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## Raising the Roar: A Case Study of Early Adolescent Student Voice on Service-Learning and Catholic Identity

April Beuder

*Loyola Marymount University*

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Raising the Roar: A Case Study of Early Adolescent Student Voice  
on Service-Learning and Catholic Identity

by

April Beuder

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2023

Raising the Roar: A Case Study of Early Adolescent Student Voice  
on Service-Learning and Catholic Identity

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by

April Beuder

**Loyola Marymount University  
School of Education  
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This dissertation written by April Beuder, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

**March 23, 2023**

Date \_\_\_\_\_

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## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to the faculty, staff, families, and most of all, the students, of SHA. It has been a privilege and a blessing to work alongside the teachers and support staff, to partner with families, and most of all, to witness the students' learning and growth. It is the students' voices that bring meaning and purpose to our vocation and their voices must be heard.

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## ABSTRACT

### Raising the Roar: A Case Study of Early Adolescent Student Voice on Service-Learning and Catholic Identity

by

April Beuder

This qualitative case study examined early adolescent students' perceptions of their service-learning program experiences at one Catholic elementary school in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles (ADLA). The purpose of the study was: (a) to understand how the powerful tradition of the Church related to doing works of social justice and outreach was experienced by students in one ADLA Catholic elementary school in the form of experiential service learning, and (b) to explore whether associations exist between the students' perceptions of their Catholic identities and their service-learning experiences. This study gathered research from student voice and work samples and utilized Carver's (1997) agency, belonging, and competence (ABC) framework.

The findings indicated that study participants experienced feelings of satisfaction, connectedness, and optimism while participating in their service-learning program. The study findings may be of interest to Catholic elementary school leaders faced with increasing levels of student disengagement and/or declining enrollment, both of which may benefit from strengthening their students' understanding of their Catholic identity and developing their sense of agency, belonging, and competence through experiential service-learning programs.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

#### **Introduction**

Student voice, and its role in educational change and reform, has been the subject of studies for decades. Fielding (2001) emphasized the potential impact of student voice to identify “shortcomings of their (school’s) current performance and possible ways of addressing the deficiencies” (p. 123). Educational institutions, including Catholic elementary schools, would benefit from hearing and honoring the voices of their students as they seek to refine and improve their programs to remain viable and relevant options for youth in the 21st century because as stated by Kidd and Czerniawski (2011), student voice can serve “as a catalyst for change in schools” (p. 288).

U.S. Catholic school enrollment experienced “their largest single year decline in nearly 50 years,” which translated to “a decline of over 111,000 students from 2019–20 to 2020–21” (National Catholic Educational Association [NCEA], 2021, p. 1). The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA, 2021) also reported U.S. Catholic elementary schools experienced declining enrollment during this same time frame at the rate of 8.1%, a decline “of over three times that of secondary schools” (p. 3).

Additionally, according to Barron (2019), Chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, for every one person who joins the church, over 6 leave; the median age of those who leave is 13 years old. Catholic educators, administrators, superintendents, clergy and religious personnel have continued to explore these persistent and alarming trends and have struggled to implement effective measures to change

their direction. As such, it is time to ask the students about their educational experiences, and time to raise “the roar that lies on the other side of the silence of the classroom, for it is only in that roar that we can begin to develop an understanding of the lived experiences” (Kidd & Czerniawski, 2011, p. 265) of the students to bring about meaningful change.

These experiences, as described by students, shed light on how Catholic schools are promoting Catholic identity.

### **Catholic Identity**

U.S. Catholic schools are tasked with adhering to state standards, both those academic and those geared toward social–emotional learning, along with diocesan standards, including religious education. The goal of Catholic education is for students to develop and grow their understanding of their identity as Catholics, prepared to contribute and work for justice and peace. As such, the purpose for learning in Catholic schools extends beyond academic progress and must include furthering the work of social justice and service to others. This commitment to serving others is integral to understanding one’s Catholic identity as one called to build the kingdom of God by working for peace and justice.

### **Service-Learning Programs**

Service-learning programs have the potential to increase early adolescents’ Catholic identities through experiential learning, thereby helping them develop autonomy, connectedness, and competence—all of which are essential to achieving psychological well-being (Carver, 1997; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Dewey, 1938; Mikami et al., 2017). Dewey’s (1938) principles of interaction and continuity were grounded in *experiential learning*, which Dewey defined as the

relationship between students' interactions with their environments and the resulting attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions acquired from and during those interactions.

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) posited, "Every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 35). Dewey (1938) further concluded, "Education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience—which is always the actual life-experience of some individual" (p. 89). Experience is, subsequently, the means and goal of education. Experience is both the process of interacting with one's environment and the outcome, or results, of those interactions.

### **Service-Learning Programs as Experiential Learning**

According to Gorham (1992, p. 108, as cited in LeSourd, 1997), "Service is defined as an act done for the public good in which an individual or group voluntarily helps other individuals or groups" (p. 157). The commitment to serve the public good must be "intense enough to inspire action" and "not undertaken for the sake of advancing one's private interests," with a focused goal to develop "the integrity of those who serve" (LeSourd, 1997, p. 157). LeSourd (1997) also noted service-learning projects provide unique opportunities to grow in understanding of others who look, live, dress, or talk differently. Serving others requires that one suspend the human tendency to judge or stereotype one another and engage in perspective taking. Such service-learning experiences can facilitate relationships between the server and one being served that are "full and direct to allow authentic knowledge of one another" (LeSourd, 1997, p. 160).

In addition to facilitating authentic relationships between the server and the one being served, service-learning programs can also promote student agency, belonging, and competence



(ABC). To do so, the programs must be grounded in learning environments committed to fostering certain core values and characteristics, such as “caring and compassion; responsibility and accountability; individuality and diversity; critical thinking and creativity; and respect for self, other, and environment” (Carver, 1997, p. 147). According to Carver’s (1997) ABC conceptual framework, effective service-learning programs possess the following four characteristics: “authenticity, active learning, drawing on student experience, and connecting lessons to the future” (p. 147). Such service-learning programs can also strengthen students’ Catholic identities as they fulfill the call to work for peace and justice.

Carver’s (1997) framework provided service-learning program characteristics and learning environment core values that can be used to design, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of experiential service-learning programs. Such programs may be of interest to educational leaders concerned with helping students reconnect with their school communities after 16 months of distance learning and prolonged isolation necessitated by the COVID-19 global pandemic; the pandemic also exacerbated social inequalities, particularly for historically marginalized student populations. Curwin (2010) stated, “The key to inspiring hope in urban youth is to create a hopeful attitude in students where hope is in short supply” (p. 36). According to Walsh and Spells (2020), “Service-learning can be a vehicle for reclaiming students who were marginalized by society” (p. 11).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Service-learning programs, though not unique to Catholic schools, can be distinctly grounded in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic and Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS, 2021). The CST and

National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic and Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS) frameworks help potentially foster a stronger Catholic identity in students by providing them with more opportunities to experience the social justice work of serving others. Specifically, “the experience of Christian community leads naturally to service” (Archdiocese of Los Angeles [ADLA], 2023, p. 4.3.14). Additionally, the NSBECS (2021) reinforced the essential nature of service-learning for Catholic elementary schools in the following standards and benchmarks:

2.7 The theory and practice of the Church’s social teachings are essential elements of the curriculum.

3.3 Every student participates in Christian service programs to promote the lived reality of action in service of social justice. (paras. 15–17)

Despite Archdiocese of Los Angeles’s (ADLA, 2023) stated commitment to Christian service and NSBEC alignment, there exists a gap in data surrounding early adolescents’ perceptions of their Catholic identities and service-learning program experiences in ADLA Catholic elementary schools. The ADLA is the largest Catholic educational community in the United States and led by the Most Reverend José H. Gomez as the Archbishop of Los Angeles. ADLA (2023) spans three counties in the state of California: Los Angeles, Ventura, and Santa Barbara. ADLA elementary and high schools also comprise one of three largest school systems in California (public or private; ADLA, 2023). These students’ voices must be heard to better understand the extent to which ADLA schools effectively fulfill their mission.

The ADLA (2023) administrative handbook outlined specific criteria for Christian service in secondary schools. The handbook also included the expectation for ADLA elementary schools to include “service-oriented outreach to the Church and civic community” (ADLA, 2023, p.

4.3.13) without specifying program characteristics or guidelines for the implementation or assessment of such service programs. Amplifying students' voices and perceptions relative to their service-learning program experiences can provide valuable insight to educators interested in refining their service-learning programs and further understanding of the impact of service learning on students' Catholic identities.

This qualitative case study examined early adolescent students' perceptions of their service-learning program experiences at one Catholic elementary school (referred to by the pseudonym Sacred Heart Academy [SHA]) in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles (ADLA). This study focused on gathering early adolescents' perceptions of their service-learning experiences and sought to understand how the powerful tradition of the Church related to doing works of social justice and outreach was experienced by students in one ADLA Catholic elementary school in the form of experiential service-learning. This case study also explored whether associations exist between the students' perceptions of their Catholic identities and their service-learning experiences at Sacred Heart Academy (SHA).

### **The Lure of Justice**

Barron (2019), during his June 11, 2019, remarks to the spring general assembly of the USCCB in Baltimore, noted, "We have a very powerful tradition around doing the works of justice and young people like that. I think we should lead with it" (6:30). He went on to state, "Surveys consistently show that young people get and resonate with the church's great teaching on justice. They resonate with our outreach to the poor and the hungry and the homeless and the migrants . . . they understand it" (Barron, 2019, 5:35). In those remarks, Barron (2019) also reiterated studies have shown that "the more involved young people are in this work that the

closer they stay to the life of a church” (7:31). He also stated for every one person who joins the church, over 6 leave, and the median age of those who leave is 13 and (Barron, 2019). In response, Barron (2019) noted, “We have a very smart tradition, but we have not communicated that effectively to our young people” (para. 7) and are missing the opportunity to connect with young people by engaging them in service-learning experiences.

After 16 months of distance learning and prolonged isolation necessitated by the COVID-19 global pandemic, there emerged an even greater need to listen to and connect with U.S. youth to help them reengage with their school communities. For ADLA elementary schools, the school community is ostensibly a faith community as well, a community committed to fostering the Catholic identity of its members.

### **Research Questions**

This case study focused on the following research question and sub question:

What are the early adolescent students’ perceptions of their participation in a service-learning program while attending one ADLA Catholic elementary school?

- a. What are the early adolescent students’ perceptions of their Catholic identity while participating in a service-learning program?

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand early adolescent students’ perceptions of their service-learning program experiences provided for them in one ADLA Catholic elementary school, along with their perceptions of their Catholic identities while participating in those experiences. Additionally, the purpose was to explore any associations

between the students' perceptions of their Catholic identities relative to their experiences in a service-learning program.

### **Significance of the Study**

U.S. Catholic school enrollment experienced “their largest single year decline in nearly 50 years,” which translated to “a decline of over 111,000 students from 2019-20 to 2020-21” (NCEA, 2021, p. 1). During that same time frame, NCEA (2021) also reported U.S. Catholic elementary schools experienced declining enrollment at the rate of 8.1%: a decline “of over three times that of secondary schools” (NCEA, 2021, p. 3). This marked decline in the elementary schools is significant for secondary schools because they rely largely upon matriculation from the elementary schools for their future enrollment.

In Los Angeles, ADLA Catholic schools reported a 12.3% decline in enrollment from 2019–2020 to 2020–2021, which translated to a loss of 9,045 students and the largest decline of the 174 Catholic schools' dioceses nationally (NCEA, 2021). Moreover, these declines in enrollment were higher for students in historically marginalized communities, further exacerbating social inequities (Gasper, 2021). During the 2019–2020 school year, “underserved groups were over twice as likely to have their Catholic schools close” (NCEA, 2021, p. 2) than all other schools nationwide, both public and Catholic. It is possible the students who left Los Angeles-area Catholic schools, either due to choice or closure, became part of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). A 2021 *LA Times* analysis noted pre-pandemic achievement gaps had continued to widen across all ethnicities, though more so for Black and Latino students than their white and Asian counterparts (Esquivel & Lee, 2021). Multiple factors contribute to these persistent and pervasive equity gaps, including but not limited to (a) food and shelter

insecurity, (b) access to quality teaching and/or tutoring, (c) language barriers, and (d) the digital divide. Still, given the Church's stated commitment to CST and NSBECS alignment, along with Barron's (2019) call to appeal to young people through social justice works, this study yielded insights into associations between early adolescents' perceptions of their Catholic identities and service-learning program experiences.

### **Storm and Stress**

Early adolescence is the transition from childhood to adolescence that typically occurs from fifth-grade through eighth-grade as students prepare to move on to high school. This period of transition from childhood to adolescence is marked by multiple fundamental changes. According to Göllner et al. (2017), this developmental period brings dramatic physical, hormonal, and neuronal changes and often presents challenges for early adolescents as they struggle to adjust to these multiple changes taking place during the onset of puberty (Göllner et al., 2017). Researchers have at times referred to this transitional period as a time of "storm and stress" when seeking to understand the typical personality trait changes taking place during this developmental phase (Göllner et al., 2017, p. 376). During this period of storm and stress, early adolescents exhibit more emotional volatility than younger children or older adults as they seek increasing levels of independence from their parents and/or guardians and shift their focus to developing peer relationships and gaining peer acceptance.

A 2020 Pew Research Center report measuring the degree of religious alignment between early adolescents and their parents found just 50% feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and overall well-being, and only 46% think about the meaning and purpose of life. The prolonged isolation and lack of social interaction during the COVID-19 global pandemic did not improve early

adolescents' social–emotional well-being for those with and without preexisting anxiety or depression (Pew Research Center, 2020). Even prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, students' sense of belonging to their school community—in this case study, a faith-based school community—was recognized as “an urgent and necessary area of research and interventions” (Parada, 2019, p. 107). According to Parada (2019), a sense of belonging is a basic psychological need and *school belonging* is generally defined as students' perceived affiliations or connections to their school community, with studies demonstrating associations between students' sense of school belonging and positive school achievement, health behaviors, and social–emotional competencies. Furthermore, these links between school belonging and school achievement have been shown to persist with students perceiving that school is meaningful and enjoyable, above and beyond their actual levels of achievement (Parada, 2019).

Service-learning programs have the potential to increase early adolescents' identities as members of their Catholic faith community through experiential learning, thereby helping them develop autonomy, connectedness, and competence to achieve psychological well-being. Psychological well-being has been widely accepted as essential to the learning process (Carver, 1997; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Dewey, 1938; Mikami et al., 2017).

### **The Void**

There exists a void in existing data surrounding how students perceive their service-learning program experiences and Catholic identities in ADLA Catholic elementary schools. Given the emergent trend of increasing attrition rates for these same schools, this case study can serve educational leaders by filling this void of student voice pertaining to their Catholic identities and their service-learning program experiences at an ADLA elementary school.

Additionally, this study and its results provide insight for educational leaders concerned with addressing students' increasing classroom disengagement and declining academic performance, both of which were exacerbated by the prolonged isolation necessitated by the COVID-19-related public health mandates and distance learning (Esquivel & Lee, 2021). This study provided insight to other Catholic elementary school leaders interested in hearing students voice their perceptions on their service-learning program experiences and Catholic identities during those experiences.

Important questions emerged when embarking in this research: (a) what are students' perceptions on their service-learning program experiences and (b) do associations exist between their Catholic identities and service-learning program experiences? To answer these questions, more information was needed directly from early adolescent students regarding their perceptions of their service-learning program experiences while attending the case study-selected Los Angeles-area Catholic school, along with their perceptions of their Catholic identities during those experiences.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Two theoretical frameworks guided this research: the Roman Catholic Church's CST, and experiential education (Carver, 1997; Dewey, 1938; Greenleaf, 1996). The first framework, CST, was based upon the fundamental understanding that every human being is created in the image of God, with an inherent right to dignity and respect as a member of the human family. As such, one's Catholic identity is firmly grounded in furthering the works of social justice and must include acts of service to others.



The second framework, experiential learning, was defined by Dewey (1938) as the relationship between students' interactions with their environments and the resulting attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions acquired from and during those interactions. Dewey's (1938) principles of interaction and continuity emerged as a seminal focus of his work grounded in experiential learning.

### **Catholic Social Teaching**

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) consists of seven key tenets central to the Church's social tradition to build a just society. These themes are grounded in the belief of a triune God, as one who is not alone, but relational in the Trinity (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2022). As such, Catholics, having been made in God's image like all humans, are also called to share in this communal life by building relationships with others through love and justice (USCCB, 2022).

### ***The Church's Best Kept Secret: A Call to Action***

Although social teachings are considered essential elements of the Catholic faith, this doctrine has not been consistently shared nor taught in Catholic educational institutions and programs, including schools, colleges, universities, and religious education programs (Barron, 2019). As a result, many Catholics do not understand these social teachings as integral to their faith. Gomez (2022), Archbishop of Los Angeles and President of the USCCB, noted the following in his January 12, 2022, pastoral teaching for *Angelus News*, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles' weekly magazine:

Catholic Social Teaching may be the Church's best kept secret. I am surprised how often I meet people, even many good Catholics, who do not know that the Church has her own teaching about what makes for a good society. (para. 4)

Catholics are called to serve others, to seek justice, and work for peace. Catholic educators, along with others who teach the faith, are called to act and incorporate these social teachings more fully into their educational programs. Given the challenges facing schools and communities in 2023, it is time for a renewed commitment to effectively communicate the rich social traditions of the Church so all may share in the full expression of this moral teaching—a moral teaching that demands from its members a commitment to work for justice and peace (USCCB, 2022).

