CSL praxis empowers students to be actors toward social change. Nygreen (2010) explains that the point of CSL pedagogy is to empower students to “see change as possible and to see themselves as change agents” (p. 248). This shift to agentic, responsible, and capable change agents is what is critically important within civic education moving forward (Broom, 2010).
Our communities, political systems, and social networks continue to be influenced by capitalist forces focusing on individual interests (Heggart et al., 2018). People may be left viewing the world through their individual self-interest and thus remaining detached from the interests of others, failing to hold the CT principle of humanization. Nkolakaki explains, “Through individualism and competition people in society are marginalized, disempowered, and manipulated. Instead, communitarian values, solidarity and responsibility, for individual and community autonomy, need to be fostered” (Nikolakaki, 2014. p. 52). My research aims to consider how education can help to better foster a move away from individualistic ideologies to those that align with the principle of humanization. Specifically, I am interested in whether leaders consider service-learning as an approach to foster civics education that not only critically explores our shared humanity but also empowers students to be agents in activism to break down systems that have created inequality and oppression, and whether these leaders view these goals as worthy or feasible. Critical theory aims to intentionally explore the experiences of the disenfranchised (Horkheimer, 1972; Stromquist, 2014), and its use in this research also aims to consider how not having access to service-learning pedagogy may perpetuate the disenfranchisements of students, as well as if educational leaders feel disenfranchised by the conditions at play that may impact the ability to include or exclude the pedagogies within their schools.

Summary

This literature review outlined ways in which service-learning curriculum has been found to benefit student learning and development, the policy and political influences of service-learning, the gaps and opportunities for understanding service-learning at the kindergarten thru twelfth grade levels, and how service-learning examines the communities, policies, and conditions of power may facilitate student agency as incorporated in a critical theory framework.
This research aims to understand if the literature explored here is influencing educational leaders’ understanding of service-learning, and how that impacts the inclusion or exclusion of the curricular approach at the K-12 level.
Chapter III: Methodology

This dissertation uses qualitative inquiry to understand educational leaders’ experiences with service-learning pedagogy. In working with K-12 educational leaders who influence curriculums, the dissertation’s design will encourage their consideration of what goes into the inclusion or exclusion of service-learning pedagogy (SL). This research considers the lived experiences of educational decision-makers as they decide whether or not to include service-learning curriculum at the K-12 level. This chapter will provide a detailed overview of the research design, its procedures, as well as the limitations of the methodology.

Research Design

The conclusion of the U.S. Department of Education 1999 "National Student Service-Learning and Community Service Survey" (FRSS 71) notes

It would be interesting to learn if schools that have initiated service-learning activities build on their early experiences by institutionalizing service-learning over time. Such a question and others examining changes in school's use of service-learning, student participation, support for teachers, and funding require research allowing analysis of changes across time. (Skinner & Chapman, 1999)

This survey provided quantitative data around the prevalence of service-learning in K-12 public schools; however, as the authors acknowledge in the above conclusion, the findings open the door for further inquiry into the conditions of service-learning in schools and how schools are sustaining the programs. This research leverages qualitative inquiry as a means to better understand the conditions that impact the inclusion and exclusion of service-learning from the educational leaders in the positions of decision-making influence. Qualitative inquiry is best applied to research that aims to build a detailed understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2019). This research utilizes qualitative inquiry to gain data from the experiences of educational
leaders and better understand the phenomenon of service-learning considerations in elementary and secondary education.

**Setting**

Literature suggests that the inclusion or exclusion of service-learning pedagogy is impacted by school resources such as funding (Saal et al., 2019), curricular support for teachers (Scott & Graham, 2015), professional development opportunities for teachers (Soslau & Gartland, 2021), as well as the age of student participants (Celio et al., 2011). Thus, research was conducted with educational leaders of public, private, parochial, and charter schools within eastern Pennsylvania counties. Given the existing research indicating the impacts these factors may have, this research intentionally inquired about schools of various types and educational missions.

Eastern Pennsylvania is comprised of nine counties: Philadelphia, Delaware, Chester, Montgomery, Bucks, Lancaster, Berks, Lehigh, and Northampton. As will be discussed later, these counties were of interest as the researcher has children enrolled in K-12 education within the counties studied and had a personal curiosity about what educational leaders know or consider in regards to service-learning offerings in the local schools. The following section will describe recruitment and participant characteristics viz. public, charter, private or parochial school throughout these counties.

**Participants and Recruitment**

Participants were education decision-makers who are currently serving in school leadership roles or who have recently served in leadership roles within the last five years. Leadership roles varied but were most often curricular leaders in school districts, heads of schools, principals, assistant principals, or school curricular leaders. Participants all came from the K-12 setting serving elementary to high school grades. There were no other criteria that
participants needed to meet to participate in the study. The research took place between October 2022 and January 2023. Participants engaged in a thirty-to-sixty-minute semi-structured interview. Following the interview, participants were compensated via a thirty-dollar gift card.

Recruitment took place following IRB approval in October 2022. This research utilized both direct outreach recruitment as well as a snowball sampling strategy. The researcher compiled a list of educational leaders within the counties in eastern Pennsylvania to conduct direct recruitment outreach with. To do this, the researcher referenced public information on school and district websites looking at roles such as superintendents, assistant superintendents with oversight of curriculum, principals, assistant principals, heads of school, and other positions that specifically related to curricular oversight or service-learning oversight. A database was established to include the school information, the educational leader's name, and the leader’s email address. Additional potential participants were identified by connecting with the Intermediate Units for the included counties to inquire about distribution lists of educational leaders. From the developed database, the researcher utilized direct email outreach to potential participants to inform them of the research and invite their participation. To begin participant recruitment, emails were sent out to 948 potential participants from the above-described recruitment efforts.

Additionally, a snowball strategy was utilized to spread the word about the research to potential participants. The recruitment communications are included in Appendix A. Table 1 summarizes the research participants and provides descriptive information about the school(s) they represent. School and district sizes are approximations based on publicly available information. If a participant discussed their experiences in multiple settings, they may be recorded twice with different descriptive information (see participant two below). Details
regarding the specific roles participants hold and school size were only collected for the participants’ current school. The student population figures represent the school district for public schools, and individual school size for private, parochial and charter schools.

**Table 1**

*Participant information will be listed.*

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Data Collection

Interview

Data was collected via one-on-one interviews with educational leaders in eastern Pennsylvania schools. Interviews utilized open-ended questions and to help collect “unconstrained” (Creswell, 2019, p 218) responses to allow participants to explore and communicate their unique experiences and perspectives on the research topic, and recount examples the researcher would not be able to observe (Creswell, 2019). Use of semi-structured interview questions that are designed to be broad and that did not lead participants to particular views have been found effective in exploring educational decision-making (Perry & Lubienski, 2020). The use of semi-structured interviews provided participants an opportunity to consider conditions particular to their schools and or their personal experiences. Interviews were scheduled from November 2022 thru January 2023 and were conducted primarily via zoom with the option for in-person conversations when convenient for the participant. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher reviewed the intention of the research, and why the inquiry is considered valuable to educational leaders. Next, the researcher reviewed critical elements of the consent process, including the research design to protect participant confidentiality, the voluntary nature of participation, as well as the ability for participants to opt out of the research at any time. During this step, the researcher would confirm that written consent has been received and reconfirm consent verbally with participants.

Interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants. Semi-structured interviews provided specific questions to guide the conversation. This format also allowed for
flexibility, so the researcher could conduct follow-up inquiry to further explore topics presented by the participants. The first part of the interview questions focused specifically on experiences with service-learning pedagogy and what service-learning curriculum may currently be used within their schools or districts. Research indicates there are varied understandings of service-learning pedagogy (Curry et al., 2019; Pollack, 2000), as well as different policy approaches in the establishment and governance of service-learning in K-12 education (Pollack, 2000). This leads to multiple pedagogical approaches to service-learning within the school curriculum. These initial questions help to understand the form of service-learning the participant may be most familiar with and were utilized to frame their perceptions shared throughout the research.

The second part of the interview questions focused on curricular decision-making. This inquiry asked how curricular decisions are made and the factors that influence the decision. Sample questions include:

- Can you tell me a bit about how your district/school determines the curriculum it will utilize?
- What considerations go into introducing a new curriculum in your school or district?
- What factors would be at play to consider service-learning within the curriculum within your current school?

These questions explore how curricular priorities factor into curricular offerings, and what considerations are made when deciding whether to introduce service-learning pedagogy within their districts. Appendix B includes a complete list of interview questions from which the researcher drew. During the interview, the researcher engaged in field notes. Field notes focused on the observations of the participants, notes on topics that stood out or were repeated throughout
the conversation, and notations of topics in which the researcher would like to engage in expanded inquiry with participants.

Before the conclusion of the interview, in support of snowball sampling, the researcher asked participants if there was anyone else they recommended for potential participation. The next step in the interview protocol included timely transcription and member checking. These steps are outlined in the following section.

**Transcription**

The majority of interviews were audio-recorded via zoom, as virtual interviews were preferred by participants. The researcher utilized a transcription service to complete verbatim transcription of the interviews. All personally identifiable information such as participant name and the names of schools were removed before transcripts were shared with participants for “participant review” (Marshall & Rossmann, 2022. p. 224). Review by the participants was not required if participants opted not to respond. Transcripts were then entered into Dedoose (version 9.0.62) for data analysis, as will be described later.

**Triangulation**

To further build the credibility of the study, and to assist with crystallization of data provided by participants, the researcher looked for additional sources to offer triangulation. The most common sources of additional information included published materials from the participants’ schools. These included school/district policies, school websites, mission and value statements, procedures, curricular requirements, etc., relevant to the conditions that may impact the inclusion or exclusion of service-learning. Some materials were identified after reference by participants, and at times the researcher sought additional sources to better clarify information provided. These materials helped to support validity within the research, which further supports the generalizability of the study as will be explored next.
Generalizability

This inquiry examines educational leaders within a specific region of the United States K-12 school system. It is not designed to produce generalizable results that can be applied to schools outside of that region, nor is it designed to have a conclusive understanding of the conditions that support or impede service-learning offerings. The purpose of this qualitative research is to gather deep details that may be lost in research that aims to create generalizable findings. The researcher aimed to reach “theoretical sufficiency” (Marshall & Rossman, 2022. p. 251) in which themes are well understood through the data collection, while maintaining an understanding that additional experiences or findings may still exist that have not been discovered. As a result, this study is not generalizable across all schools or educational leaders' experiences but could be considered generalizable to the phenomena within this region at this moment in time.

Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative research incorporates data collection and analysis as “simultaneous activities” and iterative in nature (Creswell, 2019. p. 238). By closely connecting data-gathering and analysis, this research design draws attention to trends in the data during the data collection period.

Data analysis began with the transcription process as described above. The process of transcription was a valuable step in data analysis as the researcher reflected on the conversation and began to draw attention to the messages repeated, and the information provided or potentially withheld. Transcripts were then loaded into Dedoose for analysis. Transcripts were coded with some descriptive data that removed participant identifiers but maintained the attributes of the school(s) in which they lead, such as the county, school type, and school level(s). This organizational process was the first phase of the data analysis process.
Analysis was done inductively to allow categories to emerge through the research process. To facilitate inductive analysis, the second stage of data analysis was an immersion into the data. During this phase, the researcher became more familiar with the data by visiting the data set frequently, listening to audio-recordings of interviews, looking for commonly used words, or referenced policies, regulations and other supporting material. The analysis continued by identifying categories that emerged in the data. This was done via in vivo coding, allowing the data collected by participants to drive the categories. From the literature review addressed in chapter two, theory-generated codes included the benefits of service-learning for students; financial resource requirements; teacher training; policies; federal regulations; time-constrained resources; community impact; political, cultural and community conditions; student age and ability; critical consciousness.

Early analysis considered which of these literature-driven categories appeared in the data, which are missing, and additional categories that may be emerging. The categorical analysis considered social, political, economic, or phenomena found to be influencing leaders. This contextual consideration further emphasizes critical theory’s tents of reflection and emancipation. Theory-driven categories were added based on participant data and the researcher utilized analytical memos to unpack where data aligned with theory-generated categories, and what additional categories needed to be established from transcript analysis. After the establishment of categories, the next phase of analysis included the creation of a code list for each category, as will be outlined in chapter four.