### ***Catholic Identity***

Catholic schools are rooted in a tradition of education that is fundamentally different from premises guiding public and charter elementary schools (National Catholic Educational Association [NCEA], 2012; National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic and Elementary and Secondary Schools [NSBECS], 2021). Catholic schools share the same expressed commitment to academic excellence as their public or charter counterparts; the obvious difference is the Catholic school tradition calls its members to view their realities and lived experiences through a lens that combines both faith and reason and is grounded in CST. The goal of Catholic education, therefore, is for its students to develop and strengthen their understanding of their Catholic identity, as individuals prepared to contribute and work for justice and peace (USCCB, 2022). In doing so, these students become the best versions of themselves: equipped and motivated to serve others and address social injustices (Mixa, 2021).

According to MacLean and Riebschleger (2021), “The process of religious identity development, which typically occurs in adolescence or emerging adulthood, is not well understood” (p. 395). This religious identity may be experienced as an individual, as part of a

collective group, or in relation to others and is manifested by one's religious practices and the development of beliefs. Additionally, multiple factors can shape one's religious identity development, such as relationships with others, societal factors, faith formation journeys, teachers, learning environments, and family involvement and attachment (MacLean & Riebschleger, 2021). This case study was centered on the students' voices; therefore, for the purpose of this case study, Catholic identity referred to students' perceptions regarding the extent to which they understood, followed, and performed actions consistent with the CST.

### **Experiential Education**

Dewey (1938) posited, "Every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 35).

Dewey (1938) further concluded, "Education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience—which is always the actual life-experience of some individual" (p. 89). Experience is, therefore, the means and goal of education. Experience is both the process of interacting with one's environment and the outcome, or the results, of those interactions.

### ***Principle of Interaction***

According to Dewey (1938), educational experiences have value and power when they lead to growth and development. These high-quality educational experiences are the result of two fundamental principles in practice: interaction and continuity. The premise of the principle of interaction is that the experience is the result of the interaction between the student and their environment. In other words, the interaction extends between the student's internal response to the external aspects of their environment. In turn, these responses are informed by preexisting

attitudes toward external environmental stimuli, acquired habits, current emotional state, and prior knowledge (Dewey, 1938).

### ***Principle of Continuity***

The second premise of Dewey's (1938) experiential education was rooted in the principle of continuity. As previously discussed, this principle stated, "Every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). Dewey posited humans form habits and emotional responses based upon prior experiences. In turn, these habits and responses inform an individual's responses to new experiences. Dewey's principle of continuity referred to how experiences, both past and present, influence the future, whereas interaction referred to how one's current situation influences their experiences. In other words, the principle of continuity affects one's future learning, whereas the principle of interaction is grounded in the present.

### **The Link**

The relationship between service-learning programs and Catholic identity is clear. Service-learning programs have the potential to foster students' Catholic identities by deepening their understanding of their connection to, and responsibility for, the other members of their community. In doing so, students develop attachments to and a sense of belonging with their communities (Parada, 2019). Students' sense of belonging to their Catholic school community impacts their Catholic identity, and a sense of belonging also plays a key role in adolescent development. *Adolescence* has been defined as the period of development occurring after childhood and before adulthood (Louw & Louw, 2014). Early adolescence refers to the transitional period between childhood and adolescence, typically taking place in fifth- through

eighth-grade. Researchers have sometimes referred to this transitional period as a period of “storm and stress,” often marked by emotional volatility, increased desire for independence from parents and guardians, and growing focus on peer relationships and acceptance (Göllner et al., 2017, p. 376). Service-learning programs grounded in CST can foster students’ sense of belonging to their Catholic faith communities, and subsequently, their Catholic identities.

### **Method**

This study used a descriptive, single-unit, case study design to investigate the research question and research sub question. One Catholic elementary school was selected as the focus of this case study because of its stated commitment to provide an experiential service-learning experience for its students and its accessibility to the me due to my role as the current site administrator.

Once the school was selected for the case study, a sample of early adolescent students was purposefully selected to participate in Phase I, semi-structured interviews with the researcher. Open-ended questions were included to avoid limiting students with a predetermined set of responses and allow participants to use their own language to share their experiences and stories. Purposeful sampling was used to ensure “information-rich cases” (Leavy, 2017, p. 79) that best addressed the research questions. During Phase II, additional data were collected through document review of student work samples.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions**

The following section discusses the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions in this case study.

## **Limitations**

A central limitation of this study was the limited amount of time available for data collection and analysis. As such, the sample size was limited to one elementary school to ensure sufficient time to collect and analyze the data. Because the school site was selected by convenience sampling with purposefully selected students, generalizability of the study was also limited. A second limitation was my positionality and potential underlying bias with respect to the collection and analysis of data. As an experienced educator within the ADLA Department of Catholic Schools and administrator at the selected school site at the time of this study, I had established relationships with the majority of the participants. Therefore, my positionality of power and familiarity with the participants may have impacted the participants' comfort and willingness to respond honestly. Data were collected from multiple sources to provide opportunities to triangulate the data and blunt the potential impact of my positionality and underlying biases.

## **Delimitations**

A delimitation of this study was the ultimate focus on one Los Angeles-area Catholic elementary school due to its accessibility to me; therefore, many other schools in the ADLA were precluded from participating in this study. Future research could consider exploring students' perceptions of their Catholic identities and service-learning programs at more elementary schools throughout the ADLA from various demographic and socioeconomic communities to improve the generalizability to other locations.

## **Assumption**

For the purpose of this study, an underlying assumption was that the participants responded honestly and accurately during the interviews, despite my positionality and potential bias. An additional assumption was that an experiential service-learning program had the same potential to positively impact students' Catholic identities after the prolonged period of isolation and the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 global pandemic as they would have had prior to the pandemic.

## **Social Justice Leadership Connection**

According to Freire (1970), the focus of education should be on human and community development to meet the needs of disenfranchised groups and underserved communities. Social justice research seeks to explore issues related to access, equity, and inclusion, and social justice leaders are expected to focus their efforts on dismantling current and historically marginalizing conditions due to one's race, class, gender, ability, and/or sexual orientation (Theoharis, 2007). This study sought to gather research from student voice to provide information for other Catholic elementary school leaders committed to fulfilling the mission of the Catholic Church and its schools, as articulated by the USCCB's (2022) *Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching* and within the NCEA's NSBECS (2021) principles. This study may also be of interest to Catholic elementary school leaders faced with declining academic performance and/or enrollment, both of which may benefit from increasing students' understanding of their Catholic identities through experiential service-learning programs.

Given the complexity of the equity issues plaguing schools in 2023, especially as in-person learning has resumed and learning gaps have been identified, it is critical for leaders for

social justice to engage in ongoing, critical self-reflection on current practices and underlying biases and assumptions. Additionally, socially just leaders must be capable of building consensus around a shared vision by securing significant buy-in from all participants, such as administration, teachers, staff, school boards, parents, community members, and the students. This case study and its results provide useful insight for educational leaders concerned with understanding students' lived experiences to address students' increasing classroom disengagement, learning gaps, and declining enrollment—all of which are likely to have been exacerbated by the prolonged isolation necessitated by COVID-19 public health mandates and remote learning.

### **Definitions of Terms**

#### **Belonging**

*Belonging* has been operationalized in numerous ways in literature to reflect attachment, bonding, connectedness, inclusion, liking school, fitting in, and engagement; belonging is described as a student's sense of affiliation or connection to their school and community and is regarded as a fundamental psychological need (Parada, 2019).

#### **Early Adolescence**

*Early adolescence* is the transitional period from childhood to adolescence, fifth- through eighth-grade (Louw & Louw, 2014).

#### **Information for Growth: Assessment of Children/Youth Religious Education**

*Information for Growth: Assessment of Children/Youth Religious Education (IFG/ACRE)* was a tool created by the NCEA to help Catholic schools and parishes assess how well their religious education programs form committed Christian disciples (NCEA, 2023).



## **Middle School Students**

*Middle school students* are students in transitional grades between elementary and secondary school, also referred to as junior high.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

Chapter 1 provided an overview and background of the study, including the statement of the problem, research questions, purpose statement, significance of the study, conceptual frameworks, limitations of the study, and definitions of key terms. Social justice implications for educational leaders, particularly those in the Catholic elementary school sector, were also included. Chapter 2 consisted of a review of the relevant literature and is organized and presented in three sections to meet the following objectives: (a) establish CST and one's Catholic identity as firmly grounded in furthering the works of social justice, (b) clarify experiential service-learning as integral to the mission and philosophy of Catholic schools and central to one's Catholic identity, and (c) explore existing literature surrounding the importance of capturing students' voices and perceptions relative to their lived experiences. Chapter 3 revisited the purpose of this case study and explained the research design and methodology, along with limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. Chapter 4 presented the qualitative data collected in response to the research question and research sub question. Chapter 5 included a discussion of the findings and recommendations for Catholic school educators, leaders, and future researchers.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand early adolescent students' perceptions of their service-learning program experiences provided for them in one Archdiocese of Los Angeles (ADLA) Catholic elementary school, along with their perceptions of their Catholic identities while participating in those experiences. Additionally, the purpose was to explore any associations between students' perceptions of their Catholic identities and their experiences in a service-learning program.

This study provided the context and purpose for U.S. Catholic elementary schools as institutions grounded in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) to foster students' Catholic identities. Additional research has enumerated the potential of service-learning programs to positively impact students' Catholic identities and belonging to their faith community. Given the mental health crisis facing youth in 2023, likely exacerbated due to the lack of social interaction and prolonged period of isolation brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic, understanding the relationship, if any, between service-learning and students' perceived sense of belonging and their Catholic identities was investigated.

The literature review was divided into three sections. The first section introduced CST, which is based upon the fundamental understanding that every human being is created in the image of God with an inherent right to dignity and respect as a member of the human family (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2022). As such, one's Catholic identity is firmly grounded in furthering the work of justice and must include acts of service to others. The

second section established experiential service-learning as integral to the mission and philosophy of Catholic schools and central to one's Catholic identity. The third section explored existing literature on the importance of capturing students' voices and perceptions relative to their lived experiences.

### **Catholic Social Teaching and the Mission and Philosophy of Catholic Schools**

Understanding the context of Catholic education in 2023 provided further evidence of the importance of this study. Currently, Catholic schools share the same expressed commitment to academic excellence as their public or charter counterparts; the obvious difference is the Catholic school tradition calls its members to view their realities and lived experiences through a lens that combines both faith and reason.

### **Context of Catholic Schools in the United States**

Catholic schools are rooted in a tradition of education that differs fundamentally from the premises guiding public and charter elementary schools. The goal of Catholic education has long been for students to develop and grow their identities as Catholics prepared to understand and contribute to the work for justice and peace. In doing so, these students become the best versions of themselves, ideally equipped to serve others and address social injustices.

Thomas A. Daly, Chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Committee on Catholic Education, expressed his appreciation to Catholic educators during his February 5, 2022, remarks celebrating National Catholic Schools Week. According to Daly (2022), "Catholic Social Teaching instills a love of community and country with graduates contributing to civil society at all levels, most notably among our nation's leaders, including at the highest levels of government and public service" (para. 4).

## **Church Teachings on Social Justice**

During his World Day of Peace message, Pope Francis (2022) stated, “In a word, teaching and education are the foundations of a cohesive civil society capable of generating hope, prosperity and progress” (para. 3.1). Pope Francis emphasized the importance of investments in education and encouraging young people to commit to working for a more just world. Intergenerational dialogue, together with increased efforts to foster a culture of care, renews a sense of social responsibility for the other. As the world emerged from the COVID-19 global pandemic, Pope Francis challenged his followers to build paths of peace and solidarity between generations and for those in need of support (Pope Francis, 2022). Service to others is indeed integral to the mission of the Catholic Church and its schools, with a range of teachings on social justice, solidarity, and love for the other articulated in the Catholic Church’s (2000) sections in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on human community:

The vocation of humanity is to show forth the image of God and to be transformed into the image of the Father’s only Son. This vocation takes a personal form since each of us is called to enter into the divine beatitude; it also concerns the human community as a whole. (Section no. 1877)

Additionally, the Church’s social justice teachings provided a lens with which to view economic and governmental policies concerning matters of social living and solidarity with the human community as a whole. The Church did not provide public or economic policies, but rather envisioned a vision of the world as it should be, where social conditions that degrade or dehumanize people are not tolerated.

## **Catholic Social Teaching**

According to Gomez (2022), Archbishop of Los Angeles, “We live in a cultural moment marked by urgent concern for social justice. There is much that Catholic social teaching can

bring to these conversations and debates” (para. 19). The USCCB’s (2022) *Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching* presented the Church’s position regarding its vision of a just society amid modern-day challenges. Consistently woven throughout the themes was the clear call to live as one community in relationship with the other; each member was conferred with the right to a life of dignity and respect and the accompanying responsibility to care for all of God’s creations (USCCB, 2022). Thorough discussions of these teachings have been presented through papal and foundational documents; abbreviated descriptions of the key themes from USCCB (2022) were presented via the following passage:

**Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching.

**Call to Family, Community, and Participation**

The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society—in economics and politics, in law and policy—directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community.

**Rights and Responsibilities**

The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities—to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

**Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**

A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment . . . and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

**The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers**

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected—the right to

productive work, to decent and fair wages, to the organization and joining of unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

### **Solidarity**

We are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbor has global dimensions in a shrinking world. At the core of the virtue of solidarity is the pursuit of justice and peace.

### **Care for God's Creation**

We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored. (p. 1)

Catholics have been called to serve others, seek justice, and work for peace. As such, Catholic educators, along with others who teach the faith, have been called to fulfill this integral mission of the Church and incorporate these social teachings fully into their educational programs, according to the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic and Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS, 2021; National Catholic Educational Association [NCEA], 2021).

National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA, 2021) was founded in 1904 and is the largest, private professional education association in the world, with a membership of nearly 140,000 educators serving 1.6 million students in Catholic education. The NCEA (2021) has supported Catholic schools in the following ways: (a) developed current and future leaders, (b) provided educational resources and strategically expanded professional development opportunities for those committed to the mission of Catholic education, and (c) served as the national voice for Catholic schools.

In 2012, the NCEA published the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic and Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS). The NSBECS (2021) consisted of 13 standards, organized into four domains, to serve as both a guide and assessment tool for PK–12 Catholic school effectiveness and sustainability. The organization included research-based school effectiveness criteria, as well as criteria unique to Catholic school mission and identity. The four domains included were: mission and Catholic identity, governance and leadership, academic excellence, and operational vitality.

The domains and accompanying standards derived their meaning and relevance from nine defining characteristics grounded in the Holy See’s teaching on Catholic schools as compiled by Archbishop J. Michael Miller, Congregation of St. Basil, (Miller, 2006). Five of the nine defining characteristics articulated the Catholic school’s responsibility to provide a culture for its students that promotes service to others, a sense of community, and becoming the best version of themselves. According to the NCEA (2021), these characteristics included:

**Centered in the Person of Jesus Christ**

Catholic education is rooted in the conviction that Jesus Christ provides the most comprehensive and compelling example of the realization of full human potential. . . In every aspect of programs, life, and activities, Catholic schools should foster personal relationships with Jesus Christ and communal witness to the Gospel message of love of God and neighbor and service to the world, especially the poor and marginalized.

**Contributing to the Evangelizing Mission of the Church**

By reason of its educational activity, Catholic schools participate directly and in a privileged way in the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Social Teaching.

As an ecclesial entity where faith, culture, and life are brought into harmony, the Catholic school should be a place of real and specified pastoral ministry in communion with the local Bishop. The environment in Catholic schools should express the signs of Catholic culture, physically, and visibly.

### **Committed to Educate the Whole Child**

Catholic school education is rooted in the conviction that human beings have a transcendent destiny, and that education for the whole person must form the spiritual, intellectual, physical, psychological, social, moral, aesthetic and religious capacities of each child. . . . Catholic schools should develop and implement academic, co-curricular, faith-formation, and service/ministry programs to educate the whole child in all these dimensions.

### **Steeped in a Catholic Worldview**

Catholic education aims at the integral formation of the human person, which includes “preparation for professional life, formation of ethical and social awareness, developing awareness of the transcendental, and religious education.” . . . All curriculum and instruction in a Catholic school should foster: the desire to seek wisdom and truth, the preference for social justice, the discipline to become self-learners, the capacity to recognize ethical and moral grounding for behavior, and the responsibility to transform and enrich the world with Gospel values. The Catholic school should avoid the error that its distinctiveness rests solely on its religious education program.

### **Shaped by Communion and Community**

Catholic school education places an emphasis on the school as a community—an educational community of persons and a genuine community of faith. . . . Catholic schools should do everything they can to promote genuine trust and collaboration among teachers, with parents as the primary educators of their children, and with governing body members to foster appreciation of different gifts that build up a learning and faith community and strengthen academic excellence. The Catholic school should pay especially close attention to the quality of interpersonal relations between teachers and students, ensuring that the student is seen as a person whose intellectual growth is harmonized with spiritual, religious, emotional, and social growth. (paras. 1–6)

## **Early Adolescents’ Catholic Identities in Their Faith Communities**

Adolescence has been defined as the period of development occurring after childhood and before adulthood, and early adolescence as the transitional period between childhood and adolescence typically taking place in Grades 5–8. Researchers have sometimes referred to this transitional period as a time of storm and stress often marked by increased emotional volatility, desire for increased independence from parents or guardians, and increased focus on peer relationships and acceptance (Göllner et al., 2017).



## **Belonging to a Faith Community**

A sense of belonging has historically played a key role in adolescent development. According to Allen and Kern (2017), researchers have found a sense of belonging impacts how students perceive their experiences at school, with those experiencing a sense of belonging reporting positive experiences. Furthermore, a sense of belonging was more strongly associated with students' well-being than other factors being investigated (Allen & Kern, 2017). Conversely, the impact of not belonging included loneliness; social isolation; psychological distress; disengagement; and, in some cases, poor health and self-harm behaviors. As early adolescents strived to create identities for themselves and separate from parents and guardians and family members, Allen and Kern (2017) noted:

A sense of belonging can provide a deep sense of connection that a young person carries with them into young adulthood and beyond. Without it, the young person felt lost, disoriented and alone, without the social skills needed to effectively function in their adult years. (p. 12)

## **The Lure of Justice**

According to Barron (2019), Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, "We have a very powerful tradition around doing the works of justice and young people like that. I think we should lead with it" (6:30). He went on to state, "Surveys consistently show that young people get and resonate with the church's great teaching on justice. They resonate with our outreach to the poor and the hungry and the homeless and the migrant . . . they understand it" (Barron, 2019, 5:35). In his June 11, 2019, remarks to the spring general assembly

of the USCCB in Baltimore, Barron (2019) reiterated, “The more involved young people are in this work, that the closer they stay to the life of a church” (7:31).