**Divergent Perspectives and Outlier Data**

In alignment with a critical theory (CT) framework, through data analysis the researcher intentionally looked at divergent perspectives and outlier data. Through a CT framework, data analysis looked for themes that may be divergent from commonly-communicated perspectives.
Codes were established both for positive and negative conditions. For example, under the category of service-learning benefits, the literature indicates there may be findings around how service-learning positively impacts student engagement. Analysis coded for data that aligned with the literature and intentionally looked for data contradicted. In addition to the examination of outlier data, this research concluded when theoretical sufficiency was seen in the data.

**Limitations of Methodology**

This qualitative methodology began to explore the phenomena of educational leaders in eastern Pennsylvania as they consider service-learning pedagogy and reflect on the conditions that impact inclusion and exclusion in K-12 schools. It is limited in that it is not generalizable to all U.S. educational settings as it explores conditions of policy, politics, culture, and community that are understood to change by region. This research began to explore the conditions that may be at play to explain the apparent drop in service-learning popularity that is documented since 2010 (The Education Commission of the States, 2010 & 2014). As will be explored further in chapter five, this research begins to provide context and lays the foundation for additional research to consider if and how service-learning popularity can be impacted by altering the conditions explored in this research.

**Informed Consent and Protection of Human Participants**

This research was designed and executed to promote respect, mutuality, and transparency with participants. A key tenet to this protection of participants was via the informed consent process. During participant recruitment, the researcher's communication was transparent regarding the intention of the research, commitments of time requested of participants, and information about how participant privacy would be protected. When the participant was invited to schedule an interview, the researcher provided them with a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix C). At the start of the interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form briefly to
ensure verbal agreement with the participant and ensured written consent had been received. Additionally, the researcher reiterated to participants that participation was voluntary and the option to later opt-out was available.

Additional practices were followed to ensure the protection of participant privacy during the research process, including storing all research materials, including interview audio recordings and transcriptions, on an encrypted OneDrive sponsored by West Chester University. Following transcription and participant checking, transcripts were de-identified before being loaded into Dedoose for data analytics. The researcher maintained participant confidentiality during the snowball sampling process.

**Researcher’s Bias and Positionality**

The researcher is studying service-learning (SL) curriculum with a belief that it can be a critical curricular tool to establishing students' perceptions of “themselves as actors or agents of the political arena” (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002), or “agents of social change” (Gartland, 2021). This inquiry stems from feeling a lack of preparedness to be an agent of social change despite education focused on politics, social action, and critical inquiry. Further, the educational priorities, seen within the schools of the researcher’s children, raised concerns for their preparedness to be change agents. More simply, this research stems from an interest in exploring curricular approaches that will help students better understand that there are root causes of hunger, and they have the capacity and place to address the causes in addition to collecting cans for a food drive. The researcher is curious about educational leaders’ perceptions of if service-learning curriculum can be used to not only expose students to the deeper causes of society’s challenges but also empower them to actively engage in solutions. Going back to Bickford & Reynolds (2002), do curricular decision-makers see service-learning as an opportunity to help students become activists and not just volunteers?
This study is being conducted from the perspective of an outsider to the field of K-12 education. The researcher does not work directly with K-12 students professionally, has never taught, and is not an expert in service-learning pedagogy. Despite not having formal training in elementary education, the researchers’ background has combined experiences in activism with examinations of social, political, economic, and racial influences. Additionally, the researcher is a parent of three young children and through this lens is witnessing the educational priorities their learning is rooted in.

There are assumptions the researcher brings to this work that require consideration. A personal lack of preparedness and concern for kids’ lack of preparedness to be an activist is part of what frames the researcher’s perspective. The researcher perceives that volunteerism is more actively perpetuated in our society than activism. Further, the researcher holds assumptions about how the act of volunteering can be shallow and further perpetuate perspectives of inequality that aren’t rooted in acknowledging structural forces that create inequality. During this research, engagement in regular reflective writing was used to recognize how assumptions and positionality impacted the research.

**Summary**

This research aims to explore the lived experiences of educational leaders as they interact with and consider service-learning pedagogy within the eastern Pennsylvania region. For the researcher, this inquiry stems from a curiosity to better understand how curricular decisions are made within the schools her children attend, as well as what considerations go into pedagogical approaches when there are limited resources available for educational leaders. While this research will not establish a cause-and-effect relationship nor provide evidence that service-learning is an imp pedagogy for students to experience, it will begin to consider what may be influencing its inclusion or exclusion in schools.
Chapter IV Findings

Through qualitative inquiry, this study seeks to understand the lived experiences of educational leaders in southeastern Pennsylvania when considering service-learning curriculum in K-12 schools. This chapter will present findings from semi-structured interviews with participants, and aim to address the two research questions:

1. What are southeastern Pennsylvania school administrators’ experiences with service-learning curriculum?
2. What factors influence these leaders’ decisions to use or not use service-learning curriculum?

Participants

The research design aimed to consider educational leaders' experiences from various school types and counties within southeastern Pennsylvania. In doing so, the researcher sought to understand how different cultural, economic, political, policy, and other factors may influence participants’ experiences and feedback. There were a handful of qualifications participants needed to meet to engage in the research. Participants had to be education decision-makers who currently serve in school leadership roles or have recently served in leadership roles within the last five years; participants must have worked in one of the nine southeastern Pennsylvania counties.

Participation recruitment occurred via direct outreach with principals, assistant principals, superintendents, and curricular directors in the region as well as via snowball outreach. The researcher invited over 950 potential participants via direct email outreach. Table 4.1 outlines the participants of this research. If participants discussed their experiences in multiple settings, they were recorded twice with different descriptive information (see participants 1 and 2). Details regarding the specific roles participants hold, and school size were only collected for the
participants’ current school. The student population figures represent the school district for public schools, and individual school size for private, parochial and charter school.

Table 2

*Participant Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>eudonym</th>
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<th>School Level</th>
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Participants shared their experiences at a variety of school types including two parochial schools, five public schools, one charter schools, and two private schools. Additionally, participants represented a mix of grade levels, including young learners (kindergarten and first grade) and older grades (eight through high school).

There was an over-representation of educators from Chester County. This may have occurred because the location of the sponsoring institution was within Chester County which may have resulted in more participants responding to the inquiry due to familiarity with the institution and its faculty.

Participants' multiple perspectives from various school types and counties were an intentional factor that positively contributed to the inquiry. Because of this variety, participants could consider the research questions from multiple perspectives and compare the conditions at play in current and past roles. As will be discussed in the findings, considering different school cultures, policies, and other factors further deepened the inquiry and findings.

**Findings**
This section presents data I found while interviewing participants. Detailed descriptions and direct quotes are utilized to share data. There was an overarching pattern in how participants spoke to the two research questions worth mentioning upfront. Some participants spoke with familiarity with both service-learning curricular offerings and decision-making related to service-learning offerings. A second pattern included participants who spoke more about service-learning offerings and less about curricular decision-making. Alex, Charlie, and Emerson were part of the first group who spoke to both service-learning and curricular offerings, whereas Greer discussed service-learning without a particular focus on curricular decision-making. And finally, some participants spoke more about the factors considered in curricular decision-making without a specific focus on service learning. This includes Hunter and Dylan. These varied areas of attention contributed to understanding differentiated perspectives in curricular priorities and how service-learning factors in.

Through these findings, this chapter will highlight how participants’ experiences were similar and contradictory. Their similarities in experiences highlight the appreciation for curricular consistency and accountability in education and how participants’ experiences with service-learning intersect with this drive for consistency. Similarities include shared respect for the educational and developmental benefits of service learning, and the complexities limited resources bring to prioritizing service-learning. The contradictions identified will be examined with consideration to the type of school and how leaders may experience differences based on their knowledge of public, private, charter, or parochial education. Contradictions highlight how schools approach compelling, offering, and valuing service-learning.

Research Question 1

The first research question asks about participants’ experiences with service-learning curriculum. Participants answered this question in three primary ways: (1) consideration of the
benefits of service-learning to student learning, (2) discussion of the state requirements that speak to service-learning, (3) sharing institutional policies or requirements of service. The following section will explain how participants considered these three areas in sharing their familiarity with service-learning in the K-12 setting and how these perspectives highlighted similarities and differences between participant experiences.

**Benefits of Service-Learning**

Nearly all participants who had familiarity with service-learning shared a belief that the curricular approach had educational or developmental benefits for students. The type of benefit shifted depending on the intended goal of the curriculum or the student's age. This section will examine the main themes identified by participants in considering the benefits of service learning, highlighting how all participants share a positive perspective of service-learning.

**Educational and Developmental Benefits**

All participants in this study communicated positive perceptions of service-learning regarding the educational and developmental benefits it offers students. This common theme was shared for all grade levels and by all school types. This section will consider the various educational benefits communicated by participants.

**Learning.** Participants cited improved knowledge acquisition and retention as two benefits of service-learning curriculum. Blake, a public school leader, explained,

> So when I think of service learning, I think…what's most important about retention is when our whole brain is involved in it, right? When we can touch it, like, um, feel it, we can be in like our whole body's moving, our whole body's invested and then we're thinking it through and we're using our language and we're listening and um, all of those skills are so important that my biggest fear is that that's what's missing in education.
The benefits of hands-on learning Blake communicated were echoed by Charlie, whose private school curriculum is based on more hands-on learning experiences. This curriculum recognizes that experiences may be more impactful for younger students than explanations. Charlie explains,

Seeing the different impacts of just how, how meaningful and resonant it is if you allow young children to have an experiential relationship to curriculum and learning as opposed to the sort of unintended potential negative consequences of sort of being overly didactic and overly mental linguistic with young children and the effect that that has on their behavior and their bodies.

Offering students hands-on experiences to facilitate knowledge acquisition and retention is one of the benefits participants saw in the service-learning curricular approach. The experiences of the participants' echoes the meta-analysis conducted by Novak et al., (2007) that found service-learning to positively influence “academic understanding of subject matter, skills learned, and ability to apply knowledge and reframe complex social issues (p. 153).

For some participants, like Blake, incorporating more of this type of approach may be what is “missing in education.” Still, for Charlie, a private school leader, this approach is at the core of the educational process. Charlie explains, “it's really tied to a whole theory of what it means to be a human being and how human beings grow and develop and just what's developmentally appropriate.” In addition to influencing student learning, as examined, participants also shared that service-learning can provide students with the opportunity to develop their interpersonal skills.

Interpersonal skill development was tied to service-learning because of the group or community engagement necessary in a service-learning project. Blake recounted a project their
elementary student council completed to install a new swing set at their school. The work included conducting research as well as preparing and delivering a proposal, which required the students to practice different types of skills,

So like all of these levels of, of planning that they do, again, now we're gonna talk about those interpersonal skills, those soft skills of confidence. Because you have to, one, you have to do the research then you have to decide what research do we share? …And then we have to figure out how do we present that to a school board or a governing body that can either say yes or no. Right? And so that's building these, this confidence, these social skills. Um, and like, I don't know if there's anything better than that. Having to like get up in front of people to like, you know, speak your, your position with the knowledge that you've gained from the research that you've done, right? So I, there's so many different levels and those are just a few examples of, of the experience both within the school environment and curriculum and also extracurricular things like clubs.

Blake recalls how these service-project required students to exercise interpersonal, communication, and decision-making skills they might not have otherwise had an opportunity to engage with during less experiential activities.

Service-learning projects are inherently unpredictable and will include uncertainty and obstacles along the way. They provide students with an opportunity to solve problems and adjust their approach in order to meet a goal. Greer, a private school leader, explained this investigative learning experience is one value of service-learning,

I think they have to build resilience, right? They're gonna run into a lot of obstacles along the way. So the first time you make a phone call, you might not get an answer back. I think they need to have be clear communicators and here are my goals… so whether
that's through phone calls or emails and working on building those skillsets, um, problem solving, right? What goes along with that resiliency? What happens when I go to the old person's home and the, the, you know, the senior center and like somebody says inappropriate things to me or it's really awkward I what to do? How can we talk through that? Um, I think the reflection piece gives them a lot, you know, the taking time to reflect on what did, what did I do, but not only what did I do and give, but what did I learn, right? What did I gain from this experience? Um, and then the public speaking and sharing at the end, right? Where that is a piece of ad advocacy…they're all advocating for whatever task they did or whatever…they decided to focus on, they're advocating for that and having to do that clearly and effectively too through visual writing and public speaking.

Greer offers the hands-on, creative, and real-world experiences service-learning offers students. Additionally, service-learning provides students an opportunity to take a more individualized approach to their learning, allowing them to learn about themselves and the specific impact their talents can make in their community. Greer, a private school leader, explains how this individual exploration is an important element in their approach to service. They start their service-learning curriculum by helping students consider their own identity,

Who are we as individuals? What are our strengths? Affinities maybe what are some identity markers we have? Um, how does that impact us? …so that's kind of our thinking, like who are we and what are our strengths and gifts? And then we say, okay, well what do I care about? …What am I passionate about? Right? Like, what are the environmental or human or animal need? Things that I, that I worry about, that I think about, um, and what are those? And then our ultimate, and then we try to pull them together and say,
okay, well how can you mesh those? You can take your personal interests and strengths and the needs of the world, the passions you care about, and you can think about what can I do with that?

Service-learning provides an opportunity for students to consider and apply their individual skills, passion, and identity to their schoolwork, which Greer cites as another developmental benefit to the curriculum. Publicly available information on the website of Greer’s school confirms an explicit institutional commitment towards helping students identify their unique gifts and passions.

Interpersonal, social, and problem-solving skills were all cited as educational and developmental benefits of service-learning curriculum. A final learning outcome examined by participants is the intentional development of kindness and empathy through service projects.

**Kindness and Empathy** development was discussed as a benefit of service-learning at all grade levels represented by participants. For early learners, such as kindergarten and first grade, Hunter discussed how service-oriented projects allowed educators to help students develop these competencies at an early age. “I think kindness and empathy are the biggest ones [benefits].” Hunter shared their plan to introduce a garden to their kindergarten and first-grade classes as a way for students to utilize hands-on learning about the plant life cycle but then also utilize the fruits and vegetables to provide food to the food bank.

It would help the morale, the community by seeing like these young people who wanna make a difference, um, and who are starting at such a young age. And then it'll help my little ones as well. Just grown empathy for people who maybe can't afford to put like food on the table. Um, when maybe some my students like go home, there's always snacks in
the cabinet. Um, so I think it would help them really develop a great sense of empathy, um, and kindness for giving back.

Hunter believed that early introduction to service-learning may help students develop empathy and practice kindness. So while students of this age might not be able to experience all the potential learning outcomes of service curriculums, this outcome provides them with developmentally-appropriate benefits.

They're little, I get that, but I feel like they can handle it. They would love to do something hands on. Um, but I feel like watching kids volunteer and give back to their community or provide services to people who are homeless is one thing, but then actually involving them to get involved and do it themselves in person is a whole different level of learning.

Participants representing different age groups also identified kindness and empathy as important benefits of service-learning curriculum. Frankie, a charter school leader for middle and high school students, indicated that students are “gaining some intrinsic value to this [service]. And I think that you, that's something that you carry with you then afterward.” Additionally, Frankie connects this individual development to the greater good that brings to one’s community “Like if those are the, the moral and ethical values that some of the things that we're doing through this can, that can be highlighted or, or brought out of kids, then I think that’s… a [contribution to the] good society that you're trying to build.”

All of these learning and development benefits of service-learning indicate that educational leaders see how service-learning positively impacts students. As will be examined in the next sections, facilitating experiences that produce these benefits can be challenging.

*Transformation & Meaningful Engagement*
Participants recognized that not all service experiences will deliver the deep learning benefit they identify as possible. Blake, a private school leader, explained,

Finding the right experience is so crucial, right? Just doing service, any kind of service isn't gonna lead to the outcomes you want. You really have to be more intentional about what the service is and then like what the follow up to the service experience is. Um, that it's not just isolated, um, acts of charity, but it's really is true service. Um, I think there, there is a, you see that even like in like approaches to service learning in general there, is it about doing acts of charity or is it about like transforming society, right? Um, that there is a lot of tension there.

This “tension” (Blake) between meaningful and rote services will be explored in later findings. However, participants did recount instances in which service could have a transformational impact. Alex explained from their experience leading parochial schools

I know from my own experience having seen students transformed by their service experience, like it is worth it. Like just, it's just, it's hard to quantify that, um, that worth sometimes. Um, but I mean, I've seen it myself. You know, when I was um, doing the community service core at [Parochial high school in Montgomery County], I helped them organize their …like the dance, a dance marathon to raise money for pediatric [insert the disease?]. Um, and you know, the kids would, we visited the hospitals, they met the kids, the kids would come and talk at the thing and you could just, our kids got so excited and into they would do anything and work hours and hours to get this, to organize this thing. And, you know, that's what you hope to see. Um, and hopefully that desire to organize and serve like stuck with them high school and that's really what it's all about really.
Alex acknowledges that transformational service experiences have the capacity to not only transform the community being served, but also the student engaging in the service.

Participants shared how they witnessed a handful of service-learning impacts, such as a more limited approach that reflected checking the box to more transformative learning and exposure. While this research did not aim to identify what contributes to these two different approaches towards service-learning to exist, educational leaders’ experiences with service-learning did tap into the various levels of an engagement students experience with the curricular framework. Additionally, participants considered from their perspectives what factors influence how service-learning is experienced.

Blake considered how transformative learning is developed and sustained in the educational settings they experienced in public schools. The participant described a service-learning project offered at a Bucks County public elementary school in which a teacher utilized a grant to engage students in a community garden. The teacher “took the initiative” to gather the supplies and engage the community by asking the school custodian to help build the garden platform. “So it got like a lot of people into the learning, which is really nice.” The project engaged the students in experiential learning, learning that contributed to the school community and to the local community. Blake explains that the reason this project was possible was because of the teacher’s initiative.

It’s the teacher’s innovativeness, like their ability to wanna be innovative and the ability to look at the standard or look at the, the, the skill that they’re gonna learn and go, how can I really help this student remember this concept? Right? Cause that's what it's about. It's like, learning is not just about like when I'm sitting in at my desk and opening a book and doing the problem, it's about like, how invested am I in this learning and who am I
gonna share it with? Because if you don't share learning, are you really learning something? Cause, like, that's always my biggest question. Um, so if I, if I have this skill and I share it, then I've obviously I know it, I've understood it, or I start talking about it and then the talk helps me learn more.

It was through this teacher's “innovativeness” that students were able to engage in deeper learning that, according to Blake, was transformative to the students. This participant explained their experience in which a transformative service-learning framework is established by an individual teacher taking an extra step to consider how to offer a transformative experience to their students.

Blake further considers how transformative learning is maintained if it is individual-driven.

My question right now, or I'm wondering is that even going on still. like if the, is that teachers still there? Is, are they still doing the garden or is it just, was that just a season of, because like the service learning you would hope would continue, right? Like, and we're, we do drives like, you know, diaper drives and food drives and, and things, um, of that nature. But like, I wonder how that transforms people and who they are or does, is it just like, oh, here's this and we'll just wait till the next thing, you know?

The depth of the service-learning offering and if it was experienced as transformative or obligatory was in part informed by the “innovativeness” of the teacher and the extent to which students are engaged in the experience. The following section will consider how regulations and policies interplay to impact the types of service-learning offerings participants experienced. This section will consider the differences in approaches to service-learning, the various stages of
development participants had experienced, and how these unique experiences highlight contradictions found in this research.

**State Requirements**

Participants from public schools described how state guidelines and requirements tied to the service-learning offerings in their school or how changing state guidelines pivoted offerings away from service-learning. The variety of participant experiences exemplified how school leaders adjust service-learning offerings in response to state guidelines shifts. Emerson, from a Chester County public school, was in the forming stage of requirements, while Frankie considered show shifts in requirements moved their charter school away from service-learning.

**Forming.**

Emerson described a new state guideline (Act 158 of 2018) that allowed students to meet graduation requirements via experiential learning experiences such as service-learning or internship experiences. According to PA Department of Education, the new regulation provides students with the “option to demonstrate postsecondary preparedness through one of four additional pathways that more fully illustrate college, career, and community readiness.” Utilizing this optional pathway, students can meet core competencies for high school graduation via an approved service-learning project. These new guidelines were actively under consideration within their school district as personnel worked to determine how best to meet the requirement. According to Emerson, the mandate from the state was a key driving force behind the time, attention, and resources employed to create a service-learning offering. “We'll have to support it because it is, a mandate… So even if we did not want to, we have to, all of the school districts in Pennsylvania will have to, unfortunately.” Emerson explained the active process underway to merge the state framework with school needs and student requirements,
It's a little bit more complex because we don't have full ownership or autonomy. There are certain pieces that the state wants us to have, and there are certain pieces that we have to do, and then there are certain pieces that the students have to comply. So we're trying to build all of those things and making it be as efficient as possible, not time-consuming as possible.

This participant provided insights into the complexity, pressure, and uncertainty surrounding building programs to meet new state mandates. The work includes several logistical decisions, including determining “who’s gonna facilitate it for the students? How are we going to track what they’re doing and what they’re not doing?” In addition to the logistical elements, Emerson considered how educators in their district were intentionally considering how to ensure the framework they put in place provides meaning and benefit to the students, asking themselves What benefit will this have moving forward? We just don't wanna do a service learning project or have students partner or have partnerships kind of just to meet graduation requirements. We're looking beyond that. Like what could they do with these skills and services and partnerships, um, that they're gaining. So it's a, a little labor intensive on our end for right now.

In the forming stage, Emerson articulated the logistical and educational considerations of implementing a new service-learning offering. As will be examined in the following section, Frankie, in contrast, was past the forming stage and shared the work of assessing the effectiveness of the service-learning program at their school to consider the impact and effectiveness the program had on students.

**Assessment & Adjustment.** Frankie is a leader within a charter school and discussed the recent shift away from having a general community service requirement for all students.
Historically, middle school students had an annual requirement to complete five hours of community service, and high school students had a fifteen-hour per year requirement. This requirement “was unstructured. It was kind of like ad hoc community service…it wasn't necessarily the spirit of service learning.” As the state requirement evolved, Frankie shared that their school was able to reconsider the service-learning offerings.

In reflecting upon the prior service-learning requirement, Frankie shared that the school actively considered if the requirement was producing the meaningful engagement that Emerson shared as part of their current design considerations. “It wasn’t meaningful,” Frankie noted, “the spirit of it ended up fizzling out over the years, and it just was like a, how do I log 60 hours so that it's, it's just so kinda like check.” Acknowledging how students felt about the requirement provided the school an opportunity to reconsider the learning opportunity. The school shifted to a service-learning pathway option that students could elect to pursue, removing the requirement for community engagement. The introduction of choice Frankie shared established more integrity and “ingenuity” to the learning. “It makes it so that if a student is choosing that [service-learning pathway], that they are service oriented, that they are looking within the community or the school or whatever, and saying, I see something that I want to either partner or that I wanna fix or improve.”

Introducing curricular choice to students garnered more meaningful community engagement, according to Frankie. The service now being pursued is more impactful and less tailored specifically to meeting a requirement or “checking boxes” as they described how the original requirement was approached. The assessment of the school-wide community service requirement provided this school the opportunity to consider how they can potentially shift the design to have a better impact; they considered “how do you instill the sense of service and, you
know, helping others or understanding issues within your community, which is really the point of it, not just checking boxes.”

The community’s perception of this curricular choice is also positive according to Frankie. Students choosing the service-learning pathway option to feel as though they are, “gaining some intrinsic value to this. And I think… that's something that you carry with you then afterwards.” The ability to opt into the service-learning pathway coupled with student freedom to identify and design their own service project has also led to students tying their learning to their passions. Frankie explained how “kids end up looking for community partners for their service projects within organizations that they're already a part of” or engage in more social-justice-oriented service by engaging in projects that “raise awareness.” Frankie shared the experience of assessing the community service requirement within their school and the positively perceived effects of allowing students to make individual curricular choices on whether to engage in curriculum-oriented service. The following section will further examine the theme of institutional-level policies and how participants shared the impact these policy approaches have on service-learning offerings and the impact of those offerings.