Barron (2019) also stated for every one person who joins the church, over 6 people leave, and the median age of those who leave is 13. He further noted, “We have a very smart tradition, but we have not communicated that effectively to our young people” (Barron, 2019, para. 7) and argued the opportunity has been missed to connect with young people by engaging them in service-learning experiences. In other words, Barron (2019) argued, “We’ve got this tradition, let’s use it” (6:48) to connect with young people and help them engage with a church community.

Similarly, Gomez (2022), Archbishop of Los Angeles and President of the USCCB, noted the following in his January 12, 2022, pastoral teaching:

Catholic social teaching may be the Church’s best kept secret. I am surprised how often I meet people, even many good Catholics, who do not know that the Church has her own teaching about what makes for a good society. (para. 4)

After 16 months of distance learning and prolonged isolation necessitated by the COVID-19 global pandemic, there emerged an even greater need to connect with youth to help them reengage with their school communities. For ADLA elementary schools, the school community has served ostensibly as a faith community as well. As such, service-learning experiences have the potential to increase students’ Catholic identities.

### **Experiential Education**

Dewey (1938) defined *experiential learning* as the relationship between students’ interactions with their environment and the resulting attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions acquired from and during those interactions. According to Dewey (1938), “Every experience both takes

up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 35). Experience was defined both the process of interacting with one’s environment and the outcome, or results, of those interactions. Service-learning programs grounded in the principles of experiential education have the potential to yield benefits to students beyond academic learning. Experiential service-learning programs help develop students’ abilities as change agents, provide a sense of belonging, and encourage the development of competence (Carver, 1997).

### **Principle of Interaction**

Educational experiences have value and power when they lead to growth and development (Dewey, 1938). Such high-quality educational experiences have resulted from two fundamental principles in practice: interaction and continuity. The premise of the principle of interaction was that students’ experiences resulted from interactions between themselves and their environments. In other words, the interaction occurred between a student’s internal response and the external aspects of their environment, and these responses were informed by preexisting attitudes toward environmental stimuli, acquired habits, current emotional states, and prior knowledge.

### **Principle of Continuity**

The second premise of Dewey’s (1938) experiential education was rooted in the principle of continuity. This principle stated, “every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). Dewey posited humans form habits and emotional responses based upon prior

experiences. In turn, these habits and responses informed an individual's responses to new experiences.

### **The ABCs of Experiential Service-Learning Programs**

According to LeSourd (1997), service-learning projects have provided opportunities for lived experiences with great educative potential. LeSourd (1997) defined *service* as an act done for the public good in which an individual or group voluntarily helps other individuals or groups. This commitment to serve the public good must be “intense enough to inspire action . . . not undertaken for the sake of advancing one's private interests” (LeSourd, 1997, p. 157) with a focused goal to also develop the integrity of those who serve. Greenleaf's (1996) servant-leadership model of service was founded upon the premise that the leader is servant first. Servant leadership began by exploring the natural feeling that one wants to serve the needs of others. The conscious choice develops one's aspirations to lead. Greenleaf's aspiration to lead by serving others was consistent with LeSourd's intense commitment to inspire one to serve others.

Servant leadership has been defined as the practice of building community by serving others and, in doing so, creating a sense of belonging for those serving as well as those being served. Sergiovanni (1992, p. 128, as cited in Grogan, 2017, p. 380) summarized the three characteristics of servant leadership in action and how these characteristics lead to a greater connection to one's community: purposing, empowerment, and leadership by outrage.

Sergiovanni (1992, p. 128, as cited in Grogan, 2017, p. 380) outlined:

1. Purposing: The purpose of purposing is to build within the school a center of shared values that transforms it from a mere organization into a covenantal community.
2. Empowerment: linked to purposing in that everyone is free to do what makes sense, as long as people's decisions embody the values shared by the community. This characteristic shifts the focus from individual needs to the individual's responsibility to care for the needs of the other, in other words, the community.

3. Leadership by outrage: this characteristic highlights the importance for the servant-leader to be outraged when empowerment is abused and when purposes are ignored. (p. 380)

Benefits of service-learning have reached beyond academic achievement and included the development of leadership, communication, and organizational skills (Carver, 1997). Such characteristics have involved integral components of experiential learning when organized according to the core values of experiential education programs to promote student agency, belonging, and competence (ABC). Carver (1997) defined ABC as follows:

**A** represents the developing of students' personal agency—allowing students to become more powerful change agents in their lives and communities, increasing students' recognition and appreciation of the extent to which the locus of control for their lives is within themselves, and enabling them to use this as a source of power to generate activity.

**B** refers to the development and maintenance of a community in which students (and staff) share a sense of belonging—in which they see themselves as members with rights and responsibilities, power and vulnerability, and learn to act responsibly, considering the best interests of themselves, other individuals, and the group as a whole.

**C** stands for competence, referring to the development of student competence (which usually coincides with the development of teacher competence) in a variety of areas (e.g., cognitive, physical, musical, social). Developing competence means learning skills, acquiring knowledge, and attaining the ability to apply what is learned. (p. 146)

Furthermore, effective service-learning programs possessed the following four characteristics: “authenticity, active learning, drawing on student experience, and connecting lessons to the future” (Carver, 1997, p. 147). Together, the ABCs comprised the student experience, which was dynamic and fluctuating because experience entailed both the process and the outcome. The processes of developing ABC included overcoming challenges, developing leadership and social skills, receiving feedback, and engaging in self-reflection to identify successes and missteps. The outcomes of developing ABC included greater proficiency in conflict resolution and problem-solving, increased self-knowledge, and enhanced relationships

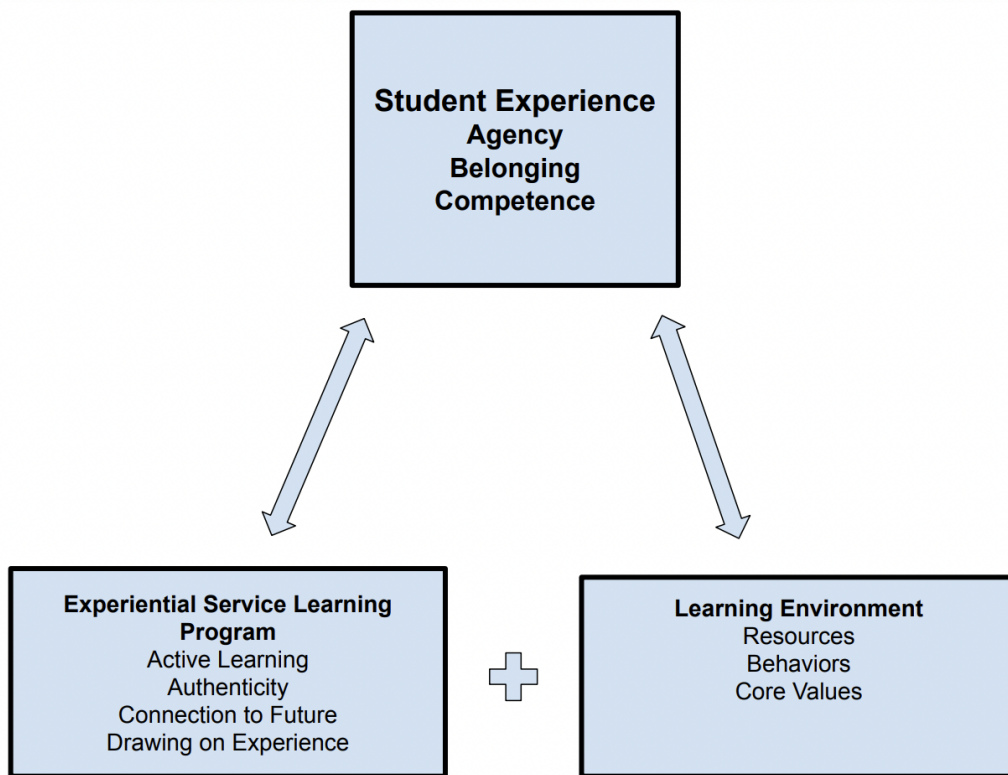
with peers. As such, experiential service-learning programs have also helped students build a sense of community and belonging.

For learning environments (e.g., classrooms and school sites) to nurture and promote the development of students' ABC, Carver (1997) identified requisite components for both the setting and program itself: resources, behaviors, and values. Figure 1 expanded on this conceptual framework for experiential education. According to Carver (1997):

- Resources include trust, empathy, language, tradition, reputation, energy, authority, and knowledge, as well as more commonly recognized resources such as money and physical materials.
- Behaviors include the identification, selection, distribution, and use of resources.
- Values that are shared by members of a learning community become guiding principles for the behaviors listed above. (p. 147)

**Figure 1**

*A Conceptual Framework for Experiential Education*



*Note.* Adapted from “Theoretical Underpinnings of Service-learning,” by R. L. Carver, (1997), *Theory into Practice*, 36(3), p. 147. (<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/40/>), copyright 2001 by Taylor & Francis.

Furthermore, some of the core tenets of experiential learning programs also promoted ABC, such as “caring and compassion; responsibility and accountability; individuality and diversity; critical thinking and creativity; and respect for self, other, and the environment” (Carver, 1997, p. 147). Institutions typically articulated these tenets in the form of mission statements, program descriptions, or philosophies. For Carver, experiential learning environments have been unique from more traditional learning environments due to the consistency and diligence with which the staff used their core values and tenets to guide their decision making and actions. As such, Carver’s conceptual framework of ABC and

program/setting characteristics has been used to develop, implement, and evaluate experiential learning programs. Given such service-learning programs have been, by definition, grounded in experience, and have involved both a process and an outcome, the assessment of service-learning programs have remained ongoing and integrated into the everyday practices of staff and students (Carver, 1997).

### **The Experience**

According to LeSourd (1997), “The service experience must evoke intense emotion because it is imperative that students learn values of the heart as well as intellectual acumen” (p. 160). Effective service-learning programs have included opportunities for both the server and the served to encounter people outside their typical social circles. Such knowledge has led to perspective taking and a deeper understanding of the other, beyond human tendency for premature judgments and stereotyping. According to LeSourd (1997), experiential service-learning programs “offer promise for realization of the vital human traits that are needed in a society that seeks to sustain a good life for all its members” (p. 157).

### **The Power and Privilege of Service-Learning**

LeSourd (1997) defined service as an act done for the public good in which an individual or group voluntarily helps other individuals or groups. Service is “not undertaken for the sake of advancing one’s private interests” but rather, seeks to uplift “the integrity of those who serve” (LeSourd, 1997, p. 157). As such, service-learning programs have demanded that one resist the urge to judge the other, thereby increasing one’s capacity for perspective taking and empathy.

Traditionally, students engaged in service-learning programs often have benefitted from greater societal privilege than those whom they intended to serve (LeSourd, 1997). Faculty and



staff committed to developing experiential service-learning programs to address inequities and/or injustices must investigate and identify the underlying structures and systems that create such differentials in social power so as not to contribute to their continued existence. Service-learning programs must explore and problematize the unequal distribution of power and privilege inherent in the service relationship and seek to do more than simply do service for those with less.

According to Cook et al. (2004, as cited in Mitchell, 2008), service-learning programs that have failed to illuminate issues of power and access may have resulted in artificially constructed perceptions of one community as broken, and another equipped to fix their brokenness. Such socially constructed images may have potentially sustained and reinforced differential access to social power for both the server and those being served, perpetuating the very injustices the server sought to undo.

### **The Classroom and Community**

According to Mitchell (2008), those tasked with the development of service-learning experiences should explore the service activity to understand its relationship to community need and service-learning program goals. Relationships in most service-learning opportunities have often been based on differences between the service-learning student and the group or individual being served. Service-learning experiences should focus on reciprocity, with participants learning from and with each other to foster authentic relationships based on connections, rather than differential access to power and privilege (Kendall, 1990, as cited in Mitchell, 2008).

According to Barber (1991, p. 51, as cited in Hepburn, 1997, p. 141):

It will be important to let the young see that service is not just about altruism or charity, or a matter of those who are well-off helping those who are not. It is serving the public interest, which is the same thing as serving enlightened self-interest. (p. 141)

Some suggestions for use by educators seeking to implement experiential service-learning programs for their students have included: (a) discussions, readings, and reflective writing about biases, unearned privilege, societal and power differentials; (b) acknowledging that learning can take place outside the physical boundaries of the classroom, such as in the community and from nontraditional sources (e.g., community members); and (c) involving those being served in the process of identifying their need, rather than the need being selected by those doing the service. As Barber (1991, p. 51, as cited in Hepburn, 1997, p. 141) emphasized, “An experiential learning process that includes both classroom learning and group work outside the classroom has the greatest likelihood of impacting on student ignorance, intolerance, prejudice” (p. 51).

Additionally, authentic relationships between the server and served are not built in a semester and require ongoing and prolonged engagement. Such relationships, intentionally built over time and with sustained efforts, are critical characteristics of a service-learning pedagogy focused on confronting social injustices to advance the public good and developing “the integrity of those who serve” (LeSourd, 1997, p. 157).

### **Student Voice**

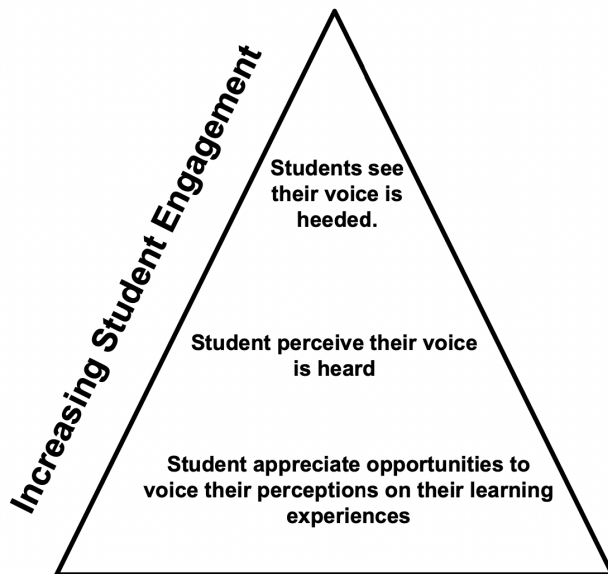
Even prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the role and impact of student voice with respect to educational change and reform had been the subject of studies for decades.

## **Impact on Student Engagement**

Educators concerned with student disengagement have studied the impact on student engagement when they perceived their views and perceptions were heard and valued (Kidd & Czerniawski, 2011). When students perceived their opinions and perspective matter to school personnel, they were more inclined to think about and express their perceptions on their learning experiences. According to Kidd and Czerniawski (2011), students expressed multiple reasons to listen to learners' voices on their educational experiences, including (a) increased student engagement, confidence, self-esteem, empowerment, and improved relationships; and (b) understanding between teachers and students. Student voice initiatives have acknowledged the value of learning with and from students to support their growth and “create opportunities for change . . . but better still become instigators of it themselves” (Kidd & Czerniawski, 2011, p. 313). Figure 2 depicts the impact of student voice on engagement.

**Figure 2**

*Impact of Student Voice on Engagement*



*Note.* Adapted from *The Student Voice Handbook: Bridging the Academic/Practitioner Divide* by W. Kidd & G. Czerniawski (2011), p. 277. Emerald Group Publishing. Copyright 2011 by Emerald Group Publishing.

**The Need**

Biddle et al. (2022) found, after 16 months of social and educational disruptions necessitated by the COVID-19 global pandemic, “Everyone in our education system is suffering from missing connections—connections between teachers and students, staff and administration, and schools and the community” (para. 2). The social isolation of distance learning and stay-at-home orders was followed by nearly 2 years of rapid-fire changes and updates to public health reopening protocols for educational institutions, ongoing concerns about infection rates, and new variants. As such, many students felt the cumulative weight of these disruptions and needed assistance to reengage with their school communities and heal from missing connections and opportunities. One way to support students as they struggled to reengage and connect with their

school and faith communities was to listen with open minds and ears to learn what their experiences were and how educators could better support their needs. According to Lubelfeld et al. (2018):

The best thing we can do for our students is to get them in position of leadership, collaboration . . . and help students to see their place in society and their place as students in their school as something larger than a passive recipient of lessons and knowledge. (p. 33)

### **The Roar**

According to Kidd and Czerniawski (2011), student voice has served “as a catalyst for change in schools” (p. 288). The researchers argued personnel at educational institutions should hear and honor the “the roar that lies on the other side of the silence of the classroom, for it is only in that roar that we can begin to develop an understanding of the lived experiences” (Kidd & Czerniawski, 2011, p. 265) of the students to bring about meaningful change. Hearing and honoring students’ perceptions on their service-learning program experiences had likely improved their engagement and interest in social justice work. Listening to the student voice to learn from their experiences may also have strengthened the relationship and connection between the students and the listeners. According to Vaughn (2021), the student perspective provided insight into not only what and how students learned, but also whether they perceived their learning supported their ideas, aspirations, and their agency. Additionally, Alterior (2006) stated, “When students reflectively process their stories, they create the possibility for change in themselves and in others” (p. 3); Kidd and Czerniawski (2011) further noted:

Listening to student stories can have a transformative impact for the hearer enabling a shift in values and valences. It enables empathy by awakening what is ordinarily not heard, enabling staff to wear another’s shoes and see things from their perspective. (p. 272)

Schools, including ADLA Catholic elementary schools, must prioritize listening to students' roars and amplify their messages for others to hear when seeking to refine and improve their programs to remain viable and relevant options for youth of the 21st century.