**Institutional Policies**

There were two policy scenarios that stood out to participants that highlighted the similarities and differences in experiences and frameworks. The first were instances in which the participant worked in schools that had a policy driving service; the second was when the participant worked in a school culture that drove service without the existence of a service policy or requirement. This section will share decisions around institutional service policies or requirements connected with school culture and educational missions.

**Christian Obligation**
Alex had experience at two parochial high schools within the same archdiocese. Their prior school had a community service requirement, whereas their current does not, however the educational and spiritual intention related to service were the same at both schools.

I think the intention [in] both cases is the same. We want students to do service out of a Christian obligation to serve those in need. Um, and also, um, you know, to develop good citizens of a democracy, so to speak.

Having experience working at two schools with similar intentions around service but different policies allowed Alex to speak to the ways in which the approach towards service, and culture around service may be impacted based on the existence of a policy or requirement.

In considering the first school that had a service requirement, Alex recounted that the requirement was often met with mechanical compliance over deep engagement.

The one that had the requirement for service…what that amounted to was, you know, at the beginning of the school year, each kid started to receive a packet where they would like log their hours, what they did and like, you know, what they got outta it and they would like hand that in, you know, towards the end of the school year. And then the school minister…review each kid's packet and then check it off. And for the most part, if you handed something in and there's writing on it, it kind of got checked off like, okay, you did it.

Feedback gathered from teachers at the school with the service requirement indicated that many of them felt like the service requirement was not really achieving its stated goals, that…it was something that students were just doing to check off and hand in the form and that there wasn’t really much meaningful learning happening through the chosen service activities.
Recounting that the service most often pursued by students was “technically volunteering, it wasn’t really service that engendered any kind of deeper understanding of the experience of those in need,” which, according to the participants’ understanding was falling short of the “Christian obligation to serve those in need” that is the root of the school’s reason for a service requirement. Further, Alex experienced that the community service requirement produced more superficial engagement rather than a deeper exposure that they felt was important to student learning.

I do think there needed to be some connection…some connection to classroom learning that they had…you know, if you go and work at a homeless shelter, then you come back and like research the causes of homelessness. Like what are the systemic issues that cause people to be homeless? And like that, that connection to me never was really [made] it was more of like, we're gonna go out and be helpers and donate things and, you know, maybe work in a soup kitchen, but they never examined why the soup kitchens have to exist in the first place.

This superficial service approach that didn’t connect service to classroom instruction or broader systemic issues failed to produce the transformative experience participants understood possible form service-learning.

This experience influenced the participants’ support for their current school’s decision not to have a service requirement. While there is no individual requirement for students to engage in a certain amount of service each year, the school “encouraged service and talk a lot about it…it’s kind of weaved into particularly our theology classes.” The integration of service into the theology curriculum is a contrast to the more ad hoc service approach Alex experienced at their prior school that had a service requirement. The absence of a service requirement is
considered by Alex to be a more accurate reflection of the purpose of service according to the school’s values.

The idea is that…we don't want to force them to do service or force them to volunteer…maybe it works out, maybe it doesn't, I don't really have any solid data on it that…they'll be compelled to do service through what they learn in the classroom and through our, you know, through the transmission of our Christian Catholic values that they'll be compelled to serve.

Alex’s experiences at two schools that share the same valuation on service but pursued two different policy approaches to achieving the learning goals provide valuable insight into the role policies can play in impacting community perceptions of service.

**It’s What We Value**

Charlie spoke about their experience at a private school in Chester County, and the prioritization of hands-on learning as a core value of their curriculum. “It's really built-in and, and assumed and implied by the school values and the school. And so, and even though we don't use the words service learning, but it's just, it's just a part of what we do.” Charlie spoke extensively about the “values” of their school and how these values drive curricular priorities, including service learning-like offerings. In this instance, since the school had strong and deep-rooted values, they didn’t also need service policies to convey these priorities. Service learning was integrated within the aims of the school,

To cultivate and develop well-rounded humans who have a moral and ethical center who are trying to be of service to the world. And their, their reason for being, and their reason for even being at the school is to grow and evolve into people who are gonna make the world a better place as opposed to just simply being successful in the world as it is.
In the example of this school, service-learning was identified as a core tenet of who they are and what they value in regard to both the education of their students and the connection between the school and community. And because their intentions were explicit, a policy was considered unnecessary by Charlie.

Charlie’s school had a shared identity and vision for education, which drove curricular decisions. As will be examined more deeply in the findings of the second research question, consistency in curricular offerings and commonality of school identity are two themes found to influence curricular decisions. The next section will consider the findings of research question two, which considers more deeply what factors participants see as influencing the effects of service-learning, how effects are understood, and their lived experiences with curricular decision-making as it relates to service-learning.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question considers the factors that influence decisions to use or not use service-learning curriculum. Participants answered this question in three primary ways: (1) curricular consistency and the quantification of education (2) resources and priorities (3) school values and cultures. The following section will consider the experiences participants shared along these three main themes and how experiences were similar or different and what contributed to the differences.

**Equity or Consistency?**

Curricular decision-making, according to many participants, prioritizes consistency in the student experience. Dylan, a curricular lead in a Chester County public school district, explained a recent redesign of their curricular decision-making process to create more consistency in how decisions are made and reviewed,
I think that everyone knows it [the change in the curricular review process] needed to happen. Like there needed to be consistency across the curricular areas. There needed to be better oversight about what was going on…I know that a lot of the teacher leaders are like, looking forward to it, have there being more consistency.

The aim for consistency at the district-level decisions echos a similar valuation of consistency at the teacher-level. Blake considers the obstacles a teacher may need to overcome to interject “innovative” (Blake) strategies into their teaching because of an overarching premise of prioritizing consistency in offerings and student experience. In speaking about the experience of a teacher who wants to propose a shift in the schedule or curriculum to allow for service-learning, Blake wonders,

[The teacher may wonder.] Do I wanna get approval? Do I wanna like ask my principal if it would be okay if, and then could he or she really validate that? Because maybe the schedule is a districtwide schedule and we don't have the ability to make adjustments or changes to…that extent, right? And we all know that, you know, you don't walk in and there's only one first grade class or one second grade class usually have 3, 5, 7 [classes]. Who knows how big your school is? And does everyone want to do that, right? Or is this being led by the, the pioneer who is either that enthusiastic and no one wants to say no to them, or are they the outcast and they are gonna go rogue in this direction and the rest of the team's going to ostracize that individual for taking that, that leap, right? So I mean there's, it's definitely not a good answer, like in terms of like how it is, but it's like the real answer….I had a great conversation with a teacher yesterday who I, I feel is like an innovative teacher, but like, like tends to be the outcast…what's equitable, right?...do we all have to have the same… that's not equity, right? Equity, you get what you need at that
time, but for how long? So is it equitable to put time limits on this subject, then this subject, then this subject? …Like without a structure then I, I can't hold people accountable.

Blake’s experience speaks to the institutional challenges of introducing new approaches to instruction, such as seeking approval, offering justifications, and considering questions of equity or consistency in the student experience. They also speak to how the teacher may be ostracized by going against the grain. This exemplifies the broader theme of consistency and predictability participants expressed.

Participants also shared that consistency across schools was valued in curricular decision-making. Blake shared their experience in public schools,

When someone says, okay, we're gonna change, we're gonna move to this different program, what's the first question? Everyone asks, what other schools are using this program? Like, everyone needs to know what other schools are using the product… Has anyone else used [product name]? How do you know? Like everyone needs to know… that before they make that change, they can predict the outcome.

Participants, such as Blake, shared their experiences in which consistency is valued within a school, within a district, and among schools. Two reasons why consistency was prioritized relates to accountability and predictability.

Being able to predict outcomes was tied to ensuring schools meet standards or mandates set by state of federal requirements. Predicting outcomes, Dylan, a public school lead, is tied to ensuring accountability to state mandates. “It's definitely more student-centered and definitely has a focus on… meeting the standards, meeting standards with…I would think that it would be with the notion of that it would increase achievement.” This “need” (Blake) to predict outcomes
directly contributed to factors that influence the exclusion of service learning. Blake offers, “we like to hold on to things that we know because we know the outcome. That's like the biggest thing. You don't know the outcome. With service learning, you can’t anticipate an outcome, but you never truly know the outcome. And teachers don't like to not have control of outcomes.”

Valuing consistency and predictability allows schools and educators to prioritize accountability. This valuation was consistent across most of the public school participants. Charlie, the head of a private school in Chester County, offers a contrasting perspective, contending that this drive towards sameness in education may be a misplaced and counter-productive objective. In considering the phenomena of consistency and accountability in education, Charlie wonders if we’re trying to create something that doesn’t naturally exist.

The fundamental problem in public education is also [the] fundamental problem of democracy, which is how do you… create unity out of diversity? …and not diversity as a code word for like racialization or economics, but like actually just difference of perspective and different cultures coming together.

In the experience of Charlie, who has worked in public education prior to shifting to private schools, public education has addressed the problem of diversity by leaning more fully into frameworks that prioritize consistency and accountability.

The impact of this drive towards an overreliance on standards and predictability controls has led to an educational landscape that relies heavily on quantifiable measures. Charlie explains,

It has led toward a sort of hypercompetitive, overly reductive, um, orientation because we, in trying to solve the problem of accountability and how do we hold schools accountable and how do we sort of prove whether or not a school is good or not, we've gone down a road toward quantifying educational value.
The following section will further consider how quantification of learning and success outcomes has factored into curricular decisions such as the one to utilize a less “predictable” (Blake) curriculum such as service-learning.

**How Do You Measure That?**

Quantifying outcomes or impacts of curriculums was a common way in which participants understood curricular assessments to be made. Dylan, a public school lead, explains, “They'll be able to then…make some determinations based off of like the data that they've collected over the six years and how students progressed and how everything went.” In considering what information measures curricular success, Dylan indicated that benchmark scores and standardized tests were key tools utilized, “I feel like in terms of academics, they, you know, it's the typical like standardized testing and benchmark scores.”

If measurable outcomes such as standardized tests are prioritized indicators of student learning, curriculums such as service-learning that may not be understood as direct contributors to these scores may be disadvantaged. Earlier findings shared how all participants indicated experiential instruction, such as service-learning, had educational benefits to students. However, these benefits may not be quantifiable in a way that aligns with the standards measures of student learning. This quantification limitation is coupled with a certain level of unpredictability associated with experiential learning.

In addition to the complexities of predicting the learning outcomes of a service-learning curricula, participants also shared that a lack of standardized measures of success may influence the inclusion of a service-learning curriculum. Blake explains that decisions to utilize service-learning will first consider what student outcomes may be realized. Referring back to a service-project that has students growing a garden, Blake wonders,
Like what's the grade, what does it look like? I feel for teachers, it's like how do, how do I assess this? Right? Which is part of the grade...how do I assess...what if this person's plant died but they were doing everything right? Like do they get an [A], how do I assess that? ...kids have to write things down. It has to be on paper so that it can validate or be evidence for, um, the success of the outcome. I don't believe in that. I feel like we don't need to do so many paper things, but that's hard to get away from just because of the tradition of school.

The reliance on assessments and quantification is built into the “tradition of school” (Blake) and is rooted in the work of teachers and curricular decision-makers, but is also found in how students and parents understand learning. Blake continues, “It’s all about measuring like what do, what will that measure? Would that be an A or will that be a C? And how do you know?... But some [parents] do compare their children against other children and they want to be, have the smartest child.” The ambiguity in how service-learning is measured and graded was one-factor participants thought contributed to decisions of curricular inclusion.

Despite the challenges around quantifying the outcomes related to service-learning, Alex, a parochial school leader, shared that it is a curricular approach worth advocating for. “it is worth it…it's just, it's hard to quantify that worth sometimes.” For educators who do recognize that service-learning is “worth it” (Alex), allocating staff resources, allowing time, and prioritizing service-learning among other competing needs was another area influencing decisions to utilize the curricular approach. In both the implementation of a service-learning requirement as well as the perception of service-learning offerings, participants indicated that school and student resources and priorities factored into decision-making around service-learning. The following section will consider these findings further.
**Resources and Priorities**

Participants discussed factors of school resources and priorities as well as student/family capacities that were considered when making curricular decisions. Decisions rooted in resource availability was an experience shared by all participants. This section will consider both of these themes and how they influence decisions related to service-learning.

**School Resources and Priorities**

Participants identified that limited school resources and competing priorities factored into curricular decision-making. First, participants identified that there were challenges in meeting basic student needs which contributed to how resource needs were prioritized. Greer offers their experience at a Chester County private school, “It's hard right now because everyone's so short-staffed with everything…I mean, the priority right now is subs. Like we just need bus drivers, we just need humans in our buildings. So I think right now, yeah, that [service-learning would] be low on the priority list.” Alex, with a Chester County parochial school agreed, “Particularly now…it's very difficult to find teachers. Like…you can't find a science teacher….I'd love to be able to hire a full-time like community service organizer or facilitator, but I mean, it's just not in the budget.”

Alex echoed this theme as it relates further to identifying resources to assist with cultivating service-learning partnerships within the community,

I think the resistance and challenges come from a lack of resources in the building or personnel to like find places, build those relationships and, you know, cause that would be really a full-time job, multiple full-time jobs to be able to reach out to nonprofits who are willing to work with high school students.

Participants shared a high level of concern related to the immediate needs required to serve students. The limited personnel resources are further impacted by community organization
limitations as it relates to permitting students to engage in service at community sites. Alex offers why these limitations impact the depth of service opportunities available even in their parochial school that prioritizes service. “There's a lot of barriers there when it comes to like, you know, a lot of places ..don't want minors coming in to, you know, be in the homeless shelter or, so that was a barrier… and they'd rather just, you know, collect food and give it to the food shelter, uh, without ever addressing underlying societal issues.” This participant’s experience echoes Bickford and Reynolds’ (2002) conclusions that students tended to lean into volunteerism instead of activism in service activities.

In addition to dealing with limited personnel resources and community organization limitations, participants also indicated that more urgent priorities were driving resource allocation and the time and attention of educators. Alex explains,

Well I think it has to do with immediate needs related to the pandemic. Like, just like right now, there is a severe need for mental health wellness of our students. Um, so you do see all sorts of things being made available to support that…cause there is an immediate need and school safety as well. I think it's just responding to the immediate needs of the school and community as we see an increase in school threats and violence and all that kind stuff. I think it's just more forefront in people's minds than, um, service learning at this time.

In Alex’s experience, the urgent needs of students and the community capture the attention of educators; additionally, participants discussed how these urgent elements also drive resource availability. Alex explains how state grant-funds are typically associated with the timely issues schools are experiencing, “a lot of those positions that, you know, might be fulfilled by like state, state grant money or something, you don't often see that come along… to hire a, um, community
service facilitator or something” Instead funding is allocated, “for like supporting student mental health, um, and school safety. Like those, those two things seem to take priority when it comes to like, funding new initiatives in, in recent years.”

Blake echos how critical priorities drive both prioritizations of resources but also contribute to change in education, “we only change if there's a true urgency. If not, we resist it the entire time.” Without a sense of urgency, change can sometimes be more challenging, according to some participants. Blake explains, “Everyone is afraid of change and when things are changing, morale is low.... So the fear of of change and we like to hold on to things that we know because we know the outcome.” Educators can predict the outcomes of the structures and curriculums they have in place now, and that predictability leads to resistance toward change. Curriculums that have less predictability will then be more resisted by educators according to Blake.

In addition to the complexities of school resources and coordinating changes in schools, participants also shared that there are resource limitations among students and families that influence curricular decisions.

**Student and Family Resources and Perspectives**

Participants shared the resource and time limitations schools and educators experience, as well as perceptions of how curricular consistency and accountability factor into curricular priorities. These principals were also understood to be factors students, families, and teachers consider. The following section will consider how educators understand student, family and teacher perceptions and how these beliefs mirror or contradict their perceptions of education and its outcomes.

Greer spoke about their experience in a K-12 private school that has a service-learning component for all middle and upper school students. They explain that the availability of
students is one factor that influences how much the curriculum can require of students. In considering the type of feedback they receive from students, Greer recalls, “they [are] always are like… it's just one more thing, right? They're busy and their families are busy. We almost never hear complaints from families.” The school prioritizes service activities, but Greer recognizes that this emphasis does have a cost to families in regard to their time and energy. They share, “it's a lot to ask them to add something to an already busy schedule.”

Parents and students are more inclined to appreciate the time associated with service-learning engagement if they find the curriculum valuable. According to Greer, their community of students and families does find value in the service experience.

We almost never hear complaints from families. …And so it's such a nice culmination where they're like, yeah, I did this. And the parents are like, yeah, we did this. And so I think that it's just, I, I think the process is probably hard. Just like, oh, it's not designed to be easy. Right? Um, and I, but I think they feel good about it when they're finished and they feel like they like did something meaningful.

According to Greer, the meaning the service engagement brings to students and their families helps the community value the curriculum.

For other participants, the valuation of service-leaning is less a part of their community. Emerson, speaking for the service-learning graduation pathway in a Chester County public school explained that some parents question the relevance of the experience for their students as they did not feel it contributed to their college-readiness, “some of our parents did not like it for the same reason. So in their minds, as, you know, I went to Clemson, so my daughter's gonna go to Clemson, my son's gonna go to Clemson…So college, you know, they thought that their children would be college bound.” In the experience of Emerson, parents might initially under-
value the service pathway. However, Emerson also identified how the pathway may provide students with the experiences and foundation to better demonstrate how they may benefit from an alternative path after graduation.

But now that you have all of these other options out there, and then they're able to show like, mom, hey, this is the partnership that I made. These are the things that I'm doing. I love it. And then you'll hear someone, um, in a higher up or in an office to say, you know what, you really don't have to go to college for that. You can take this route. So for some parents, they loved it. Other parents, it was counterproductive in their minds.

Where curriculum offered students choice, such as the choice between college-rep or not, students and families were more likely to identify the curricular value according to Emerson.

Most participants mentioned how the opinions of parents factored into curricular decisions. For some, it was a driving force, whereas for others, it was part of a more complex process. Blake notes the ways in which parents can drive curricular decisions in the public schools in which they worked.

If parents like it, we have to do it because they're ultimately the ones in control and our board members of the community, right? They make the decisions on our curriculum and Future Ready Index. Why do people move to the locations that they move to? Because they look at our school's report card on Future Ready Index where it compares every school to every like other school in the state. And we are all held against..[parents think] I'm gonna move to this district because this is a good district….or I'm getting my kid to go to this charter school because I'm not gonna send them to this school district. So like we are measured by our scores, even though we don't wanna say like, we don't pay attention to PSSA scores. Well yeah we do.
The complexities of school rankings, such as the Future Ready Index mentioned by Blake, can impact curricular decisions. As previously discussed, participants perceived that it was harder to predict the outcomes and quantify the benefits of service-learning curriculum. While participants consistently communicated that students, parents, and educators experienced and recognized the benefits of the curriculum, the challenges of implementation were significant. Even in schools whose identity and values were rooted in service, building buy-in, allocating sufficient resources, and prioritizing service was ongoing challenge. According to Alex, from a Chester County Parochial school, teacher support was an ongoing focus, “some teachers embrace it and are all in, some see it as, oh, here's another thing we have to do in the classroom. And you, they're, you know, obligation we have to do.” Charlie, from a private school in Chester County who describes the school identity as rooted in service explains that the coordination and execution of service falls onto teachers, “[Service is] Typically teacher-led, we don't have it as a separate job or role. It's sort of the expectation that…it's just part of the faculty's job to work together to do these things.” According to participants, decisions around service-learning offerings typically fell to teachers to make, even in schools in which service is a priority in the offerings or school values. This characterizes a different perspective for service-learning curriculum compared to other curricular priorities. Whereas curricular consistency was noted as a priority when it came to other areas of attention, service-learning offerings seem to be an exception where teachers are left to apply for individual grants to offer service learning (Charlie), and individual teachers identify and execute the curriculum (Alex and Charlie).

This finding demonstrates how the perceptions and priorities of students and families were aligned with those of the educational leaders. These similarities are worth noting, as they
may intertwine to further drive a singular approach or high emphasis on consistency and predictability.

Educators face many competing priorities and bids of time and resources in the curriculum. Service-learning, with its less-predictable outcomes and inconsistencies, is disadvantaged when it comes to prioritization among these more urgent and certain matters. Instances in which schools have overcome these logistical challenges were when the curriculum aligned with a school’s identity. As will be explored in the following section, the power of school identity, and culture in influencing curricular decisions related to service-learning was an emerging theme of important note and an instance in stark contradiction noted in participant experiences.

**School Values and Identity**

Charlie represents a private school in Chester County, and shares that their school has a strong identity and values that align with service and experiential learning. The ability to bring like-minded families together is a contrast to the “fundamental problem of democracy,” which was noted earlier in these findings, “which is how do you, how do you create unity out of diversity?” Charlie explains how public and private schools may differ in their ability to establish shared community,

“part of what being at [private school] means is you, you have these cultural attracts…those educational lineages are putting out their values into the world. And people from all over who resonate with those values are attracted to that, and then they come together…if you're actually in a community where …there is no cultural attract and people don't have the freedom to choose to be there or to be somewhere that resonates with them more, but they're just kind of stuck together regardless of what they think and believe, it's gonna be really hard to create a coherent, um, sense of this is who we are, this
is why we're doing what we're doing, and this is how we justify the fact that we're gonna spend the first seven years of life playing, for instance. Cause not everybody thinks that's a good idea. Oh. And I kind of came to the conclusion, I just had to accept that, you know, like some people really want their four year old, like doing academic stuff, and I think that's a big mistake, but ultimately they're free to, to raise their child that way and send their child to a school that's gonna have a really academic preschool, but I don't [have] be there. So that has to be my freedom and choices as an individual to opt out of that.

Participants spoke about how school identity and shared values influenced curricular decision-making regarding service learning. Participants whose school values or identity aligned with service-learning spoke about how the curricular decisions were rooted in this alignment regardless of quantifiable or predictable outcomes. Greer, from a Chester County private school, shared how service-learning priorities in their school were not constrained by over-reliance on quantifiable learning outcomes.

We're a school that right now uses grades and, and narratives, um, to give students feedback. I think we're also a school that has looked heavily into mastery transcripts and thinking about how can we help pressure colleges to not just look at grades and then that would free us up to not just think about grades, but we are still trapped in the grades matter. Um, so I think we're a school with like vision and intention that's still very much doing grades. So I think anytime we get a chance to do experiential stuff like this, where the outcome is a lot of times less important than the process…I think we really latch on at that and I think that's something that's really, um, highly valued here.”
Greer’s school utilizes narrative assessment instead of just grades, which they feel limits the overreliance on quantifiable assessments and aligns with the nature of experiential education. The school's values of experience over outcomes drive both how they advocate with colleges and how they are able to incorporate service-learning into their curriculum.

Alex, from a parochial school, discussed how acts of service align with the “Christian obligation” that was instilled through their theology curriculum. This alignment of service to the identity of the school created a culture in which service-learning was incorporated despite not having state or local policies governing its inclusion. Additionally, this alignment meant that members of the community didn’t question or challenge the incorporation of service into the curriculum. Alex shares, “I think people like it….it's pretty well received amongst the faculty and …the families.” Through triangulation the researcher observe Alex’s school website as mentioning the commitment moral and ethical development of students that extends beyond the school community.

In addition to direct alignment with school missions, the identity of a district also factored into the incorporation of service, as shared by Hunter. “[our] school district values like giving back to the community,” Hunter explained. This valuation led the district to create grants teachers can apply for to incorporate innovative projects into their classrooms. It is through these grants that Hunter aims to establish a service-learning project for their class that creates a community garden that will provide students with experiential learning about the plant lifecycle and provide food for the local food bank. The school's identity of being community-oriented, according to Hunter created space to integrate service learning in a way to helps contribute to the community.
Hunter was also the only participant from a public school that spoke to how school identity, values, and culture directly relate to curricular decision-making. Other public school participants discussed the positive educational and developmental benefits of service-learning and how those benefits progress their school's purpose; however, they didn’t speak to the rich connection between how the school's identity drives decision-making. Charlie provides some insight into how differences in educational values and school identity may be understood, and how their school values truly drive all curricular decisions.