### **Conclusion**

This case study research was guided by Carver's (1997) ABC conceptual framework on adolescent students' perceptions of their service-learning program experiences and Catholic identity. Carver's ABC framework was used to code the students' perceived feelings of agency, belonging, and competence while participating in their service-learning program. Experiential service-learning was established as integral to the mission and philosophy of Catholic schools and central to one's Catholic identity. Therefore, one's Catholic identity was firmly grounded in furthering the work of justice and must include acts of service to others. Given the importance of hearing and honoring the students' voices and perceptions relative to their lived experiences, this case study research used student interviews and service-learning program work samples to analyze the ABCs of students, along with their perceptions of their Catholic identity, while participating in a service-learning program.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presented the research question and research sub question and outlined the research design, data collection, and analysis methods used for this case study. Catholic schools have been rooted in a tradition of education that differs fundamentally from premises guiding public and charter elementary schools. Although Catholic schools have long shared the same expressed commitment to academic excellence as their public or charter counterparts, the obvious difference has been the Catholic school tradition of calling its members to view their realities and lived experiences through a lens that combines both faith and reason. According to Pope Francis (2022), “In a word, teaching and education are the foundations of a cohesive civil society capable of generating hope, prosperity and progress” (p. 1.3). Integral to the mission of the Catholic Church and its schools is service to others, with a range of teachings on social justice, solidarity, and love for the other as articulated in the Church’s Catholic Social Teaching (CST) framework.

This section is followed by an explanation of the qualitative descriptive case study methodology as the appropriate approach to understand the characteristics of experiential service-learning in one Los Angeles-area Catholic elementary school. The data collected were presented as findings in Chapter 4 and discussed in Chapter 5.

## Research Questions

This case study focused on the following research question and sub question:

What are the early adolescent students' perceptions of their participation in a service-learning program while attending one ADLA Catholic elementary school?

- a. What are the early adolescent students' perceptions of their Catholic identity while participating in a service-learning program?

## Rationale

As the researcher, I worked from a phenomenological perspective to investigate participants' perceptions and lived experiences related to the research questions to understand early adolescent students' perceptions of their service-learning program experiences provided for them at the case study site (i.e., Catholic elementary school) and their perceptions of their Catholic identities while participating in those experiences. I intended to use this perspective because I was "interested in human consciousness as a way to understand social reality, particularly how one 'thinks' about experience; in other words, *how consciousness is experienced* [emphasis in original]" (Leavy, 2017, p. 129).

I conducted a single-unit case study on the bounded system of the Sacred Heart Academy (SHA) campus, using data from student interviews and a document review of student work from the service-learning program. SHA was a pseudonym used to protect the privacy of the school's students, staff, and administrators. I intended to use the descriptive case study design to facilitate in-depth empirical research occurring in a concrete, real-world setting. This case study research was grounded in a specific context; as such, other educational leaders will be able to compare the findings of this study to their own experiences and contexts. Additionally, my positionality



as principal and researcher allowed me to navigate efficiently through scheduling conflicts, engage in iterative self-reflexivity of practices and policies, and maximize response rates and validity due to my familiarity and established relationships with the participant groups. Given the phenomenological nature of the research questions, the qualitative descriptive case study design was the ideal method of understanding participants' perceptions and lived experiences relative to the topic (Mills & Gay, 2019; Yin, 2016).

### **Method**

This study used a descriptive case study design to investigate the research question and research sub question. One school was selected through convenience sampling as the focus of this case study for two reasons: (a) its stated commitment to provide an experiential service-learning experience for its students; and (b) its accessibility and familiarity to the me, as the researcher.

### **Participants**

This study included me and participants from one primary stakeholder group: early adolescent students in Grades 6–8. Purposeful sampling was used to identify student participants for follow-up interviews based upon their availability and willingness to participate. Each participant provided different perspectives to build a holistic understanding of the service-learning program and each student's voice provided unique insights into their perceptions on their Catholic identities and service-learning program experiences.

The participant sample started with 75 sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students who were currently enrolled students at one selected Catholic elementary school in Los Angeles County. All participants were prescreened prior to the Phase I interviews to identify students

with the following characteristics: enrolled for at least 3 consecutive school years, including the 2022–2023 school year and self-identified as Catholic in the school’s student information system. From this group, 15 students, representing all three grade levels, were randomly selected and invited to participate in the Phase I semi-structured interviews.

### **Setting**

This qualitative descriptive case study took place within the Archdiocese of Los Angeles (ADLA), the nation’s largest Catholic community comprising three counties in the southern part of California: Los Angeles, Ventura, and Santa Barbara. Since 2011, the ADLA (2023) has been led by the Most Reverend José H. Gomez, as the Archbishop of Los Angeles. As of 2023, the ADLA school system was comprised of 214 elementary schools and 50 secondary schools. Each elementary school site was a parish school and governed by its pastor. The elementary school site in this case study was a parish school that was governed by its pastor. The school belonged to the San Pedro region, which included 53 elementary and eight high schools.

At the time of this study in 2023, SHA served approximately 265 PreK–Grade 8 students. SHA had one classroom per grade level, with an average class size of 24 students. The teaching staff typically consisted of 15 adults, as well as approximately 16 classified or part-time staff. Classified staff included front office personnel, a bookkeeper, a facilities manager, instructional aides, and a variety of other part-time roles. Each PreK–Grade 2 classroom was assigned one teacher and one instructional aide.

SHA also had a support team education plan coordinator (STEP coordinator) to oversee the school’s STEP Program. The STEP Program was a collaborative effort between teachers, administrators, parents, and students to determine solutions and provide additional support for

students based on their individual strengths and areas of need. Approximately 8% of the SHA student population was served by its STEP Program at the time of this study.

During the 2021–2022 school year, SHA families’ self-identified racial demographic breakdown was as follows: 37% White, 26% Hispanic, 26% multiracial, 7% Asian, 2% African American, and 2% Filipino. In total, 85% of SHA families identified as Catholic. Moreover, 70% of SHA’s 2021 and 2022 graduates matriculated to different Catholic high schools. The variety of data collected through interviews and student work samples provided a full view of students’ perceptions on their Catholic identities and service-learning program.

### **Service-Learning Program Overview**

SHA’s service-learning program differed from other programs because it was a weekly class that all sixth- to eighth-grade students attended together with their servant leadership teachers. In addition to completing service projects, referred to as Magis projects, the students learned about Greenleaf’s (1996) servant leadership model, the Seven Pillars of Servant Leadership (Sipe & Fick, 2015); CST, specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals (Poe et al., 2021); and public speaking, among others. Students worked together, led by their group president, to complete assignments and service-learning projects throughout the year. The students were divided into four groups, known as their houses. Each house had students from all three grade levels and was named after a saint of importance to the SHA parish: St. Anthony of Padua, St. Clare of Assisi, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Joseph of Cupertino.

The house presidents were responsible for ensuring their house completed their assignments by facilitating their discussions, encouraging members to collaborate while goal

setting, and monitoring their progress. Each house also maintained a binder with their mission statement, norms, student roles, meeting minutes, and project reflections. At the beginning of each school year, each house president was responsible for leading a group discussion as they revisited their mission statement and meeting norms to determine whether any changes or updates needed to be made. Throughout the school year, the presidents developed their leadership skills and were responsible for creating and maintaining a culture where each member feels welcome and included. The house presidents were supported by their two service-learning program teachers and four eighth-grade delegates. The delegates assumed overall leadership roles for the class and were responsible for coordinating with the service-learning teachers to plan and present lessons, design and execute team-building activities, and collaborate and problem solve with the house presidents as issues arise. Additionally, students completed individual assignments, such as a written reflection upon completion of their first service-learning project of the school year: their Mini-Magis project. See Appendix A for a sample of the instructions for the written reflection.

At the end of the year, the students completed an application requesting to be considered for different roles, such as prayer leader, house president, house vice president, secretary, or delegate (see Appendix B). The students stayed in their same house for the duration of their time at SHA, unless there were extenuating circumstances. As the eighth-graders graduated each June, the incoming sixth-grade students were welcomed into their houses during a ceremony at the end of their fifth-grade year.

## **Data Collection**

This qualitative case study consisted of two phases: (a) Phase I, which employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with randomly selected students from an initial, larger set of purposefully selected students; and (b) Phase II document analysis of student work samples, program artifacts, and documents. I used triangulation to answer the research questions and collected data from multiple sources (Leavy, 2017).

### ***Phase I: Interviews***

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed for use during the individual student interviews to facilitate conversation. Open-ended questions were included to avoid limiting students with a predetermined set of responses and allowed participants to use their own language to share their experiences and stories. The questions were constructed to elicit student perceptions on their Catholic identities and service-learning program experiences. The interview protocol included four questions adapted from National Catholic Educational Association's (NCEA, 2023) Information for Growth Assessment of Children/Youth Religious Education (IFG/ACRE) test results. The IFG/ACRE has been administered annually to students in Grades 5 and 8, then submitted to NCEA for scoring. The test consisted of two sections: (a) an objective portion to assess understanding of the doctrine (i.e., head knowledge), and (b) a subjective portion to assess their beliefs, attitudes, practices, and perceptions (i.e., heart knowledge). The second portion included questions regarding feeling safe; included and supported by peers, teachers, administrators, and clergy. Five questions directly related to students' Catholic identities were of interest to this study and were adapted to allow for open-ended responses and

included in the Phase I interview protocol. The five questions from the IFG/ACRE, Level 2, were Questions 7, 10, 11, 12, and 41 (see Appendix A; NCEA, 2023).

The interviews were scheduled according to the participants' availability and took place either in a naturalistic setting that was familiar and accessible to the participants (e.g., a breakout room or classroom) or via Zoom ([www.zoom.us](http://www.zoom.us)) based upon the participant's preference to establish trust and build a rapport with the me (Mills & Gay, 2019). The individual interviews were audio-taped with the permission of the student and their parents. During interviews, I demonstrated active listening and took field notes to capture the participants' exact words as well as my interpretations and sense-making throughout the data collection process (Leavy, 2017). All interview participants were asked to bring an artifact from a recent service-learning project for use during and after the interview. During the interview, each student was asked to describe their artifact, thereby contextualizing their service-learning experience through storytelling. After the interview, I analyzed the artifacts, along with the transcribed interviews, to identify themes and code responses.

### ***Phase II: Document Analysis***

In addition to the data collected through interviews, I analyzed student service-learning work samples including presentations, websites, and reflections.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Prior to requesting participants' consent, each student and their parents were informed of the research topic and that their participation was voluntary. All participants received the informed consent form along with the timeline for the notification of the interview selection, the interview schedule, and the estimated completion date of the study.

All data collected throughout the case study were stored on a secure, password-protected laptop with fingerprint touch identification. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality and participants' names were never be used in any public dissemination of the data (e.g., publications, presentations). All hard copies of research materials and consent forms were stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to me. When the case study was completed, all identifying information was removed from the data and kept confidential. If, however, during the case study, I had learned a student intended to harm themselves or others, the appropriate authorities would have been notified. I did not need to notify any authorities during the case study because I did not learn information from students regarding harm to self or to others.

Interview sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and eventually *in vivo* coded to identify thematic patterns. Data analysis of interviews and student work samples began October 1, 2022, with initial immersion of the data to get a holistic sense of the data and a deeper insight into the participants' experiences (Leavy, 2017). After initial immersion with the data, I engaged in data reduction to prioritize and identify which data were relevant and useful in answering the research questions (Leavy, 2017). Inductive coding was derived from the data to capture meaning from participants' narratives rather than my biases or preconceived understanding of the students' experiences. Although data collection occurred in two phases, my inductive analysis of the data was iterative and ongoing. This approach allowed me to immerse myself in the data and construct meaning as themes, relationships, and patterns emerged (Mills & Gay, 2019).

### **Validity and Trustworthiness**

During the semi-structured interview process, *in vivo* coding strategies were used to capture the participants' actual responses rather than my interpretations. Once the interviews

were completed and transcribed, I shared my analysis with participants and provided opportunities for clarification or additional explanation as needed.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions**

#### **Limitations**

A central limitation of this study was the limited amount of time available for data collection and analysis. As such, the sample size was limited to one school site to ensure sufficient time to collect and analyze the data. Because the school site was selected by convenience sampling and the participants were selected by purposeful sampling, the generalizability of the study is also limited.

A second limitation was my positionality with respect to the data analysis. As an experienced Catholic educator and the administrator of the selected school site at the time of this study, I had established relationships with most of the participants (i.e., students, teachers, and administrators). As such, my positionality may have affected the participants' responses. Data were collected from multiple sources to triangulate the data, allow themes and meaning to emerge, and blunt my bias.

Lastly, there was often the inherent limitation of self-reported data; however, this case study specifically sought to hear and understand early adolescents' perceptions of their service-learning program experiences and their Catholic identities. As such, in this case study, the students' self-reported perceptions were relevant and integral to answer the research question and sub question.



## **Delimitations**

A delimitation of this study was the focus on one Los Angeles-area Catholic elementary school. One school was selected by convenience sampling to participate; therefore, all other schools in the ADLA were precluded from participating in this study. Additionally, this research focused only on purposefully selected early adolescent students in sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grades from one school, who were selected through convenience sampling. The findings were not supported by longitudinal data nor were they applicable to pre-COVID-19 pandemic years. Future researchers should consider exploring service-learning programs and students' Catholic identities at additional schools throughout the ADLA, from various demographic and socioeconomic communities, to improve the generalizability of the data.

## **Assumption**

An underlying assumption was the participants responded honestly during the interviews despite my positionality and potential bias. An additional assumption was that experiential service-learning programs would have had the same impact on students' Catholic identities after the prolonged period of isolation and the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 global pandemic as they would have had prior to the pandemic.

## **Timeline**

I adhered to the following timeline to complete this case study. The dissertation proposal defense took place in June 2022. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was submitted in July 2022, with the full review taking place in August 2022. Prescreening and initial contact with participants to notify and obtain consent took place by August 31, 2022. Student interviews took place from September 10 to September 30, 2022, either in person or via Zoom,

based upon the participants' preferences. Interview sessions were recorded, transcribed, and eventually *in vivo* coded to identify thematic patterns. Data analysis of interviews and student work samples began October 1, 2022, beginning with an initial immersion of the data to get a holistic sense of the data and a deeper insight into the participants' experiences (Leavy, 2017). Findings, implications, and recommendations drafts were written from November 2022 to January 2023, followed by editing in February 2023, with the final dissertation defense in March 2023.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand early adolescent students' perceptions of the service-learning program experiences provided for them in one Archdiocese of Los Angeles (ADLA) Catholic elementary school. Additionally, the purpose was to explore any associations between the students' perceptions and their Catholic identities relative to their experiences in a service-learning program.

As the researcher, I worked from a phenomenological perspective to investigate participants' perceptions and lived experiences related to the research question and sub question because they were "interested in human consciousness as a way to understand social reality, particularly how one 'thinks' about experience; in other words, *how consciousness is experienced* [emphasis in original]" (Leavy, 2017, p. 129). This single-unit descriptive case study focused on the bounded system of one Catholic elementary school in the ADLA, referred to by the pseudonym Sacred Heart Academy (SHA). This study used data from student interviews and document review of student work samples from the service-learning program to facilitate in-depth empirical research occurring in a concrete, real-world setting to answer the following research question and sub question:

What are the early adolescent students' perceptions of their participation in a service-learning program while attending one ADLA Catholic elementary school?

- a. What are the early adolescent students' perceptions of their Catholic identity while participating in a service-learning program?

## Participant Demographics

The participants in this research study consisted of a convenience sample selected from 75 early adolescent students in Grades 6–8. The 75 students were prescreened for the following characteristics: enrolled at SHA for at least 3 consecutive school years, including the 2022–2023 school year, and self-identified as Catholic in the school’s student information system. Fifteen students in Grades 6–8 ranging in age from 10–13 years were randomly selected from the pool of 47 eligible participants with parental permission, and invited to participate in Phase I (i.e., semi-structured interviews) over a 3-week period. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participants’ information.

**Table 1**

### *Participant Information*

Pseudonym	Grade level	Provided work sample	Years attended SHA
Benjamin	6	No	4
Caroline	8	Yes	9
Collette	8	Yes	7
Connor	8	Yes	4
Daniel	6	No	6
Jonathon	6	Yes	7
Julia	7	Yes	8
Kathy	7	Yes	6
Maricel	8	Yes	4
Mateo	6	No	7
Patricia	7	Yes	8
Penelope	8	No	9
Peter	6	No	7
Quinn	6	No	7
Sara	8	Yes	9

The numbers in Table 1 indicate the participants’ grade levels, whether they provided a service-learning project work sample, and the number of years they had attended SHA.

## **Data Analysis Procedures**

The case study analysis process included individual student interviews. The student interviews were conducted during noninstructional time, lasting between 20–45 minutes, at a day, time, location, and mode of the students' and parents' choice: in total, 14 students chose in-person interviews, and one student chose Zoom. Student participants were assigned pseudonyms prior to the interviews to protect confidentiality, and identifying information was removed from the transcripts and student work samples. Audio-recorded interviews were collected from 13 students with parental permission and child assent to assist me with transcribing and identifying themes. During the audio-recorded interviews, I practiced active-listening and asked follow-up questions, taking only abbreviated notes throughout the interviews; however, I took detailed, handwritten notes during the two interviews of students without permission to audio-record to accurately capture their responses. No visual images were collected during this study.

### **Phase I Qualitative Data Analysis: Semi-Structured Interviews**

I designed a 16-question interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions to allow participants to use their own language to share their experiences and stories and avoid limiting their responses with a predetermined set of responses to answer my research question and sub question. The questions were divided into four sections: introduction, involvement, impact, and Catholic identity. The purpose of the three introductory questions was to put the students at ease and establish their understanding of the structure of the service-learning program class by asking relatively straightforward questions regarding the location, frequency, and duration of the classes, with a transition question regarding student participation (see Appendix C.)