Why are kids in school? And I think it, it sort of built into the values and principles and mission of [private school in Chester County]. From the beginning, part of the whole conception of what the school is and why it exists and what it's trying to do is to cultivate and develop well rounded humans who have a moral and ethical center who are trying to be of service to the world. And their reason for even being at the school is to grow and evolve into people who are gonna make the world a better place as opposed to just simply being successful in the world as it is. Whereas I think in public education that narrative isn't quite as well developed or cultivated because there's so much pressure to just compete and succeed within the systems…as they currently are. So you don't end up having a lot…of, uh, energy and, um, just overall orientation or incentive toward broader, deeper goals. Um, you're really sort of stuck in the more limited narrow goals that are perpetuated through things like quantified, you know, metrics of educational value like test scores and things like that.. So that, that broader contrast is really very relevant to this question of Service learning.

As Charlie shared, their school has a defined identity that has drawn like-minded, service-oriented individuals together within this community. Triangulation efforts align with Charlie’s
account, as publicly available information indicate this private school’s express intention of engaging students in an experiential approach to education. This shared identity is also found in the teachers of the school,

Our teachers get paid even much less than public school teacher …you gotta find people who are really mission-driven. this is just what she's doing with her life, and it's all about the kids and the learning in the school…It's like when you have a more resonant, attracting force that's bringing people together everyone has bought into in coming to the school.

Further, this collective identity has also driven parent choice and buy-in to the service-oriented curriculum. Charlie explains how the private school’s clear identity and valuation of educational priorities set the intention that parents then opt into.

I don't think there's any resistance [to service-learning]. I think in general, people love it and see it as a good thing. I mean, it's just, it's so important. It's so meaningful. …it’s just wrapped in from the beginning. Like people know that that's part of what they're getting [into]. But by my sense is that all parents really appreciate the work and the effort and the planning that goes into making trips and events and projects happen. So my sense is just really a lot of appreciation… I guess it maybe like a really cutthroat competitive school parents would be like, you know, oh, why, you know, they wasting so much time, you know, working on a farm, they should be doing math or whatever.

In the previous finding, participants expressed how parent priorities and school priorities may align in a way that makes it hard to distinguish which entity (educators or parents) are setting the tone for school priorities and driving decision-making. In contrast, Charlie has indicated that for their private school, the priorities are clear and these priorities are set by the school and parents
have opted into engaging with them. The clarity in priorities this private school leader experiences is in contrast to the experiences shared by public school participants.

Blake, a public school leader, shares their perceptions of this contract by actively questioning the purpose behind the priorities being executed by their school. “Like are we really here just so parents could work during the day and we just keep the kids occupied? Or are we really teaching these kids? Are we really growing kids' love for learning?” Blake continued by explaining, “we are truly just a babysitting service right here” when seeing examples of instruction that are failing to engage students.

As expressed by these participants, schools whose identities and values connect to service-learning can tie these curricular offerings to those established priorities. Doing so, according to these participants, creates opportunities to communicate and share the benefits of service-learning in a way that does not require the same quantifiable evidence communicated in previous findings.

**Summary of Findings**

In all the ways schools, students, and teachers are inherently unique, having a universal method to measure their success creates structures that aim to ensure consistency and address the challenge of "create unity out of diversity" which Charlie indicated an inherent challenge within our world and educational environment.

Through considering the similarities and contradictions participants expressed, this chapter highlights how educational institutions and practices can either address this challenge of “diversity” by overpowering it with uniformity, a drive for consistency and accountability, or acknowledge it through establishing and articulating explicit educational values and school identities. How educational leaders have communicated their similarities and differences in experiences with service-learning and the factors that influence decision-making, exemplify
broader alignment and contradictions within K-12 education. The topic of service-learning when considered by participants has provided broader insight into how educators feel students benefit from these real, unpredictable, and challenging curricular experiences; while simultaneously highlighting the contradictory ways in which educators and schools are positioned to lean into this curricular approach given the constraints they experience in resources, perceptions, and acceptance.

**Summary**

In many ways, all educators share some common goals- to provide students with quality education, to help them gain a “love for learning” (Bake), to support student development academically, socially, and even emotionally. There are consistent similarities in the challenges educators face and in the convictions they hold in regard to how to support students. Consistently is a driving force behind curricular policies and state mandates, and it is a core component to establishing accountability in education. The educators who participated in this research shared how they found consistency and accountability valuable in ensuring students received a quality education and in helping establish some predictability in instruction, assessment, and success. Participants shared that this drive for consistency and accountability is based on the premise of ensuring “equity” (Blake) for students. But by treating all students, educators, and scenarios the same, this framework is actually prioritizing equality over equity, which may be overlooking the inherent “diversity” (Charlie) that exists within communities.

Diversity in education is found in the inherent differences in what people value in regard to education and how people understand and develop their strengths. These natural contradictions exist among students and communities but are hard to incorporate into curricular frameworks that value consistency and predictability. These findings highlight how educators
inherently acknowledge these contradictions but don’t always have the agency, capacity, or framework in which to support them via curricular offerings.
Chapter V: Discussion

This research is rooted in the question of whether educational leaders consider service-learning as a curricular approach to fostering student participation in community solutions to societal challenges and empowering students to be agents of change. As capitalist forces continue to drive an emphasis on individual interests over community interest (Heggart et al., 2018), can schools, through engagement with service-learning, help to foster a move away from individualistic ideologies to those that explore our shared humanities? With a critical theory framework (CT) that centers on humanization, the freeing of everyone from oppressive forces, this research considers if service-learning curriculum is seen as a tool to teach K-12 students about the value of the collective good over selfish individualism and helps students learn how to prioritize the collective good by breaking down systems that have created inequality and oppression.

The following sections will discuss the themes identified and how they intersect with the critical theory principles of emancipation, reflection and praxis, and humanization. The principle of humanization will be considered via the following themes 1) hegemonic forces that prioritize curriculums that are consistent and predictable, 2) educator’s hegemonic understanding of the humanizing nature of service-learning; 3) how educators experience liberation through praxis and where they see limitations in praxis, and 4) how hegemonic forces are influencing uneven access to service-learning.

Hegemonic Forces and Curricular Priorities

The findings of this research demonstrate the interplay between two different hegemonic forces to influence access to service-learning curricula. The first surrounds curricular priorities that limit the prioritization of service-learning, and the second considers how educators
overcome these limitations in order to understand service-learning’s capacity to prioritize humanization.

**Hegemony to Prevent Marginalization**

Critical Theory’s principle of humanization aims to diminish the marginalization and oppression of others in order to provide liberation to the collective. It requires that the needs of everyone, not just oneself, be considered. By prioritizing the well-being of everyone and deprioritizing individual self-interest, everyone can be emancipated from oppressive forces. Humanization considers the needs and experiences of all involved and the achievement of freedom for all. Through this research, educators echoed a version of this concern for the collective well-being of all students in considering the influences of educational decisions. Participants spoke about honoring the collective by prioritizing consistency in the experiences for all students.

Participants shared that educational consistency and predictability were driving forces behind educational decisions. Participants experienced a drive toward consistency in district-level curricular decisions (Dylan), among teachers within a school (Blake), and across the entire public education system (Charlie). Consistency was valued in both the experiences students have and the outcomes educators can anticipate. In considering service-learning curriculums, participants indicated that having teachers deviate from standard schedules or approaches created complexities because it created inconsistency in student experiences. Further, participants found that experiential offerings, such as service learning, were perceived as having greater ambiguity in the predictability of outcomes.

These findings suggest that in an effort to avoid the marginalization of students, public education aims to create consistency in both student experiences and accountability for schools and educators. Historically, hegemonic forces that have shaped dominant education policy have
prioritized consistent, predictable curriculums that address individual learning in a way that allows for student competition. Charlie, the leader of a Chester County private school, offers their interpretation of this educational objective in the public schools, “It [educational consistency] has led toward a sort of hypercompetitive, overly reductive, um, orientation because we, in trying to solve the problem of accountability and how do we hold schools accountable and how do we sort of prove whether or not a school is good or not.” Charlie refers to the competition that exists between schools to determine if a school “is good or not.” At the same time, Blake mentioned how parents look for quantifiable outcomes such as grades that “compare their children against other children.” Comparison and competition in education further emphasize individual self-interest that threatens humanization. Prioritizing these individual-student outcomes may further advance cultures that prioritize individualism. Students are receiving a message via the hidden and explicit curriculums (Apple & King, 1977) of our schools that will impact how they see the world and prioritize their self-interest over the broader needs of their communities.

Comparison of educational outcomes, whether of schools or students, is rooted in the drive to quantify student learning with predictable outcomes. Participants expressed how these priorities impacted how they considered service-learning since SL curriculums may be less predictable, require more flexibility and are therefore not accessible to every student, and rely on less standard assessment approaches. The findings indicate that experiential curriculums such as service-learning are considered less predictable and less easily quantifiable, which disadvantages these approaches amidst the hegemonic conditions that place value on predictability and clear quantitative measures of success.
Considering this finding through a critical theory framework, this drive toward consistency is a hegemonic drive toward curriculums that are accessible and predictable for educators. The political, social, and economic forces surrounding schools are driving toward hegemony in student experiences and student outcomes. Apple and King (1977) argue that curriculums are designed to further hegemony as they are intended to educate students on their society's social, political, and economic conditions via the hidden curriculum. The participants of this research indicate that hegemony, in this case, achieved and enforced through consistency, is intended to limit the marginalization of students; however, they also indicate that it could be contributing to a misunderstanding of humanization or meeting the unique needs of students. Blake actively questions if this drive towards consistency is actually creating more confines and if these confines limit humanization, “what's equitable, right?...do we all have to have the same… that's not equity, right? Equity, you get what you need at that time, but for how long? So is it equitable to put time limits on this subject, then this subject, then this subject? …Like without a structure, then I can't hold people accountable.” Blake expresses their experience with a drive toward hegemonic experiences, in this case, experienced as a drive toward consistency in education, and how this drive limits students’ individual needs from being met. In considering service-learning curriculums rooted in individualized student experiences, transformations, and impacts, this drive towards consistency and predictability negatively impacts the opportunity to offer service-learning and can negatively impact student humanization because of limited curricular experiences.

These hegemonic forces, and their negative impact on service-learning, contextualizes the quantitative declines in service-learning policies seen in the literature (The Education Commission of the States, 2010 & 2014). The factors identified in this research, while not
conclusive in identifying the causes of the decline in service-learning policies and supports, provides evidence that explains how educators experience policy, resource, and cultural constraints and pressures that decrease the opportunities for service-learning offerings.

Through a critical theory lens, participant experiences indicate that education’s intention to protect students from marginalization via prioritization of consistent curriculums and predictable outcomes has created hegemonic student experiences that limit humanization. Controls are exerted by societal, political, and economical sources to create hegemony. The following section will further consider how these forces are stripping not only students of the unique experiences they may benefit from in school but also impacting educational leaders' emancipation.

**Humanizing Nature of Service-Learning**

This research explored not only the humanization of students, as discussed but also educational leaders, as it invited them to reflect on the impacts of curricular decisions and consider the conditions impacting these decisions. The findings show that through participation in this research, educational leaders were empowered to engage in this reflection as they considered the contradictions of their own experiences. Participants experienced complex hegemony in expressing a shared perspective of the benefits of service-learning and the challenges surrounding its incorporation. In particular, participants agreed on the academic, developmental, and social-emotional benefits of a service-oriented curriculum. Participants’ experiences with experiential curriculums, such as service-learning, lead to a consistent finding regarding educators' positive perspectives on the outcomes it provides to students.

In addition to creating positive individual-student outcomes related to learning, and development, participants also indicated that service-learning offers benefits that extend beyond the individual student and provide a more collective benefit. Charlie indicates service-learning
helps prepare students to “service to the world” instead of just “compete and succeed within the systems… as they currently are.” Hunter understood service-learning as a way to “develop a great sense of empathy…and kindness for giving back.” The way service-learning curriculums can have a broader impact beyond just the individual student exemplifies how it can help manifest humanization and the betterment of all. Despite this hegemonic perspective regarding the benefits of service-learning, participants experienced complexities in their unique experiences related to the resource, cultural, or political realities impacting the utilization of service-learning within their schools.

This research did bring to light absences in educational leaders’ agency in influencing factors that impact the inclusion or exclusion of service-learning offerings. Participants discussed their experiences implementing state requirements, assessing service-learning programs, and engaging students in service projects; however, very few examples indicated that participants felt they could directly influence students’ exposure to the curriculum. This research finds examples in which educational leaders feel disenfranchised by the conditions at play that may impact the ability to include or exclude the pedagogies within their schools.

The following section will further consider how these forces are stripping not only students of the unique experiences they may benefit from in school but also impacting educational leaders' emancipation.

**Experiencing Liberation Through Praxis and Limitations in Praxis**

Critical Theory contends that reflection and praxis are integral corequisite components to achieving freedom from oppression. In order to experience emancipation from hegemony, people need to critically question sources of power and seek alternative arguments to mainstream societal priorities (Stromquist, 2014). This act of critical questioning is deeply tied to taking action to influence change. This research invited educators to share their experiences with the
“theoretically oriented action” (Fischman & McLaren, 2005. p. 426) that roots critical theory. Participants shared their experiences of critically examining the social norms within their schools and how this reflective exercise yielded more equitable and effective practices. Frankie’s explanation of their charter school’s examination of the service-requirement for students indicates how education leaders may consider the factors that have influenced policies and the policy's effectiveness to consider shifts that will create less oppression.

Frankie shared that the original service requirement “wasn’t meaningful,” as students and teachers engaged in the work to comply but did not get the intended positive impacts. The willingness of Frankie’s school to critically examine the policy, why it exists, and if its effect is an example of CT’s principle of reflection and praxis. Through this act, Frankie’s school was able to create an optional service-learning pathway for students. This pathway option provided students with a meaningful way to engage in impactful service in their community and introduced student agency by allowing them the choice to participate in service. This act of critical assessment, curricular redesign, and the new approach that provides student choice is also an example of the critical theory principles of reflection and praxis to bring about greater humanization.

Other examples from this research indicate that this trifecta of reflection, praxis and prioritization of humanization is not always within the reach of educators. Critical Theory contends that reflection and praxis go hand-in-hand. “It is the idea that both theory and practice by themselves are incomplete and one-sided - that theory without practice is abstract, inert, and socially detached, while practice without theory is myopic, superficial, and undirected” (Cunningham & Vachta, 2003. p. 30). As explored, this research finds that educators aim to join these two practices so that thoughtful assessment and critical inquiry lead to effective change.
However, this research indicates that educators may not always believe praxis is possible. Challenges such as competing priorities and external forces such as policy mandates and family opinions may make educators feel incapable of the praxis phase.

Participants noted that educational decision-making includes many challenging factors, such as juggling the “urgent needs” (Alex) of students, the perspectives of parents and teachers, along with policy requirements of states of institutions, and the best academic interest of students. In these moments of decision-making and competing priorities, participants sometimes felt ineffectual in making decisions that prioritize student learning and development. Blake (public school) explains that the decisions their school and district are making, they know, do not always align with the academic best interest of students but instead align with parents' “wants.” Blake uses the example of leveling, which is the practice of grouping students with similar academic performance together, as an example of feeling unable to change practices that, upon critical reflection, they know to be rooted in inequity.

[W]e level here in fourth and fifth grade. And…that's a prime example…leveling goes against equity and dignity. It goes against every possible pedagogy that I could think of. And my teachers know it too. Our data shows it, that leveling is not effective and can be very difficult to teach some of those level classes and very difficult to pace those level classes. But parents want leveling. So that's what we do.

Blake indicates that reflective practices demonstrate that the practice of leveling is ineffective and further contributes to oppression and inequity; however, they feel unable to challenge this norm because of the pressure they receive from groups in power, in this case, parents.

Educational leaders, those individuals who are experts in educating K-12 students, expressed their own oppression within the existing educational framework. Their voice,
expertise, and commitment to the humanization of all students are threatened by the pressures they experience. These pressures limit their ability to engage in praxis to produce change and achieve the critical theory tenet of humanization for all students.

The research participants indicate ways they have used thoughtful inquiry to examine the conditions that lead to a lack of choice in education and its impact on students. Blake (public school leader) wondered if education simply existed to “babysit,” questioning the entire framework of the school; Emerson (public school) recognized how educational experts in their school were reacting to the mandates established by the state; Charlie (private school leader) recognized how public schools do not align with their frame of education and choose to work at a private school. Charlie explains, “my experience in terms of being in urban public schools versus being in [Private School in Chester County] is, there is a difference in just sort of the overall understanding of what education is and what it's about and what it's for and what are your overall goals. And I think the schools that I've been more drawn to and ended up at have just a more holistic understanding of what it's all about.” These acts of questioning by educators or choice regarding what school to work at are examples of acts of emancipation or individual praxis as they stem from a thoughtful inquiry into the influences, circumstances, and conditions at play in setting educational priorities.

Critical Theory aims to intentionally explore the experiences of the disenfranchised (Horkheimer, 1972; Stromquist, 2014); this research indicates that students may be disenfranchised by the prioritization of consistent and predictable curricular approaches, as well as educational leaders' disfranchisement by the conditions at play that may impact the ability to include or exclude the pedagogies within their schools. The following section will consider the limited examples identified of how educators have overcome this complex hegemony and
disenfranchisement to support both individual student transformation and, equally as important, the betterment of others.

**Hegemonic Forces and Uneven Access**

The critical theory principle of humanization challenges structures built to prioritize individual interests alone. This research finds that individual self-interest and student competition may be driving forces behind curricular priorities because of prioritized practices such as quantifying outcomes, and grades, and prioritizing consistent student experiences. Participants provided examples of how these priorities guided educational decision-making and negatively impacted considerations to include service-learning.

Despite educators’ collective understanding of the benefits of service-learning pedagogy on both individual students and collective communities, this research indicates that the political, social, economic, and other forces at play prevented service-learning curriculums from being prioritized. Through these participants, this research finds that educators see service-learning as a viable curricular approach that not only positively impacts individual students but also helps equip students with the skills and experiences necessary to contribute to broader community goals and shared humanization. The complexity they communicated was in the inconsistencies public and private educators experienced in being able to make decisions that prioritized service-learning. In particular, public educational leaders did not experience as much agency or flexibility to prioritize this approach.

There were a few examples identified via this research in which educators shared frameworks in which curricular decisions were made to prioritize factors beyond individual student learning. These instances were found most often in private and parochial schools whose explicit intention was to engage students in experiences beyond themselves and for the benefit of their broader community. Charlie, a private school leader, directly offers how their school
explicitly differentiates its mission to align with humanization. Charlie indicates their private school tries to prepare students to “make the world a better place as opposed to just simply being successful in the world as it is…Whereas I think in public education that narrative isn't quite as well developed or cultivated because there's so much pressure to just compete and succeed within the systems…as they currently are.” For this private school, their identity directly aligns with the humanization of students not just for their students’ own self-interest but for the potential impact these students can have on greater humanization. The school leans into service-oriented curriculums to achieve this goal. Alex (parochial school) echoes this framework in sharing how their school tries to instill the values of “Christian service,” not just for the benefit of the student but to instill values in which students feel “compelled to serve” outside of school obligations.

The hegemonic forces that prioritize curriculums whose outcomes are predictable and easily quantifiable are thwarting the utilization of service-learning curriculums in schools. However, this research finds that this is being done in uneven ways. Participants from private and parochial schools indicated they had more flexibility to offer curricular approaches that did not directly align with the priorities of curricular predictability and outcome quantification. The hegemonic forces identified in this research were less impactful on private and parochial school leaders’ decision-making. In an effort to ensure all students get equal access to effective public education, understood as a public good, public education has created frameworks that reinforce curricular hegemony and may be limiting the experiences students can have with service-learning. This reinforces a broader hegemony in which political, cultural, economic, and as seen from this research- curricular forces emphasize individualism and capitalism. Private schools offer an alternative that allows for greater flexibility. However, this alternative can be accessed
by only a portion of the population, which contributes to the hegemony at play in which individuals with privilege have greater access to resources and influence on societal conditions (Horkheimer, 1972; Stromquist, 2014). Critical Theory requires that we ensure the needs of the privileged or majority do not diminish the humanization of all and the betterment of the collective good. The findings of this research indicate that educators see service-learning as a curricular tool to contest individualism within their communities, and potentially achieve greater humanization; however public educators were unevenly thwarted in utilizing this curricular approach do to hegemonic forces that more greatly impact their work than that of private and parochial educators.

The following sections will consider the implications of this research in practice and how these findings may be helpful for educators to promote service-learning curriculums.

**Implications**

This research aimed to consider the experiences educational leaders have with service-learning as quantitative data showed potential declines in service-learning offerings over the past decade (The Education Commission of the States, 2010 & 2014). The following sections will consider the implications of these findings.

**Implications for Practice**

Educators regularly make decisions in response to the “urgent needs” (Alex) of their school community, which impacts their curriculum considerations such as service-learning. The findings of this research provide a deeper understanding of what influences these decisions and, more specifically, how these factors impact decisions to include or exclude service-learning offerings. Further, these findings provide insights into how educators can further align decisions with their student learning and development expertise, which may help to create opportunities for service-learning offerings.
Educators consistently expressed positive perspectives of educational, developmental, and social development students experience through experiential education such as service-learning. Leaning into this recognition, educators can create frameworks that make these learning experiences more accessible to teachers and students and that recognize the “innovativeness” (Blake) teachers bring when pursuing these offerings. Despite limitations in resources such as time, personnel, and support for service-learning, participants shared how service-learning offerings have been integrated into their schools. This indicates that it is possible to integrate these learning opportunities in all of the schools represented by participants; it can, however, require more effort and justification to prioritize service-learning with the hegemony of individualized and quantified student learning priorities.

Educators can continue to champion service-learning by clearly communicating the benefits the programs offer students. Sharing these perspectives with students, parents, teachers, and fellow-decision makers may both encourage the utilization and keep attention to the benefits that experiential learning offers that are not as easily attainable by more “didactic” (Charlie) curricular approaches.

Further, educators can critically consider where allowing curricular flexibility may provide greater benefits to students and teachers. These findings demonstrated how curricular decisions are, at times, framed to produce consistent and predictable educational experiences across schools and for all students. This goal may create a reluctance for teachers to offer these alternative learning opportunities, as the need to implement them may create additional obstacles they need to overcome to justify a pivot from the consistent approaches in place. In addition to the added justification required, pursuing alternatives could lead teachers to be “ostracized” (Blake) for breaking from the norm. This flexibility may have a humanizing impact on both
teachers and students. Educators can help to diminish these challenges by remaining flexible to alternative curricular approaches such as service-learning and actively recognizing the innovation teachers bring when designing these experiences. Creating space for individual innovation humanizes teachers as they are able to experience their own emancipation and help students experience this via the service-learning opportunity. Further, in recognizing that equal experiences do not actually create equality for students, the principle of humanization, and freedom from oppression for all, requires that educators allow space for the unique needs of all students to be met.

Educational leaders also have the opportunity and responsibility to do local and national advocacy for service-learning programs. In recognizing the drive toward curriculums that prioritize predictable positive outcomes on standardized tests, The Education Commission on the States has offered recommendations on how educators can still promote service-learning programs (Fredericks, 2003). They encourage educational leaders to be familiar with the research that demonstrates the impact of service-learning curriculums and “improved academic performance” (Fredericks, 2003. p. 11). Educational leaders play an important role in helping their schools understand the value of service-learning but also advocating for policy shifts with their school boards and community members (Fredericks, 2003).

Additionally, educators can foster positive perspectives of service-learning within their community by ensuring the benefits of service-learning are captured. Assessment of curricular benefits is critical in the U.S. education landscape that values standards, assessment and accountability. Pickeral (200) explains,

Service learning is a vibrant pedagogy that allows students to achieve civic, social, career and personal outcomes. The fact that these may not be captured by standardized measures
simply means that other ways to report on success are needed. It will be crucial to ensure that a rich and varied track record of success is created and incorporated into public reports. (p. 10)

In practice, educational leaders can help make the connection between service-learning curriculums and outcomes and educational standards their school priorities. Tapping into the culture of assessment to demonstrate the positive impact of service-learning, makes the positive impacts clearer despite the ambiguous outcomes that may be perceived. Leaders have a responsibility to draw attention to the positive educational outcomes associated with service-learning (Pickeral, 2000) and to advocate for policies that support the inclusion of service-learning with their school boards, and other governing bodies (Fredericks, 2003).