The second section consisted of four questions regarding students' involvement with the program, such as a recent experience or work sample (if presented), and the perceived importance to them of the experience and/or work sample. The third section consisted of five questions focused on the program's impact and included questions on (a) their favorite part of the program, (b) remote versus in-person experience, and (c) suggestions for change. The sixth-graders did not participate in SHA's service-learning program during the COVID-19 global pandemic, as this was their 1st year and the program had been fully in person prior. Their responses regarding their program experiences in person versus remote were not based on their actual experiences, but their opinion of what the experience might be like based upon their remote learning experiences in other classes.

The last section consisted of four questions on Catholic identity to determine whether the students saw a connection between the service-learning program and their Catholic identity, their prayer life, and God's call for them. The fourth and final question of this section asked for their definition of what it means to be Catholic. These four questions were adapted from the Information for Growth Assessment of Children/Youth Religion Education (IFG/ACRE; NCEA, 2023) Level 2, Questions 7, 10, 11, 12, and 41. Only two students responded they were unsure of or did not know how to answer one or more of the questions from the Catholic identity section.

During interviews, I practiced active listening and took field notes to capture the participants' exact words along with my interpretations and sense-making throughout the data collection process (Leavy, 2017). I asked follow-up questions for clarification as needed and allowed the students as much time as necessary to respond. In some cases, the student addressed

multiple questions at once and I prompted them to share specific examples or tell me more to provide more opportunities for them to share their perceptions in their own language.

### **Phase II Qualitative Data Analysis: Student Work Samples**

Nine of the 15 students either brought a work sample from the service-learning program (e.g., a written reflection or presentation) to the interview or shared a digital copy with me. Due to the timing of the interviews, the sixth-grade students had not completed a service-project yet because the study was conducted only 2 months into their 1st year with the program; one eighth-grade student did not share a work sample with me. I asked the nine students who did bring or share a sample to describe their work and tell me why they chose to share it with me, thereby contextualizing their service-learning experiences through storytelling.

In addition to the data collected during the transcribed interviews, I analyzed students' work samples, immersing myself in both sets of data, to identify themes and code their responses using Carver's (1997) core values of experiential education programs: agency, belonging, and competence (ABC). Overall, their responses aligned with one or more of the three ABC categories. I noted students' responses differed somewhat by grade level, with sixth-graders emphasizing a sense of belonging and feeling welcomed more frequently than the seventh- and eighth-graders, and eighth-graders often expressing feelings of satisfaction in seeing projects through to completion and feeling more confident and well-prepared for the future. I also noted when expressing feelings of agency, students frequently linked their perceived capacities to effect change and make a difference in their roles as servant leaders. This observation was understandable, because SHA's service-learning program is grounded in the principles of Greenleaf's (1996) servant-leadership model of service. Greenleaf founded this model upon the

premise that the leader is servant first; the model begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve the needs of others. The connection between student agency and their Catholic identity is presented in the research sub question section of this chapter.

### **Organization of Chapter**

In this chapter, the research findings from data collected during the 15 semi-structured student interviews are reported and organized according to the research question and sub question, beginning with a description of the data from the student interviews by theme. The interview data are followed by a presentation of additional data collected from the student work samples completed during the service-learning program, also organized by theme.

### **Themes**

The participants' responses and work samples were analyzed to determine alignment with Carver's (1997) core values of experiential education programs (i.e., ABC) to answer my research question and sub question. Carver (1997) defined ABC as follows:

**A** represents the development of students' personal agency—allowing students to become more powerful change agents in their lives and communities, increasing students' recognition and appreciation of the extent to which the locus of control for their lives is within themselves, and enabling them to use this as a source of power to generate activity.

**B** refers to the development and maintenance of a community in which students (and staff) share a sense of belonging—in which they see themselves as members with rights and responsibilities, power and vulnerability, and learn to act responsibly, considering the best interests of themselves, other individuals, and the group as a whole.

**C** stands for competence, referring to the development of student competence (which usually coincides with the development of teacher competence) in a variety of areas (e.g., cognitive, physical, musical, social). Developing competence means learning skills, acquiring knowledge, and attaining the ability to apply what is learned. (p. 146)



Together, the ABCs comprise the student experience, which is dynamic and fluctuating because experience is both the process and the outcome. Carver's (1997) core values also served as the thematic organization and presentation for the data analysis in this chapter.

### **Phase I: Semi-Structured Interviews**

The Research Question asked: What are early adolescent students' perceptions of their participation in a service-learning program while attending one ADLA Catholic elementary school? According to LeSourd (1997), service-learning projects provide opportunities for a lived experience with great educative potential, with benefits reaching beyond academic achievement to include the development of leadership, communication, and organizational skills. Due to the social isolation of distance learning and stay-at-home orders beset by the COVID-19 global pandemic, followed by nearly 2 years of frequent updates to public health reopening protocols for educational institutions, many students have felt the cumulative weight of these disruptions and have needed assistance to reengage with their school communities and heal from the missing connections and opportunities to interact with classmates. One way to support students as they struggle to reengage and connect with their school and faith communities is to listen with open minds and ears to learn their perceptions of their learning experiences so educators could better support their needs. When students perceive their opinions and perspectives matter to school personnel, they are more inclined to think about and express their perceptions on their learning experiences (Kidd & Czerniawski, 2011); therefore, to answer my research question, I prioritized listening to students' voices to learn more about their service-learning program experiences.

### ***Theme 1: Agency***

In these sections, I used the participants' pseudonyms and presented their direct quotes with their pseudonym. During the semi-structured interviews, 100% of the eighth-grade participants referenced feeling empowered to bring about change and exercise control over their learning experiences while participating in their service-learning program. Overall, 73% of the participants (i.e., three sixth-graders, two seventh-graders, and all eight of the eighth-grade students) referenced feeling empowered as change agents and able to impact their learning experience. I coded their responses into three subthemes. Subtheme 1 highlighted participants' perceptions of agency with respect to their individual accomplishments. Subtheme 2 focused on those participants expressing feelings of accomplishment when leading classmates to successfully complete their service-learning projects. That is, in addition to successfully completing a service-learning project, participants also described feeling empowered by their ability to lead their group's efforts. Subtheme 3 presented the participants' descriptions of the extent to which they recognized some of their classmates as leaders.

**Subtheme 1: Individual Accomplishments.** During my interview with one eighth-grader, Penelope, I asked how she felt after completing a recent service-learning project with her classmates. She responded:

I felt accomplished . . . it made me smile and I felt like whenever I complete one of my projects, I feel like I'm just more connected to my community. I just feel like we're all together because I mean, we're all human.

This sense of accomplishment was present in other participants' responses. When asked about her favorite part of the SHA service-learning program, another eighth-grader, Collette, shared the following:

I like that our servant leadership program doesn't just talk to the students but allows the students to do activities in their own way so they can grow. I like how it's not essentially boring. It's not like a lecture. They let our students participate in many activities. They let them participate in things which might seem kind of silly sometimes. But they really help us grow. . . . I feel like we have the opportunity to step up a little more and like, show the world what we can really do.

When asked a subsequent question (i.e., How does it make you feel to participate in SHA's service-learning program?), Collette continued:

It felt amazing. It was just so nice to feel that I got the chance, that I got the opportunity, to step up in the world and really try to make a difference. . . . It makes me more confident in like, talking and helping others and making sure I put other people before myself.

Patricia connected her service-learning program experiences to her future and noted how those experiences help her make meaning of her environment:

Question: Why is your service-learning class different from your other classes?

Because, like, religion class is more in the book. When you're doing Servant Leadership class, it's like putting what you learn in context and gets you into the real world . . . like stuff you're going to be doing in high school and continuing on to college. Things that you can use later. It's showing how you can use your faith in real life. (Patricia)

Other students expressed similar feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction upon completion of their service-learning projects (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Individual Participants' Feelings of Agency*

Pseudonym	Grade level	Response
Jonathon	6	It feels good because I know that I have given my time and I'm putting smiles on people's faces, and it just makes me feel better to know that they have what they need.
Kathy	7	It made me feel good that we are helping others. . . . We have too many shoes at our house, so I was happy that other people had the comfort of having shoes, too.
Mateo	6	I feel happy because I made them happy with my project.
Patricia	7	It makes you feel just really good, I guess, to know that you were helping out other people. Our Mega Magis project was really big, but all the smaller projects we did also made us feel like we were doing something to cheer someone up with kindness.
Sara	8	It made me feel good. It was nice to see their smiles.

Table 2 includes direct quotes from participants describing their feelings of agency while participating in SHA's service-learning program.

**Subtheme 2: Empowered as Leaders.** Five of the six eighth-grade participants described a sense of accomplishment at being able to lead their groups' efforts toward the completion of their *Magis* service projects. Each group was responsible for completing three *Magis* service-learning projects throughout the school year, beginning with a Mini Magis project, followed by a Magis Mediano project, and culminating in a Mega Magis project. Some study participants were delegates within their service-learning programs. Delegates are eighth-grade students at SHA who lead many of their service-learning classes by creating presentations and activities for their classmates to explain the seven capacities of a servant leader, practice time management, and create specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound (SMART) goals. According to one of the four delegates:

I am currently a delegate for Servant Leadership [class]. I manage the presentations and the activities we do in class. I think being a delegate is amazing. You get the overall

experience of just being able to feel like you're part of this community. It's truly amazing. (Collette)

Question: What is the role of the teachers?

I would say that we [the delegates] switch off with the teachers most of the time. Typically, the delegates lead the big presentations like the SMART goal presentations, and the Magis ones. I believe that that's just so that students can communicate better with the students. I think it makes it easier for students to listen and learn when they're able to communicate with someone their age . . . we have lots of projects, lots of assignments that we have to do, and helping each other is a big part of it. You really need to just sometimes step up and really just intervene to help others (in your house). (Collette)

Another delegate, Maricel, referenced her role as a delegate as her favorite part of the service-learning program, noting:

I guess I like the Magis projects, because I'm a delegate and I like planning what we do for the class presentations, like the one we did about SMART goals. We did it like Hamilton. So that was really fun and I enjoyed that. I like being part of the delegates and completing our Magis projects. (Maricel)

Question: How would you describe your service-learning program?

I would describe this as a leadership program, as a way for kids to learn and to grow as leaders in the community and the world. And I think it is also a way for kids to learn about things like smart goals and how to become more of a servant leader. We use smart goals to help us set goals for ourselves. . . . It could be anything. . . . One thing that it can be used for is job interviews or other interviews, and our Magis projects. (Maricel)

In addition to the delegates, there are four presidents in the sample. The presidents lead the efforts of their group, and each group is referred to as the servant leadership house. At SHA, the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders attend weekly servant leadership class during the regular school day. At the beginning of each school year, the new sixth-grade students are sorted into one of four houses and remain in these same houses through eighth grade, unless there is an extenuating circumstance. One president described her role, noting:

As leading the house and just making sure everyone's engaged and included. Like if I see someone either goofing off you know, I give them a little reminder. Or if I notice that

maybe someone's not doing their best or they're just not feeling 100%, I take them off to the side, talk to them, you know, make sure they're okay. (Penelope)

When asked about their favorite aspect of the service-learning program, one of the other presidents expressed his feelings of accomplishment upon successfully leading his group.

According to Connor, an eighth-grade student and house president:

I'd say my favorite part is, again, seeing everything completed at the end of every module when you do your presentation on it, and seeing how it all fits together, so perfectly. I like seeing everything completed. I'm the president for my group and it's a lot of fun. But also a lot of work.

Question: You mentioned that you were a president for your group and it's a lot of work. Can you tell me more about that?

I am lucky to have two of my classmates as my vice presidents, and they're super helpful. If I ever need any help with anything, they are there. The most challenging thing is staying on task because everybody in our house gets along really well, so they're always talking, and I can't say that I'm not one of them. But I'd say it's communication. Um, I've done other things at our church where I help teach a little mass for the younger kids, where we take them off to the side [during the homily] to do our kid friendly gospel and servant leadership very much prepared me for working with children and making sure they are all included and are paying attention. It prepared me by like again, with the communication, I have to make sure they're all on task, or listening to the reading, and all having fun.

Question: What is your favorite part about being president?

I like being able to have some credit in stuff getting done. Like currently our website, which we started working on two weeks ago. We haven't finished it yet. All we need to get in is the pictures and it feels really good to see everything completed the way it was supposed to be. (Connor)

In the prior response, Connor articulated his agency as a leader, along with his understanding of the responsibilities to the group as its leader.

Caroline also shared feeling empowered to generate activity and able to organize and lead her group's efforts, stating:

My favorite part is learning more about how to be a servant leader and interacting with the other grades and being able to help them.

Question: Do you feel a responsibility to help the younger grades?

Yes, and when, like, everyone has something to turn in, I make sure that they understand and are able to get it done and I get to help the new members feel welcome.

Question: If you could change one thing about the program, what would it be?

Maybe, like, giving the younger grades a bigger responsibility so they can get used to it . . . like when you're in sixth grade, it's kind of like they could maybe have a bigger impact in the house and how we do things.

Question: Do you think the 8th graders should be in charge, the way they are now?

Yeah, it is, like, balanced. Because at the same time the 8th graders are getting ready to leave (for high school) there are younger students who are trying to lead more so they will be ready. (Caroline)

**Subtheme 3: Recognized by Classmates as Leaders.** The delegates and presidents expressed how they were also recognized by their classmates as leaders with power and influence. During the one-on-one interviews, this subtheme emerged in several students' responses and reinforced the leadership development aspect of their service-program learning experiences. Seventh grade student, Kathy, shared the following observation, referencing both the current leaders' abilities to generate activity and her own developing leadership skills. Kathy noted:

This year the eighth-graders are really good leaders. We [our house] have been on top of it and we get our work done. And they're just good leaders and this year is probably the best year. I might want to run for coleader of student council because then I am automatically a delegate. I've gotten better at public speaking because they give you the microphone a bunch and you have to present in front of a lot of people. So I think it will make me more confident to speak in front of other people. (Kathy)

When asked to describe a recent service-learning program experience, Jonathan, a sixth-grade participant, recounted a lesson presented by the delegates and expressed his appreciation for the delegates' leadership skills. He noted:

Everyone leads in some way but there's some that lead more than others. . . . The delegates did, like, a SMART goals presentation where they acted out Hamilton and connected them [goals] to the acronym. And they explained it to us in a very detailed way and it was really clear. The delegates are usually eighth-graders that help lead the class with the teachers and most of the time they are the presenters and teaching the students. (Jonathon)

It was evident from the students' responses that setting SMART goals is integrated throughout SHA's service-learning program. Although SMART goals are not grounded in CST or service-learning curriculum, they have the potential to further develop students' growth mindset, particularly in their capacity and confidence as leaders (Poe et al., 2021). Three other sixth-grade students also emphasized the role of student leaders in the SHA service-learning program (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Sixth-graders' Perceptions of Leadership*

Pseudonym	Response
Benjamin	The delegates are the people that kind of set up servant leadership for us, from a kid's perspective, so we can understand it.
Mateo	Well, I think it is a thing where kids could learn more about leadership and actually practice leadership for the 8th graders. But the younger kids also get to see how to follow them and do stuff for the community. Servant leadership teaches us a lot about leadership and a ton of other skills you can use in your future, like smart goals. . . . they can be very useful for your future, and you'll be prepared for your future.
Quinn	The other students who are delegates are helping the younger students and the presidents, they're like the leaders of the house. They get everybody to work together and tell us what we're going to do.

Table 3 captures the sixth-grade participants' descriptions of the importance of leadership development in their service-learning program experiences. The theme of leadership



development also emerged in the discussion of the third theme, competence, and again with the research sub question discussion regarding students' perceptions of their Catholic identities.

### ***Theme 2: Belonging***

Ten of the 15 participants representing all three grade levels referenced experiencing a sense of belonging in their responses and described feeling welcomed and included. Participants' responses included references to being part of a group, meeting new people, and working together. Throughout the course of my interviews, I noted this theme surfaced frequently both in participants' responses to the question regarding what they liked best about the program, as well as when describing the program in general. The data indicated a sense of belonging is a consistent and pervasive element of the SHA service-learning program.

As in the previous section, two subthemes emerged during the one-on-one interviews. Some participants referred to feeling welcomed and included when first joining their houses. Other participants referred to their sense of affiliation with the group, indicating they liked meeting new people, working together, and discovering that everyone has a role or responsibility in the group.

**Subtheme 1: Welcomed and Included.** According to Carver (1997), a sense of belonging is the development of a community in which individuals identify as members of the group. Belonging is “operationalized in various ways in the literature to conclude attachment, bonding, connectedness, inclusion, liking school, fitting in, and engagement to name a few” (Jimerson et al., 2003, as cited in Parada, 2019). This section presents participants' responses regarding feeling welcomed and included in their service-learning program class.

One sixth-grade participant, Jonathon, described how he felt when he first joined his new house, noting:

All the people get sorted and the houses are accepting and welcoming. They always cheer for you. It made me feel very happy and, like, accepted because they welcomed me without hesitation. (Jonathon)

Peter, also a sixth-grade participant, referenced similar feelings during his interview, and stated:

The entire sorting ceremony made me feel so welcomed. You are put in a group with other students and it's a way for kids to be friends with other kids, and makes you feel welcomed in your house. (Peter)

The sorting ceremony is the students' first experiences with their service-learning programs. This ceremony is when students found out which house they will be in for the next 3 years. One eighth-grader recalled how she felt when first joining the program as a sixth-grader, noting:

I remember the sorting ceremony. I was nervous and excited, hoping that like the members of the Houses would make me feel comfortable and welcome.

Question: And did they?