Finally, educators can actively work to recognize the factors contributing to educational decisions and assess if those factors positively or negatively impact the decisions being considered. These findings indicate multiple factors influencing decisions, such as resource availability, urgent student needs, parent and teacher perspectives, policies, and state mandates to name a few. All of these factors have relevance in various decisions. Still, decisions may be more effective if educators can critically consider which factors are most relevant in particular decisions. For example, decisions around curricular approaches may need to emphasize impacts on student learning and development over other considerations.

These are some of the ways in which these findings may be used to support the work of educational leaders. The following section will consider the implications of these findings in future research.

**Implications for Research**

These qualitative findings provided deep insight into the experiences of educational leaders with service-learning curricula and the considerations around the inclusion or exclusion
of the curriculum. Its findings indicate how service-learning can be experienced as transformational or perfunctory based on various factors. While this research didn’t investigate what attributes of a service-learning curriculum foster a more transformative experience, research that considers this for K-12 schools would be valuable to helping educators ensure they prioritize the factors that will have the most significant positive impact.

Secondly, in understanding the considerations that go into curricular decision-making, participants did not indicate a feeling of control over most of the factors they discussed. Instead, considerations included policy frameworks, state mandates, resource limitations, or a broader school identity or mission. Because of the deep-seated nature of these elements, participants may feel a lack of control or influence over decisions. This may contribute to their own feelings of oppression. While this research did not specifically consider leaders’ sense of influence in educational decisions, these findings do indicate this may be another area of the relevant inquiry. In particular, future research that considers how to develop and exercise decision-making agency productively would be of further interest. This research does indicate that educational leaders may be experiencing frustration with the current lack of agency they feel. For example, Blake wondered if their school was actually contributing to a “love for learning” and if educators were simply “babysitting.” Research that actively considers how to provide educational experts with more positive influence on the offerings of their school is another research implication.

The following section will consider the limitations of this research.

**Limitations**

This qualitative inquiry aimed to consider the lived experiences of educational decision-makers in southeastern Pennsylvania. It does not capture all the conditions and experiences at play within the region but does begin to consider how educators understand service-learning at this time and what they see as factors that may be influencing its inclusion or exclusion in
school. This section will further share the limitations of this research, including factors of methodology, researcher bias, and generalizability.

**Methodology**

Qualitative inquiry aims to build a detailed understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2019) through the understanding of the lived experience of participants. For this research, participants had varying degrees of experience with service-learning and curricular decision-making. Some participants had direct experience with both focus areas, while others had more experience with one or the other. These diverse perspectives contributed to the inquiry, as they shed light on how educators gain exposure to service-learning and curricular decision-making. Further, in exploring the phenomenon, this research aimed to consider educational experiences from educators at a variety of school types and grade levels. In doing so, the research findings consider the similarities and contradictions that exist in the experiences of educators.

Participants had experience in five of the nine counties in the studied region. Most participants, seven of the eight, had experience with Chester County, which may have influenced the experiences educators shared. Participants from these counties may have had greater opportunities to participate in the research because of either resource or policy factors. For example, some school administrators responded to the researcher’s invitation to participate by indicating that their district policies prevented their engagement. Other potential participants may not have felt they could spare the time to participate in this research. These, and other factors, impact the findings of this research as the participants might have had the professional freedom to speak openly as part of this research and dedicate work time for their participation. It could be that the research participants felt greater freedom to share their critical reflections with the researcher.

**Generalizability**
The factors that participants experienced were nuanced and specific to their schools. While participants express consistent themes, their experiences aren’t generalizable to all schools or educators. The common themes may be similar to the factors at play in other schools, but the specific conditions are likely different.

**Researcher Bias**

The researcher engages in this inquiry as an outsider to K-12 education. As an outsider and as a parent of kids in the K-12 schools, the researcher was interested in studying curricular approaches that could help students better understand the complexities of societal challenges and begin to develop their individual capacity and place to address the causes via sustainable solutions. To limit personal perceptions and biases from factoring into this research, the researcher engaged in regular reflective practices to consider where individual perceptions may be factoring into participant conversations and coding.

Being an outsider to K-12 education may have also allowed participants to speak more freely with the researcher, as they were not talking with a peer or someone of influence in K-12 learning. Additionally, as an outsider, the researcher could make connections between the commonalities and contradictions between participant experiences without personal or professional experience and biases in K-12 education.

**Summary**

Education objectives that consider only the needs of the individual may unintentionally be advancing cultures that prioritize individualism. A “hypercompetitive” (Charlie) education model that leans into competition and individual self-interest will impact the message students are getting from our education framework. It is then inevitable that the teachings of both the hidden (Apple & King, 1977) and explicit curriculums of our schools will impact the way our graduates engage in their communities and institutions throughout their lives. Our educational
framework needs to intentionally leverage both the hidden and explicit curriculums to teach students how to create communities in which they dismantle oppression, competition, and the marginalization caused by individualism. As Charlie (private school) indicates, this is the intention of their school, “[our goal] is to cultivate and develop well-rounded humans who have a moral and ethical center who are trying to be of service to the world. And their reason for being and their reason for even being at the school is to grow and evolve into people who are gonna make the world a better place as opposed to just simply being successful in the world as it is.”

Charlie’s experience in both public and private education gives him a perspective into the freedom private schools have to break away from the “hypercompetitive” (Charlie) framework that reinforces the values of individualism and competition among students. Charlie continues, “Whereas I think in public education that narrative isn't quite as well developed or cultivated because there's so much pressure to just compete and succeed within the systems…as they currently are.” This research is rooted in the question of if service-learning can be a curricular tool to help students understand the current systems of individualism and competition that contribute to societal challenges and inequities. And further, if service-learning curriculums can begin to equip students with the skills and experiences to critically question these values and help students “grow and evolve into people who are gonna make the world a better place.” While this research does not aim to thoroughly answer all of these questions, these findings do suggest that these questions are important ones to ask, given the current educational framework being employed. Further, the participants of this research see the need to consider an alternative framework and consider service-learning a valuable tool for helping to develop the academic, developmental, social, and empathetic competencies students will need to break away from the
competitive and individualistic frames that currently permeate the educational and societal landscape.
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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email

Dear Educational Leader,

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study about service-learning curriculum in K-12 schools. This study is being conducted as part of doctoral dissertation at West Chester University.

This study will examine the factors influencing inclusion or exclusion of service-learning curriculum at the K-12 level in Eastern Pennsylvania schools. Research will explore the experiences of K-12 education leaders with service-learning and curricular decision making. Participants do not need to have prior experience with service-learning to contribute to the study.

Participation in this study involves:

- A time commitment of 40-60 minutes for an in-person or zoom conversation.
- Participants will receive a $30 gift card to amazon or target for participation.

You have been identified because of your current or recent leadership position within K-12 education in eastern Pennsylvania.

For more information about this study or to participate, please contact the principal investigator, Megan Jerabek, by email at mjerabek@wcupa.edu or by replying to this message.

Agreement to be contacted or a request for more information does not obligate you to participate in any study. This study has been approved by the West Chester University Institutional Review Board, protocol IRB-FY2023-56.

Thank you,
Megan Jerabek

Principal Investigator

Study Title: Service-learning Curricular in Eastern Pennsylvania’s K-12 Schools: A qualitative Study of Educational Leaders
Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Part One: Service-Learning Pedagogy
- When you think of service-learning pedagogy, what type of curriculum comes to mind?
- What types of service learning curriculum is being offered in your school/district?
  - If there are some being offered: How did the curriculum get introduced in your school?
  - If it isn’t being offered: Has service-learning curriculum ever been considered?

Part Two: Curricular Decision Making
- Can you tell me a bit about how your district/school determines the curriculum it will utilize?
- What factors go into these decisions?
- How have you seen these factors evolve over time?
- How are curricular priorities supported within your school/district?
- What considerations go into introducing a new curriculum in your school or district?
- If someone were to try to introduce a service-learning at district level, what would have to happen to make it possible?
- Do you have any personal experience with service-learning pedagogy?

Conclusion:
- Is there anything else you would like to share with me around this topic?
- Is there anyone else you recommend I speak to around this topic?
- If I need any follow-up, do you mind if I reach out to you?
Appendix C

Participant Informed Consent

Project Title: A qualitative inquiry of circumstances influencing service-learning offerings in Eastern Pennsylvania K-12 schools

Investigator(s): Megan Jerabek; David Backer

Project Overview:
Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Megan Jerabek as part of her Doctoral Dissertation. The purpose of this research is to study the experiences of K-12 curriculum decision-makers in their consideration of service-learning curriculums for their school districts. Via qualitative inquiry the research will consider the circumstances, conditions, and factors that have informed inclusion or exclusion of the curriculum; how student development goals factor into decisions; and how curricular directors assess and adjust their decisions to incorporate service-learning curriculum.

Your participation will include:
- Complete Interview (in person or via Zoom, audio recorded)
- Member check interview transcription (15 minutes, review via email). This is optional.
- This study will take 40 to 60 minutes of your time
You will receive $30 dollars in the form of Gift Card.

There is little risk to harm from this research. Risks include time spent on the conversation and any discomfort with a question, and ensuring confidentiality. The researcher respects your right to not answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, and prioritize confidentiality by ensuring transcriptions are secure and personally identifiable information isn’t shared.

The benefit of this research for participants: a study that explores the experiences of educational decision makers may produce valuable knowledge that they can utilize to inform their work. Service-learning curriculum is often found within higher education curricula, and hasn’t been studied extensively at the K-12 level. As such, service-learning may be a topic that curricular decision makers don’t have readily accessible information about. This research aims to fill this gap, and by doing so may prove relevant to the work of those participating in the research. One of the benefits of the research will be through sharing my findings with participants with the intention of providing them the benefits of the information gained.

The research project is being done by Megan Jerabek as part of her Doctoral Dissertation

If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form.
You may ask Megan Jerabek any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it won’t affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this research is to study the experiences of K-12 curriculum decision-makers in their consideration of service-learning curriculums for their school districts. Via qualitative inquiry the research will consider the circumstances, conditions, and factors that have informed inclusion or exclusion of the curriculum; how student development goals factor into decisions; and how curricular directors assess and adjust their decisions to incorporate service-learning curriculum.

2. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**
   - Complete Interview
   - Member check interview transcription
   - This study will take 60 minutes of your time.

3. **Are there any experimental medical treatments?**
   - No

4. **Is there any risk to me?**
   - Possible risks or sources of discomfort include: There is little risk to harm from this research. Risks include time spent on the conversation and any discomfort with a question. Additionally, there is a risk associated with ensuring confidentiality. The researcher respects your right to not answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, and prioritizes confidentiality by ensuring transcriptions are secure and personally identifiable information isn’t shared
   - If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Megan Jerabek
   - If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

5. **Is there any benefit to me?**
   - Benefits to you may include: For participants, a study that explores the experiences of educational decision makers may produce valuable knowledge that they can utilize to inform their work. Service-learning curriculum is often found within higher education curricula, and hasn’t been studied extensively at the K-12 level. As such, service-learning may be a topic that curricular decision makers don’t have readily accessible information about. This research aims to fill this gap, and by doing so may prove relevant to the work of those participating in the research. One of the benefits of the research will be through sharing my findings with participants with the intention of providing them the benefits of the information gained.

6. **How will you protect my privacy?**
   - The session will be recorded.
   - The researcher will record the interview to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. All data will be encrypted and stored securely. All your information and interview responses will be kept confidential.
   - Your records will be private. Only Megan Jerabek, David Backer, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
   - Your name will not be used in any reports.
   - Records will be stored:
     - Encrypted File
   - Records will be destroyed after manuscript development, but no less than three years

7. **Do I get paid to take part in this study?**
   - You get $30 dollars in the form of Gift Card
8.  **Who do I contact in case of research related injury?**
   ○ For any questions with this study, contact:
     ■  **Primary Investigator:** Megan Jerabek at
         or mjerabek@wcupa.edu
     ■  **Faculty Sponsor:** David Backer at 610-436-2326 or dbacker@wcupa.edu

9.  **What will you do with my Identifiable Information/Biospecimens?**
   ○ Not applicable.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.
I, ____________________________ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

______________________________
Subject/Participant Signature
Date:________________________

______________________________
Witness Signature
Date:________________________