Yeah. They included me right away and like, helped me when I was struggling. (Caroline)

Two other participants also described feeling welcomed and included. According to eighth-grader Sara:

It's [the service-learning program] a lot of people working in a group setting where we can be comfortable with each other and express ourselves. Everyone feels welcome, feels included.

Penelope, also an eighth-grader, shared

[I] just love how inclusive it is, and how everyone gets a role. There's not one person that's not important to the house. Yea, I would say that it's [the service-learning program] very inclusive.

**Subtheme 2: Group Affiliation.** According to Allen and Kern (2017), a sense of group affiliation, or belonging, impacts how students perceive their experiences at school, with those

experiencing a sense of belonging reporting positive experiences. According to eighth-grader Connor:

It's [service-learning program] made my overall school experience much better because now every Friday I have a very fun class to look forward to.

Furthermore, a sense of group affiliation was more strongly associated with students' well-being than other factors being investigated. Participants from all three grade levels highlighted working together in a group setting as a positive aspect of the program; in some cases, group affiliation was favorite aspect (see Table 4). The participants' responses in Table 4 highlight their perceived sense of being part of a group as a positive aspect of their service-learning programs.

**Table 4**

*Group Affiliation*

Pseudonym	Grade level	Response
Daniel	6	My favorite part is learning and being with my friends and doing stuff that we can all help with . . . like there is something we can all be good at.
Quinn	6	I like that we get to work together and have fun. We get our part of the project and help each other out. It's pretty fun because we're working together and doing fun activities to get to know each other more.
Julia	7	We get to work with other houses sometimes and we, like, see all our friends from another house. This weekend I got to talk to them about how it is in their house and how they do the projects, and we get to learn about what the others are doing and then we all are supported. Yeah, I'd say it's pretty fun because when you get to meet with everyone else like, people from different grades. So you become, like, friends with all those people. You get more of a relationship with them.
Kathy	7	I've definitely gotten to know the sixth-graders and eighth-graders a lot more (in Servant Leadership class) so we, like, know each other now when we see each other on campus. It's nice to know not just your classmates and to know other people in junior high too. . . . You get to know the people more so then your connection grows stronger. . . . Everyone has a job in their house, and so everyone can be included and have a part.
Patricia	7	You get to know everybody, especially the ones that you don't know their names or anything . . . You get to work with people that you may not know or talk to outside of school.

In response to how they felt when participating in SHA's service-learning program remotely, eighth-grade participant, Penelope, shared the following, which also highlighted the importance to her of being able to connect with her classmates:

On Zoom, you just can't interact or really connect . . . and it was really difficult to just talk. . . . But in person, it's just so much better . . . you can connect with them [classmates] . . . make eye contact. It's just a much better experience. (Penelope)

When asked what she would change about the program, Penelope, suggested more time together, which was consistent with the importance to her of being with the group. She noted:

I think that maybe I would do either a longer period or maybe meeting twice a week because we do a lot of different projects and stuff like the house challenge, where you have to create a website for your house, and there's just a huge list of things you have to do to get ready for the year. So yeah, more time to work together. (Penelope)

Two other students responded similarly to the same question regarding potential changes to the program. According to seventh-grader Patricia, her suggestion for change was the following:

Maybe meet more often for certain projects. We need more time to get together.

Connor, an eighth-grade delegate, initially responded he would change nothing about the program, but after thinking about the question, he also suggested more time with his classmates as one way to better the program. He stated:

Everything is positive. I can't think of anything to change. Maybe one thing I would change is do activities where the houses collaborate. I think it would make the communication better because you have to conduct communication with people that are not even in your group and deal with more people's ideas. (Connor)

### ***Theme 3: Competence***

According to Carver (1997), the development of student competence requires learning skills, acquiring knowledge, and attaining the ability to apply what is learned. Three subthemes emerged during the interviews: leadership skills, teamwork, and self-actualization. Once again, participants' responses overlapped regarding their competencies as leaders and their responses regarding Theme 1 (i.e., student agency) because as the students' perceived that their leadership skills were developing, they felt more empowered to bring about change and positively impact their learning environment and that of their peers. Given the service-learning program's roots in the principles of servant leadership and Catholic Social Teaching (CST), there was also overlap in participants' responses to questions regarding their Catholic identities, which is discussed in a later section.

**Subtheme 1: Leadership Skills.** As in the first theme of agency, participants' responses regarding leadership skills fell into two categories: developing leadership competence in self, and recognizing leadership competence in others.

**Leadership Skills in Others.** When describing a recent service-learning program experience, sixth-grader Jonathon, noted the leadership competence of others:

The delegates did like a SMART goals presentation where they acted out Hamilton and connected them to the acronym. And they explained it to us in a very detailed way and it was really clear. The delegates are usually eighth-graders that help lead the class with the teachers and most of the time they are the presenters and teaching the students.  
(Jonathon)

His response highlighted an appreciation for the effectiveness of the delegates' presentation skills but also a recognition that they, the delegates, typically lead the class. Seventh-grader, Kathy, also expressed an appreciation for the older students' leadership skills in the following response:

This year, the eighth-graders are really good leaders. We [our house] have been on top of it and we get our work done. And they're just good leaders and this year is probably the best year.

Question: Can you tell me a specific example of how they are good leaders?

They teach us more about how to be faithful and how we can be responsible as a community and work well with others. (Kathy)

Kathy's, response indicated her understanding of leadership included modeling one's faith—in this case, Catholicism—meeting the needs of the community, and working well with others. She went on to describe how her experiences have helped her develop confidence as a public speaker, which she also perceived to be an important leadership skill:

I might want to run for co leader of Student Council because then I am automatically a delegate. I've gotten better at public speaking because they give you the microphone a bunch and you have to present in front of a lot of people. So I think it will make me more confident to speak in front of other people. (Kathy)

**Leadership Skills in Self.** Maricel, an eighth-grade delegate, also emphasized the focus on leadership skills in her description of SHA's service-learning program experiences:

I would describe this leadership program as a way for kids to learn and to grow as leaders in the community and the world. And I think it is also a way for kids to learn about things like SMART goals and how to become more of a servant leader. We use SMART goals to help us set goals for ourselves . . . it could be anything . . . one thing that it can be used for is job interviews or other interviews, and our Magis projects. (Maricel)

Collette was an eighth-grade delegate as well as a member of the SHA Student Council.

In sharing her experiences as a delegate, the overlap between leadership skills and serving others was apparent in her response:

It [being a delegate] makes me more confident in, like, talking and helping others and making sure I put other people before myself. (Collette)

For Collette, being a leader requires confidence in public speaking, but also in being able to put the needs of the group before her own. In response to my follow-up question on whether she thought there is a link between her leadership role on student council and in her service-learning program, Collette shared:

I think in both of those, both of those classes [student council and service-learning], we learn how to lead a large group of people and we also learn organization skills, like planning things, the kind of big things especially, like dances and events . . . and then I think that we also learn to help each other a lot because throughout servant leadership and student council, we have lots of projects, lots of assignments that we have to do, and helping each other is a big part of it. You really need to just sometimes step up and really just intervene to help others. (Collette)

Collette's emphasis on helping others and putting the needs of the group ahead of the individual led to the next subtheme, teamwork.

**Subtheme 2: Teamwork.** Another eighth-grade delegate, Maricel, described teamwork as an aspect of her leadership skills in the following response:

We have sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders all in one house, so we [delegates] have to figure out how all of our different ages can work together.

Maricel's response indicated an understanding of her responsibility as a leader to facilitate teamwork and collaboration between her house members. Sixth-grade participant, Jonathan, also referenced teamwork in his response to what he likes best about SHA's service-learning program. His response indicated an appreciation for the importance of teamwork and recognition of his growing competence in this area:

I like that I'm able to work with my friends and I guess the whole point of it is to help your team and learn teamwork. So working with the people in my house has helped me learn how to work with people better. (Jonathon)

Another sixth-grade participant, Daniel, also referenced teamwork in describing how he participated in the service-learning program. He noted:

Well, I usually help people because I don't have a specific job. So I help other people with their jobs, with things they need help or just in general.

Daniel's response indicated that even though he is not a delegate or house president, he still felt capable of contributing to his group's efforts.

Lastly, Mateo, a sixth-grade participant, gave the following explanation of SHA's service-learning program, including his aspirations to lead and the importance of teamwork:

Servant leadership teaches us a lot about leadership and a ton of other skills you can use in your future, like smart goals. . . . They can be very useful for your future, and you'll be prepared for your future. I think when I am older, I'll use the leadership skills and I'm also learning about teamwork. You have to work with other people in your house. (Mateo)

**Subtheme 3: Self-Actualization.** The third subtheme that surfaced during the interviews reflected the opportunities for self-actualization reported by participants during their service-learning program experiences. According to sixth-grade participant Peter, one of his favorite aspects of the program is the following:



All your talents get to shine. . . . Yeah . . . you can learn a lot about yourself because your talents get to shine . . . because some of us might already know their path, but some probably don't. (Peter)

Question: Why do your talents get to shine?

Because you have to work with your house to complete projects and you might have to try new things, like design a website, or help someone you don't know very well with their job. Or maybe like, in our house challenge or when we're doing icebreakers, you can sing or create a dance for your house . . . stuff like that. You don't get as many chances to try things like that in other classes. (Peter)

Peter did not reference leadership skills development in his response. Instead, he expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to reach his potential. He also referred to a "path," which was similar to Seventh-grader Kathy's reference to responding to God's call for her, which included serving others. Kathy stated:

Well, especially in servant leadership, it's like God's calling me and it makes me especially called with the house projects. We do projects to help other people and so it makes me feel better as a person when I do. (Kathy)

This subtheme of self-actualization in relation to God's calling for them was also present in the participants' responses to interview questions regarding their Catholic identity, which are discussed in the following section.

### **Research Sub Question**

The research sub question asked: What are the early adolescent students' perceptions of their Catholic identity while participating in a service-learning program? In addition to understanding early adolescent students' perceptions of their service-learning program experiences, I was also interested in learning their perceptions of their Catholic identity. I incorporated four questions on Catholic identity in the interview questions to explore any associations between the students' perceptions on their Catholic identity relative to their

experiences in SHA's service-learning program. The questions asked participants whether they felt there was a connection between SHA's service-learning program and their Catholic identities, their prayer lives, and God's call for them. The fourth and final question of this section asked for their definition of what it means to be Catholic. The questions were:

13. How does the service-learning program relate to your Catholic faith?
  - Connected? Related? Important?
14. Does your Catholic faith help you understand what God's call is for you in this world?
  - In what ways?
15. Can you talk with me about how prayer affects your life?
  - Important? If so, in what ways?
16. What does it mean to you to be a Catholic?
  - Why or why not?

These four questions were adapted from the IFG/ACRE (NCEA, 2023) Level 2, Questions 7, 10, 11, 12, and 41. The participants' responses to the sub questions were also analyzed using Carver's (1997) core ABC values of experiential education programs.

### ***Theme 1: Agency***

SHA's service-learning program is grounded in the principles of servant leadership, emphasizing the importance of serving others and meeting the needs of others in the community, but also within the house. The participants' responses to the four questions regarding their Catholic identity once again highlighted their positive associations with feeling empowered to effect change and exercise control over their learning experiences, specifically with respect to their abilities to fulfill God's call for them by helping other people and serving as the hands and feet of Jesus.

Maricel, an eighth-grade participant, responded to Interview Question 13 (i.e., How does the service-learning program relate to your Catholic faith? Connected? Related?; NCEA, 2023) regarding whether SHA's service-learning program is related or connected to her Catholic identity:

I think they're related in a way because in servant leadership, we're called to be the hands and feet of Jesus. And when we do our Magis projects, we're called to go out in the world and make disciples of Christ and help others around us and we are often called to love one another and just help out the best we can to lead others. I think it can actually empower your Catholic identity because I mean, Jesus tells us that we should be disciplines of Christ. And when we help others, it's like we're helping Him, helping Jesus.

Another eighth-grade participant, Penelope, responded similarly to the same question:

I think they're related because the seven capacities of a servant leader really connect to Jesus' mission on earth and what he wanted to do. . . . There is definitely a connection and you know, Jesus taught us to carefully care for one another, love one another, no matter what the circumstances and I think that servant leadership class, especially the Magis projects, they really help us to live out that as well.

Question: Do you think servant leadership class is different from your daily religion class?

I would say so because the things we are taught in the classroom are more academic and then during servant leadership class, they kind of help us access our spiritual beliefs. I feel like they help us to think about them and develop them, and I don't think a lot of people get that opportunity this young.

Collette, also an eighth-grader, emphasized the importance of developing leadership skills to positively impact her environment and fulfill her goal of helping others become leaders as well. She noted:

Question: Do you think it is important to be a leader?

I think that it's extremely important to know how to be a leader because when you grow up and it's time to do future things, especially even in high school, even in college, you have to really learn how to lead big groups of people and teach them how to be the hands and feet of Jesus and grow them into a disciple so they can lead others in life.

The sixth and seventh grade study participants also affirmed the connection between their service-learning experiences and their Catholic identities. Specifically, participants described feeling empowered to fulfill God’s call for them by helping other people and serving as the hands and feet of Jesus (see Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Connection to Catholic Identity*

Pseudonym	Grade level	Response
Benjamin	6	I think they’re connected to each other because God wants us to be helping others as much as we can . . . and the Magis projects do help others . . . and by having different jobs, you can help others with their job, even if you don’t have a job.
Kathy	7	I think they’re connected because they also teach us a lot about faith in our Servant Leadership class with the projects and just the class in general. And we learn to go out and make a difference. We . . . always pray in servant leadership and learn how to be a better person out in the world.
Patricia	7	I think it definitely relates to one another, because they’re teaching us things in Servant Leadership that we are going to be using like in the real world and how to be a good follower of Jesus Christ.
Quinn	6	They are related because we’re following Jesus and learning how to be like him and how to be a leader. I think Servant Leadership will help me be a better Catholic because I’m helping others and learning to be a leader like Jesus.

The participants’ responses in Table 5 affirmed connections between their service-learning experiences and their Catholic identities, reflecting their perceptions that the service-learning program would empower them to follow Jesus by serving others.

***Theme 2: Belonging***

The participants’ responses in this section emerged in response to Interview Questions 15 and 16 regarding the importance of prayer in their life and what it means to them to be Catholic. I analyzed participants’ responses to determine whether they indicated feelings of being part of a group and/or connected to others. Their responses fell into two subthemes: feeling connected to a group and feeling connected to God.

**Subtheme 1: Connected to a Group.** In response to Question 16, sixth-grade participant, Peter, shared the following:

It means to trust in God, to have faith in others, and yourself. in people you don't know. It means a lot of good things. . . . I feel like it means there is a group, an expanding group, who will be there long after you.

Question: Can you tell me more about the expanding group?

It means to let other people be the leader, then even after you leave the school, they can do great things too and be very good leaders themselves. Being a leader does not mean being the only one doing things . . . it means helping others be leaders too.

Peter's response indicated both a sense of belonging to a group in the present, but also a future group, one that persists over time. His response also highlighted the extent to which leadership—more specifically, leadership by serving others—was integral to his understanding of what it means to be Catholic. He did not explicitly mention feeling connected to God, but his reference to trusting in God indicated an understanding of a reliance upon another, as did his reference to having faith in others.

**Subtheme 2: Connected to God.** In response to Interview Question 15 regarding prayer, nine students representing all three grade levels indicated feelings of connectedness when praying. Their responses are recorded in Table 6.

**Table 6***Importance of Prayer*

Pseudonym	Grade level	Response
Peter	6	Prayer kind of feels nice when you pray, especially for someone else, like people who are homeless or hungry, because God knows you are being selfless.
Quinn	6	Yes, because you're trying to connect with God through prayer.
Julia	7	We pray a lot during servant leadership . . . at the beginning and at the end and praying helps you with your relationship with God . . . so that he knows you're still there and not away from him.
Kathy	7	It makes me feel closer to God and like, more warm, like I feel comforted.
Patricia	7	I'm usually very calm and peaceful, and it feels like I'm almost having a conversation with God.
Caroline	8	Prayer has affected my life because it makes me feel like Jesus is with me, like whenever I'm struggling or like going through a hard time. When I'm praying, I feel like I'm in the presence of God and I feel holy and good.
Maricel	8	I think it is important because . . .when we pray and if we need help with something, God is always there and God will always provide for us no matter what, even if it takes a little bit longer. So prayer is . . . really effective in life and it is a very powerful resource to go to when you need help. When I pray, I feel calm with time after I pray . . . very calm, very relaxed, especially when it's about something that's kind of bothering me. So that's how I feel after I pray.
Penelope	8	I mean, the world is just so busy. There's constant chaos and prayer just kind of gives me the space to stop and to just rest and just to think about the other things happening. Of course, sometimes my mind is running but I think that the more I've practiced prayer, and continued to do it, it's been easier to just not think about anything and just be present.
Sara	8	Prayer is kind of meditative. I can share my worries with God and it helps you understand your life.

The responses in Table 6 indicate the participants perceived prayer as an effective method of connecting with God. Although participating in prayer is not unique to SHA's service-learning program, the participants' responses underscored the importance of feeling connected and affiliated with others, including God.

***Theme 3: Competence***

In this section, I present the participants' responses to (a) Question 14, regarding understanding God's call; and (b) Question 16 (NCEA, 2023), regarding what it means to be

Catholic. As previously stated, student competence requires learning skills, acquiring knowledge, and attaining the ability to apply what is learned (Carver, 1997). In response to Questions 14 and 16, participants reported feelings of self-actualization when heeding God’s call for them and/or becoming better versions of themselves (NCEA, 2023). For sixth-grade participant, Daniel, to be Catholic meant:

You should be good to others and, like, help other people when you can, no matter like, who they are. In servant leadership, they teach you more about being Catholic and I understand it more because I learned a lot more about being Catholic in servant leadership than before when I was just you know, in a religion class, because the goal of servant leadership class is to help you become a better person.

Once again, I noted participants perceived helping others as an aspect of becoming a better person, specifically within the context of their Catholic identities. For eighth-grade participant Caroline, “being there for other people and following Jesus” is what it means to be Catholic. She went on to say:

The servant leadership program is like, really great because it helps you express yourself and become a better servant leader. A servant leader is like, someone that’s the hands and feet of Jesus and always helping others.

Caroline’s focus on helping others and becoming a better person was consistent with Daniel’s; however, her response differed slightly from Daniels’ because she referenced self-expression as a positive aspect of SHA’s service-learning program. Although different than Daniel’s, Caroline’s reference to self-actualization was also present in Collette’s responses. Collette noted:

Question: Does your Catholic faith help you understand what God’s call is for you in this world?

Yes, because in servant leadership we get to like, learn how to be better people and be a servant leader, like helping others and putting other people before yourself. I know that God always had like, a path for me, and for others. And I just think we should be helping people when they have problems and help them get through them and find their path.

Question: What does it mean to you to be a Catholic?

I think to be Catholic means to believe in Jesus and to believe in God and to have faith in them and it means to love others, and it means to hope for others, to have faith in others and see each other as Jesus would see us.

Colette's references to God's path for her, and for others, indicated her understanding that her life has purpose and potential. She also referred to seeing each other as Jesus would see her and her classmates, which also implied the possibility there is more to others than is often seen on the surface—and that perhaps, there is unrealized potential that has yet to be actualized. Another eighth-grade participant, Penelope, referenced her calling and her spiritual beliefs, both of which are still evolving:

You know, I don't know exactly what I'm called to do. But I know that I can follow the basic principles, the Ten Commandments and Jesus' teachings. I think that servant leadership helps us. . . . It kind of gives us a guide to just get our minds going . . . to get us thinking about it. Because I mean, we're young, we don't need to have a definite answer or one specific thing to believe in. . . . Servant leadership helps us explore our faith and what we believe.

Question: What does it mean to you to be a Catholic?

That's a hard question because there's so many details. But as Catholics, we're called to love one another . . . no matter what religion. . . . I'd say we should love each other and to just be accepting.

## **Phase II Qualitative Data Analysis: Student Work Samples**

I also collected data from student work samples completed during the service-learning program to answer my research question and sub question. All 15 participants were invited to provide me with a work sample of their choice from their service-learning class. Due to the timing of my data collection, the sixth-graders were unable to provide work samples as they were in their first 2 months of the service-learning program and had not had time to complete a project or presentation. Nine of the 15 participants did provide a work sample. Some of the work



samples were group projects representing the work of several students. My analysis of the work samples was also coded according to Carver's (1997) core ABC values of experiential education programs. The following section presents the findings from my analysis of two group work samples: (a) a website completed by Connor, Jonathan, and Sara to demonstrate their understanding of servant leadership; (b) a slide presentation by delegates, Collette and Maricel, on the seven themes of CST.

### **Student Work Sample 1: A Reflection on Servant Leadership: Connor, Jonathan, and Sara**

Connor was an eighth-grade participant and also the president of his service-learning project group, otherwise known as their house. In SHA's service-learning program, there are four houses named after saints of importance to their parish. Each house has approximately 25 members and each house is responsible for completing several group assignments throughout the school year. Connor chose to share with me his house's group reflection on what it meant to be a servant leader. Two other study participants, Jonathon and Sara, were also members of the House of Clare, and contributed to this group reflection. I refer to this work sample as Connor's group reflection in this section.

Connor's group reflection was part of his house's website. The website began with a brief history of his house saint, followed by a reflection on the following question: What does Servant Leadership mean to you? Their response to this question was:

Our house places emphasis on ensuring that all of our members have equal opportunities to develop leadership skills. To us, servant leadership is leading from the bottom and putting the needs of those you lead above your own. In our House, we take Jesus as our example of how to lead and serve, and we always strive to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Along with using Jesus as our example, we utilize the seven capacities of a servant leader which we have learned and developed in our classes and through real world experience. We take into consideration Greenleaf's (1996) best test by leading with the goal of helping all those we lead and serve to become leaders themselves. We want to create a

safe environment within our house so that our members can develop latent talents and put into action what we have learned in servant leadership.

I coded the aforementioned response and found elements of each of Carver's (1997) three core ABC values of experiential education programs.

### ***Theme 1: Agency***

According to Carver (1997), students develop personal agency when they have opportunities to become more powerful change agents and are able to use this power to generate activity. Connor's group reflection referenced the importance of "ensuring all members have equal access to opportunities to develop leadership skills." They also referenced using "the seven capacities of a servant leader, which [they] have learned and developed in [their] classes and through real-world experience," and "putting into action" what they had learned. Each of these statements were consistent with the development of personal agency as defined by Carver (1997).

### ***Theme 2: Belonging***

Developing a sense of belonging included identifying as a member of a group and feeling a sense of responsibility for and prioritizing the best interests of both the group and the individual members of the group (Carver, 1997). Connor's group reflection included the four following phrases:

- ensuring all members have equal access,
- putting the needs of those you lead above your own,
- leading with the goal of helping all those we lead and serve to help them become leaders themselves, and
- creating a safe environment within our house so that our members can develop latent talents.

Each of the phrases was consistent with Carver's (1997) description of belonging and group affiliation, with members feeling a responsibility for the group and its individual members.

### ***Theme 3: Competence***

For students to develop competence, they must learn new skills and gain new knowledge, then be able to apply them both. The goal of SHA's service-learning program is to promote works of social justice and foster the development of servant leaders. As such, the new skills and concepts presented to the service-learning program participants focus on leadership skills development so students can serve as the hands and feet of Jesus. When the SHA students become more competent through their service-learning program, they also become more powerful change agents. As such, some participants' responses reflected examples of both agency and competence. In Connor's group reflection, they prioritized the development of each member's leadership skills and included the following references:

- striving to be the hands and feet of Jesus,
- utilize the seven capacities of a servant leader which we have learned,
- developed in our classes and through real world experience,
- develop latent talents, and
- put into action what we have learned.

Each of the references was consistent with developing competence as defined by Carver (1997).

### **Student Work Sample 2: A Presentation on CST: Collette and Maricel**

Each year, four eighth-graders were selected to serve as delegates and lead many of their service-learning classes by creating presentations and activities for their classmates, such as creating SMART goals, understanding the seven capacities of a servant leader, and practicing time management. Study participants Collette and Maricel were delegates. Collette chose to share their presentation on CST with me as an example of her work in the service-learning

program. Maricel was a coauthor of the presentation and also consented to sharing their presentation with me. I referred to their work sample as Collete's group presentation.

As I analyzed their presentation, it became clear to me that their work was relevant to my study because it provided important insight into my sub question:

- a. What are the early adolescent students' perceptions of their Catholic identity while participating in a service-learning program?

As delegates, one of their assignments was to design and execute a lesson for their classmates on CST. The work sample that Collette shared with me was their full slide presentation on the seven themes of CST. According to Collette, she and the other delegates researched the church's teachings and then worked together to create slides that would explain the seven themes to other students in language they could easily understand. As in the prior work sample, I noted references to each of Carver's (1997) ABCs.

### ***Theme 1: Agency***

The introductory slide of Collete's group presentation stated the following:

There are 7 Catholic Social Justice teachings that can provide guidance on how to observe Jesus' teachings throughout our lives. As Servant Leaders, we strive to incorporate these seven principles in everything we do. These key themes offer insight into our faith and how God calls us to serve and lead others.

Their presentation included four more references to God's call, including:

- We are called to respect all life and avoid war and conflict that undermines the value of each person.
- We are called to work together towards good by helping others, especially the poor and sick and by loving our neighbors.
- The Gospel calls us to be peacemakers and so with our love for all our sisters and brothers we are called to promote peace through the violence and conflict in our world.
- We are called to protect people and the animals in this world.

Agency, as defined by Carver (1997), referred to the extent that students feel empowered to effect change and exercise control over their learning experiences. In the context of their service-learning program experiences, the students centered their learning experiences on their abilities to fulfill God's call for them by helping other people and serving as the hands and feet of Jesus. Collette's group chose to reference God's call in five of the nine content slides, which provided insight into their perceptions of their Catholic identity with respect to their service-learning program experience.

### ***Theme 2: Belonging***

I noted six references in Collette's group presentation to group affiliation and a sense of belonging with the following phrases:

- We strengthen our community and encourage bonds of friendship and family to grow.
- We are called to work together towards good by helping others.
- Teaches us to interact and be an active part of our society.
- We have responsibilities to help each other and care for the world.
- Put others before yourself, just as Jesus would do.
- We are all one human family united by Jesus Christ our Savior, no matter our racial, ethnic, and economic differences.

Their references to community and the common good in their descriptions of CST indicated the prominence of a sense of belonging in SHA's service-learning program. In this context, Collette and Maricel's group identity was linked to their identities as members of their Catholic faith community, called by God to lead by prioritizing and serving the needs of others. This finding was consistent with my prior findings from Phase I.

### ***Theme 3: Competence***

According to Collette's group presentation, the seven themes of CST "provide guidance on how to observe Jesus' teachings throughout our lives." Collette and Maricel went on to say as

servant leaders, they “strive to incorporate these seven principles in everything we do.” Both phrases highlighted how the participants developed competence: (a) observing Jesus’s teachings and (b) striving to incorporate the seven themes.

SHA’s service-learning program goal is to promote works of social justice and foster the development of servant leaders; therefore, the new skills and concepts presented to the service-learning program participants are focused on leadership skills development to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus. Similar to Connor’s group reflection, Colette’s group presentation also included examples of both agency and competence, such as the following phrases:

- We can live out this principle in our daily lives by treating each other with love and respect.
- The Gospel calls us to be peacemakers and so with our love for all our sisters and brothers we are called to promote peace through the violence and conflict in our world.
- We show our love to God by caring for his creations and his world. We are called to protect and love for the world around us and live with all of God’s creations.

The aforementioned phrases demonstrated participants’ perceptions of their Catholic identities as linked to their identities as servant leaders, called by God to lead by prioritizing and serving the needs of others. This finding was consistent with my prior findings from the Phase I interview data.

### **Conclusion**

I found considerable overlap in the data collected between Phase I (i.e., semi-structured interviews) and Phase II (i.e., document analysis) in the context of Carver’s (1997) core ABC values of experiential service-learning. In addition, the participants’ perceptions regarding their Catholic identities were often linked to the development of competence and agency within the contexts of their service-learning experiences, such as developing leadership skills and the

building the ability to work as a team. Chapter 5 provides an in-depth discussion of my findings, along with implications, limitations, and recommendations for the field of Catholic elementary education and future research.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand early adolescent students' perceptions of their service-learning program experiences provided for them in one Archdiocese of Los Angeles (ADLA) Catholic elementary school, referred to as Sacred Heart Academy (SHA). Additionally, the purpose was to explore any associations between the students' perceptions of their Catholic identities relative to their experiences in a service-learning program.

According to Vaughn (2021), the student perspective provides insight into not only what and how students learn, but also whether students perceive their learning supports their ideas and aspirations (i.e., their agency). As such, this case study prioritized listening to students' narratives to capture meaning from their experiences rather than relying upon my, or other educators', potential biases or preconceived understandings. I worked from a phenomenological perspective to explore participants' perceptions because I was "interested in human consciousness as a way to understand social reality, particularly how one 'thinks' about experience; in other words, *how consciousness is experienced* [emphasis in original]" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 17, as cited in Leavy, 2017, p. 129). I focused on gathering early adolescents' perceptions of their service-learning program experiences through individual semi-structured interviews and work samples from the program.

Catholic schools are rooted in a tradition that calls its members to view their reality and lived experiences through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), with an expressed commitment to serving others (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2022). The



primary mission of Catholic education is for its students to develop and grow their identities as Catholics. The commitment to serving others is integral to one's Catholic identity as an individual called to build the kingdom of God by working for peace and justice.

Despite this commitment to social justice, there exists a void in the data surrounding how students perceive their service-learning program experiences in relation to their Catholic identities in ADLA Catholic elementary schools. To better understand the effectiveness of SHA's service-learning program and explore associations between the program experiences and students' understanding of their Catholic identities, this case study examined the students' transcribed interviews and work samples to hear and honor their perceptions relative to their service-learning program experiences. The research question and sub question guiding this study were:

What are the early adolescent students' perceptions of their participation in a service-learning program while attending one ADLA Catholic elementary school?

- a. What are the early adolescent students' perceptions of their Catholic identity while participating in a service-learning program?

According to Carver (1997), service-learning programs have the potential to reach far beyond academic achievement and lead to the development of leadership, communication, and organizational skills, if the program is organized around the core values of promoting student agency, belonging, and competence (ABC). Carver (1997) defined ABC as follows:

**A** represents the developing of students' personal agency—allowing students to become more powerful change agents in their lives and communities, increasing students' recognition and appreciation of the extent to which the locus of control for their lives is within themselves, and enabling them to use this as a source of power to generate activity.

**B** refers to the development and maintenance of a community in which students (and staff) share a sense of belonging—in which they see themselves as members with rights and responsibilities, power, and vulnerability, and learn to act responsibly, considering the best interests of themselves, other individuals, and the group as a whole.

**C** stands for competence, referring to the development of student competence (which usually coincides with the development of teacher competence) in a variety of areas (e.g., cognitive, physical, musical, social). Developing competence means learning skills, acquiring knowledge, and attaining the ability to apply what is learned. (p. 146)

My research was guided by Carver’s (1997) ABC core values of experiential education programs. In addition to the data collected during the semi-structured interviews, I analyzed student work samples, along with the transcribed interviews, immersing myself in both sets of data. I coded the participants’ responses using Carver’s (1997) ABC values and identified themes and subthemes.

This chapter discusses the summary and analysis of the findings and is divided into the following three sections: (a) the impact of SHA’s experiential service-learning program on its early adolescent students’ sense of ABC values; (b) the connection between SHA’s experiential service-learning programs and the students’ Catholic identities; and (c) the importance of student voice. This chapter also discusses recommendations for future research around service-learning program experiences, along with recommendations for Catholic elementary school leaders interested in (a) understanding the effectiveness of their existing service-learning programs for students in Grades 6–8, (b) implementing experiential service-learning programs to promote students’ ABC values, and (c) fostering their students’ Catholic identities.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The findings are presented in the following order: (a) the impact of SHA’s experiential service-learning program on its early adolescent students’ sense of ABC values; (b) the

connection between SHA's experiential service-learning programs and the students' understanding of their Catholic identities; and (c) the importance of student voice.

### **Impact of SHA's Experiential Service-Learning Program on its Early Adolescent Students' Sense of ABC Values**

This section presents the students' perceptions regarding the extent to which they experience feelings of agency, belonging, and competence while participating in SHA's service-learning program.

#### ***Agency***

Students must have opportunities to become more powerful change agents and be able to use this power to generate activity that develops personal agency. In this study, I found participants frequently expressed their appreciation for being able to "make a difference" and "put into action" what they learned in their religion and service-learning classes. Participants also described feeling satisfied with their growing capacities to complete their Magis projects, both individually and within their groups. For example, some students expressed satisfaction and pride with their individual accomplishments upon completion of a task or project. Other students described feeling proud of their ability to lead their group's effort to collectively complete a service project.

SHA's service-learning program model is intentionally designed to be student-driven. Students are expected to choose their own service-learning projects, then create timelines and to-do lists to complete their projects. Upon completing their projects, the students present a summary of the process to their classmates. These summary presentations also include a reflection on the impact of the project, any obstacles the students encountered, and adjustments

they would make in the future. Although the service-learning program is part of the participants' religious formation, it differs distinctly from their traditional religion class because the program is action-oriented and largely student-driven. The participants expressed feeling "happy" and "good" at being able to use their faith in a real-world context and "step up" to get things done, rather than just reading and writing about the experience. In discussing a failed project, one student even smiled and expressed optimism that she had learned what she needs to do differently next time and was already planning her next project.

### ***Belonging***

A sense of belonging has a key role in early adolescent development: the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, typically taking place in fifth- through eighth-grade. This transitional period is sometimes referred to as "storm and stress" and is often marked by increased emotional volatility, desire for increased independence from parents/guardians, and increased focus on peer relationships and acceptance (Göllner et al, 2017).

Researchers have studied a sense of belonging since the 1950s, resulting in multiple definitions of what the term means: affiliation, community, engagement, connectedness, climate, bonding, membership (Allen & Kern, 2017). Some researchers (McLelland, 1987; Rogers, 1951; Vallerand, 1997, as cited in Allen & Kern, 2017) have described belonging "as a need to be regarded in a positive way by others . . . motivated to affiliate with others . . . an innate desire to relate with others . . . the development of the self and identity building" (p. 6). Common to each of these definitions is the need to connect with other people and that a sense of belonging "fulfills an individual's innate psychological drive to belong to groups, take part in meaningful

social interactions and is so fundamental that it can be as compelling as the need for food” (Allen & Kern, 2017, p. 6).

The participants in this study voiced clear and positive perceptions of feeling welcomed, included, and connected to their peers, and in some cases, the larger community. Similar to my findings with student agency, the students’ sense of belonging manifested itself in two ways: (a) feeling welcomed and included, and (b) group affiliation. Some of the younger students expressed feeling welcomed and included, with several older students recognizing their responsibility to make sure all the members of their group felt welcomed and included. Some participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to get to know students from other grade levels, being able to say “hi” to them at recess and lunch and connecting with members from their service-learning house structure outside of school. Participants from all three grade levels reported working together in a group setting as a positive aspect of the program, and in some cases, described group work as their favorite aspect of the experience. Several students referenced their responsibility to do their part to help the younger students learn how to lead to ensure their “group” continues after they graduate SHA.

These findings were consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) theory of belonging, which posits individuals are interconnected with complex influences both external and internal and “a child’s development is largely influenced by his or her environments, and in particular, their interaction with the layers of systems that this environment entails” (p. 8). According to Bronfenbrenner’s framework, children are relational beings, and their development is influenced by both micro factors (biological, personality, individual traits) and macro factors (environment, culture, customs; Allen & Kern, 2017). These factors influence each other over time.

Allen and Kern (2017) found a sense of belonging impacted how students perceived their experiences at school, with those experiencing a sense of belonging reporting positive experiences. Furthermore, a sense of belonging was more strongly associated with students' well-being than other factors being investigated. Conversely, the impact of not belonging included loneliness, social isolation, psychological distress, disengagement, and in some cases, poor health and self-harm behaviors (Allen & Kern, 2017).

As early adolescents strive to create identities for themselves and separate from parents and guardians or other family members, Allen and Kern (2017) noted the following can occur:

A sense of belonging can provide a deep sense of connection that a young person carries with them into young adulthood and beyond. Without it, the young person can feel lost, disoriented and alone, without the social skills needed to effectively function in their adult years. (p. 12)

Studies have demonstrated associations between students' sense of school belonging and positive school achievement, health behaviors, and social–emotional competence (Allen & Kern, 2017; Eisenberg et al., 2003, as cited in Parada, 2019). Furthermore, these links between school belonging and school achievement have been shown to persist with students perceiving that school is meaningful and enjoyable, beyond their actual levels of achievement (Parada, 2019). As an educator, I have observed, after nearly 2 years of disrupted learning and social isolation, students long to reengage with their school communities and feel a sense of belonging and connection to others. Educational leaders need to mobilize and act to help students experience a sense of belonging.

### ***Competence***

To develop competence, students need to learn skills, acquire knowledge, and attain the ability to apply what they learn. The study participants described developing and using

leadership skills, learning how to work as a team, and having opportunities to let their talents “shine.” There was notable overlap with participants’ responses regarding their competence as leaders and their responses regarding Theme 1, student agency. As the students perceived that their leadership skills developed, they felt more empowered to bring about change and positively impact their learning environments and those of their peers. When students feel competent, they feel prepared for their futures; most importantly though, participants expressed feeling hopeful and optimistic about their futures, rather than fearful and helpless.

Given the service-learning program’s roots in CST and the principles of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1996), it is understandable that the participants’ responses regarding agency, belonging, and competence overlapped with their responses to questions regarding their Catholic identities. This finding is further discussed in the following section.

### **Connection Between SHA’s Experiential Service-Learning Program and the Students’ Understanding of their Catholic Identities**

To better understand the students’ perceptions of their Catholic identities, I incorporated four interview questions on Catholic identity to explore any associations between their Catholic identities and experiences in SHA’s service-learning program. The questions asked each participant if they felt there was a connection between SHA’s service-learning program and their Catholic identity, their prayer life, and God’s call for them. The fourth and final question in this section asked for their definition of what it means to be Catholic. These four questions were Interview Questions 13 through 16 and adapted from National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA’s) Information for Growth Assessment of Children/Youth Religious Education

(IFG/ACRE; NCEA, 2023) Level 2 test. The IFG/ACRE is administered annually to ADLA fifth- and eighth-graders. The fifth-graders take Level 1, and the eighth-graders take Level 2.

### *Agency*

At times, it was challenging to separate out the participants' Catholic identities from their feelings of agency, belonging, and competence relative to their service-learning program experiences. For example, the participants' responses often highlighted their positive associations with feeling empowered to bring about change and exercise control over their learning experiences, specifically with respect to their ability to fulfill God's call for them by helping others and serving as the hands and feet of Jesus. This clear association between their service-learning program outcomes and their Catholic identity is understandable given the program's roots in CST and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1996). Interestingly, some participants referenced serving the needs of the larger community, along with the needs of the other students in their group—reflecting the pervasiveness of service to others as the hallmark of their program experience.

### *Belonging*

The participants' responses fell into two subthemes of belonging: feeling connected to a group and feeling connected to God.

**Connected to a Group.** There was an overall sense from the participants' responses that they felt part of a group and a responsibility to be “the hands and feet of Jesus” and serve the needs of the others in their group, along with the needs of those in the larger community. One participant indicated both a sense of belonging to a group in the present, but also a future group: one that persists over time. Their sense of belonging in this context was linked to their



understanding of what it means to be Catholic: to be part of a larger group committed to serving as the “hands and feet” of Jesus.

**Connected to God.** The participants’ responses in this area were mostly with respect to the importance of prayer in their lives. The participants indicated feelings of calm when praying. Many participants expressed feeling closer to God during prayer and more connected, as if having a conversation when sharing their worries with God. Although participating in prayer is not unique to SHA’s service-learning program, the participants’ responses did emphasize the impact of feeling connected and affiliated with others, including God.

### ***Competence***

Participants’ perceptions in this section largely came in responses to Questions 14 and 16 (NCEA, 2023):

Question 14: Does your Catholic faith help you understand what God’s call is for you in this world?

Question 16: What does it mean to you to be Catholic?

Participants reported feelings of self-actualization when heeding God’s call for them and/or becoming a better version of themselves. Some participants referenced God’s path for themselves and their responsibility to help others find their path. Some indicated the importance of seeing others as Jesus would and loving one another; one participant noted it is important to “just be accepting” of everyone. Once again, the participants referred to understanding God’s path for them or trusting in God’s plan for them. In doing so, the participants expressed hope and optimism for their futures, rather than fear or despair.

## **Connection to CST**

The primary mission of Catholic education is for students to develop and grow their identities as Catholics, with an expressed commitment towards works of social justice and consistent with CST. Therefore, in addition to thematically organizing the students' responses and work samples according to Carver's (1997) ABC core values, I also analyzed them using the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB, 2022) CST framework. The students' responses indicated developmentally appropriate alignment between the students' responses and CST and are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7***Student Responses Alignment With CST*

Tenet of Catholic Social Teaching	Participant Quote
Life and Dignity of the Human Person	<p>I know that God always had like, a path for me, and for others. And I just think we should be helping people when they have problems and help them get through them and find their path. (Collette)</p> <p>It's [the service-learning program] a lot of people working in a group setting where we can be comfortable with each other and express ourselves. Everyone feels welcome, feels included. (Sara)</p> <p>All your talents get to shine. . . . Yeah . . . you can learn a lot about yourself because your talents get to shine . . . because some of us might already know their path, but some probably don't. (Peter)</p>
Call to Family, Community, and Participation	<p>We strengthen our community and encourage bonds of friendship and family to grow. . . . Teaches us to interact and be an active part of our society. (Collette)</p> <p>The entire sorting ceremony made me feel so welcomed. You are put in a group with other students and it's a way for kids to be friends with other kids, and makes you feel welcomed in your house. (Peter)</p> <p>This year, the eighth-graders are really good leaders. We [our house] have been on top of it and we get our work done. And they're just good leaders and this year is probably the best year. They teach us more about how to be faithful and how we can be responsible as a community. (Kathy)</p>
Rights and Responsibilities	<p>They teach us more about how to be faithful and how we can be responsible as a community and work well with others. (Kathy)</p> <p>As leading the house and just making sure everyone's engaged and included. If I notice that maybe someone's not doing their best or they're just not feeling 100%, I take them off to the side, talk to them, make sure they're okay. (Penelope)</p> <p>And then I think that we also learn to help each other a lot because throughout servant leadership and student council, lots of assignments that we have to do, and helping each other is a big part of it. You really need to just sometimes step up and really just intervene to help others. (Collette)</p>
Option for the Poor and Vulnerable	<p>Put others before yourself, just as Jesus would do. (Collette)</p> <p>It made me feel good that we are helping others . . . we have too many shoes at our house, so I was happy that other people had the comfort of having shoes, too. (Kathy)</p> <p>We are all one human family united by Jesus Christ our Savior, no matter our racial, ethnic, and economic differences. (Collette)</p> <p>I think to be Catholic means to believe in Jesus and to believe in God and to have faith in them and it means to love others. (Collette)</p>

*Note.* Adapted from *Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching* by U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (2022) (<https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching>), copyright 2022 by United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

**Table 7 (continued)**

*Student Responses Alignment With CST*

Tenet of Catholic Social Teaching	Participant Quote
The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers	<p>Our house places emphasis on ensuring that all of our members have equal opportunities to develop leadership skills. To us, servant leadership is leading from the bottom and putting the needs of those you lead above your own. (Connor)</p> <p>Along with using Jesus as our example, we utilize the seven capacities of a servant leader which we have learned and developed in our classes and through real world experience. We want to create a safe environment within our house so that our members can develop latent talents and put into action what we have learned in servant leadership. (Connor)</p>
Solidarity	<p>I feel like I'm just more connected to my community. I just feel like we're all together because I mean, we're all human. (Penelope)</p> <p>It makes you feel just really good, I guess, to know that you were helping out other people. Our Mega Magis project was really big, but all the smaller projects we did also made us feel like we were doing something to cheer someone up with kindness. (Patricia)</p> <p>I like that I'm able to work with my friends and I guess the whole point of it is to help your team and learn teamwork. So working with the people in my house has helped me learn how to work with people better. (Jonathon)</p>
Care for God's Creation	<p>There is definitely a connection and you know, Jesus taught us to carefully care for one another, love one another, no matter what the circumstances and I think that servant leadership class, especially the Magis projects, they really help us to live out that as well. (Penelope)</p> <p>[I] just love how inclusive it is, and how everyone gets a role. There's not one person that's not important to the house. Yea, I would say that it's [the service-learning program] very inclusive. (Penelope)</p> <p>Well, especially in servant leadership, it's like God's calling me and it makes me especially called with the house projects. We do projects to help other people and so it makes me feel better as a person when I do. (Kathy)</p>

*Note.* Adapted from *Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching* by U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (2022) (<https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching>), copyright 2022 by United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

## **The Student Voice**

The semi-structured interview format facilitated a conversational flow and allowed me to ask clarifying questions and note various levels of enthusiasm in the participants' responses. The interview data and student work samples provided powerful insight and specificity regarding the participants' service-learning program experiences and Catholic identities. This part of my research design provided more validation for service-learning than I anticipated because the students had the opportunity to tell me their stories in their own words, rather than from a predetermined list or multiple-choice survey. The participants described feelings of happiness and satisfaction at being able to "step up" to real-world challenges and see projects through to completion. Others referred to learning more about "their path" and being able to "let their gifts shine." It was enlightening for me to listen as the participants described what they liked most about their service-learning program experiences and their suggestions for change. Hearing and honoring their voices deepened my understanding of their service-learning program experiences and their priorities and reflections on their Catholic identities. As a school leader, the student responses and input will better equip me to serve their needs.

## **Limitations**

There were three main limitations to my findings due to the qualitative study design and my reliance on empirical data: time constraint, my positionality, and the use of self-reported data. As such, the results of this study are not generalizable.

The central limitation of this study was the limited amount of time available for data collection and analysis. The sample size was limited to one school site to ensure enough time to collect and analyze the data. The school site was selected by convenience sampling and the

participants by purposeful sampling. The sample size was further restricted to include only students enrolled for 3 consecutive school years, including 2022–2023, and self-identified as Catholic in the school’s student information system.

A second limitation was my positionality. As the current administrator of the selected school site, I had established relationships with most of the participants, including students, teachers, and administrators. As such, my positionality as both the researcher and administrator may have impacted participants’ responses.

The third limitation was the inherent nature of self-reported data with respect to accuracy because I relied upon the students’ memories and interpretations for my data; however, the purpose of my case study was to hear and understand early adolescents’ perceptions of their service-learning program experiences and their Catholic identities in their own words. As such, in this case study, the students’ narratives were necessary to answer the research question and sub question.

### **Future Research**

It was clear at the outset of my study that more research is needed to understand the effectiveness of the service-learning program provided for early adolescents at SHA. This study accomplished that objective and yielded valuable data to guide the school’s efforts to enhance its service-learning program. The study also highlighted the value of student voice in building a full understanding of the service-learning program’s effectiveness, particularly in light of the program’s potential to positively impact students’ overall school experiences. Given the current study’s limitations, future research studies should be explored that include additional voices around service-learning program experiences and Catholic identity.

## **Future Research for SHA**

The current study was limited to SHA students in Grades 6–8 who also self-identified as Catholic in the school’s student information system. As such, I excluded the participants’ non-Catholic counterparts, even though both groups are fully integrated throughout the school day by attending the same classes, receiving the same instruction and assignments, and taking the same assessments. To understand the impact of SHA’s service-learning program more fully, it would be valuable to replicate this study to hear and honor the non-Catholic voices of students in Grades 6–8.

The current study was also limited to students in Grades 6–8 who had enrolled at SHA for at least 3 consecutive years, including 2022–2023. Hearing the voices of the sixth-through-eighth-grade students enrolled for less than 3 years would build on the current study. The perceptions of these students’ service-learning program experiences and their understanding of Catholic identities would provide additional data regarding the service-learning program’s effectiveness. Because SHA, as with other ADLA elementary schools, welcomes and serves students who do not identify as Catholic, the perceptions of non-Catholic students regarding their service-learning program experiences and their understanding of Catholic identities would provide unique insights into the program’s effectiveness.

A third voice was also missing from this study: service-learning program teachers. The current study findings indicated the student participants felt empowered to lead and support their classmates during their service-learning classes. Participants described their teachers as available to guide them and ensure they stay on track. It would be helpful to hear the program teachers’ voices regarding their perceptions of the students’ ABC values and their Catholic identities.

Educators' perspectives would provide insight into the degree of alignment between the students' and teachers' perceptions around their service-learning program experiences.

Finally, a longitudinal study following the same 15 students involved in this current study is needed to learn more about their continued level of involvement in service-learning programs, along with their sense of belonging, their leadership, their Catholic identity, and whether their perceptions persist or change.

### **Future Research for ADLA Elementary and Secondary Schools**

This study did not address the gap in data surrounding early adolescents' perceptions of their Catholic identities and service-learning program experiences in other ADLA Catholic elementary schools, nor did this study address students' perceptions at ADLA secondary schools. Similar research into both ADLA elementary and secondary students' perceptions and experiences would provide useful information to better understand the effectiveness of all ADLA schools' service-learning programs in fostering students' sense of agency, belonging, competence, and their Catholic identities. The findings from such studies would also inform ADLA elementary school personnel seeking to prepare their students for matriculation to ADLA Catholic high schools and secondary schools seeking to attract their graduating eighth-graders.

### **Recommendations**

Although the findings from this study are not generalizable, they do have important implications for Catholic elementary school leaders in two areas: (a) the positive impact of implementing experiential service-learning programs on students' overall school experiences and Catholic identities, and (b) the importance of emphasizing the Catholic school commitment to fostering a strong sense of community and doing works of social justice in efforts to recruit and



retain students to further the mission of Catholic education. Increasingly, young people long to belong, to feel hopeful, and empowered. Catholic schools are uniquely positioned to respond to these needs; in fact, their mission calls them to do so. Catholic schools must act to reverse the flow of young people drifting away from their schools and draw them back to the life-giving community of the Catholic school.

### **Implementing Experiential Service-Learning Programs**

During conversations with other Catholic elementary school leaders and teachers, I observed most of their schools have service-learning requirements for their students, but often those requirements do not go beyond merely counting hours to fulfill their school's service requirements. In some cases, leaders and teachers are not sure of their school's service-learning program requirements. In other cases, educators are not convinced of their program's effectiveness. Catholic school leaders and educators concerned with fostering strong feelings of agency, belonging, and competence to improve their students' overall school experiences and strengthen their Catholic identity could consider implementing experiential service-learning programs that are grounded in CST and the principles of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1996).

According to Baxter (2011):

We should avoid counting up hours to measure how much service a student does; rather, we should ask them to reflect on what their service has meant to them and their faith. That will allow them to appreciate and understand the benefit they receive when they serve others. (p. 26)

Experiential service-learning programs require students to go beyond simply completing a required number of hours of service to fulfill program requirements. Instead, service-learning programs provide opportunities for students to put their faith into action and lead by serving others.

## *Curriculum Design and School Culture*

Service-learning programs grounded in the principles of experiential education can yield benefits to students beyond their academic learning, such as the development of leadership, communication, and organizational skills (Carver, 1997). According to Dewey (1938), “Every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 35). Experience is, therefore, the process of interacting with one’s environment and the outcome, or results, of those interactions. Experiential service-learning programs provide unique opportunities for students to learn and grow as change agents, develop a sense of belonging, and experience feelings of competence (Carver, 1997).

Catholic school leaders and teachers seeking to implement an experiential service-learning program can begin by evaluating the current culture of their classrooms and school sites. According to Carver (1997), learning environments must exhibit the following components in order to nurture and promote the development of students’ ABC values:

- Resources include trust, empathy, language, tradition, reputation, energy, authority, and knowledge, as well as more commonly recognized resources such as money and physical materials.
- Behaviors include the identification, selection, distribution, and use of resources.
- Values that are shared by members of a learning community become guiding principles for the behaviors listed above. (p. 147)

For Catholic schools, these components are often articulated in their mission statements, handbooks, or schoolwide learning expectations. The task is to discern the extent to which these components are present in the daily operations of the school and in interactions between students, teachers, and leaders.

Once the culture of the learning environment reflects the required components, leaders can design their service-learning curriculum to possess the following four characteristics: “authenticity, active learning, drawing on student experience, and connecting lessons to the future” (Carver, 1997, p. 147). Authentic relationships between the server and one being served require ongoing and prolonged interaction. Such relationships must be intentionally built over time and are essential to a service-learning curriculum focused on confronting social injustices and developing “the integrity of those who serve” (LeSourd, 1997, p. 157).

According to Carver (1997), experiential learning environments are unique from more traditional learning environments due to the consistency and diligence with which the staff adhere to their core values in their decision making and actions. Carver’s conceptual framework of ABC and learning environment components can be used to develop and implement an experiential learning program that is consistent with the Catholic school’s mission and commitment to CST.

### ***Teacher Engagement on the Power and Privilege of Service-Learning Programs***

Relationships in service-learning programs are often based upon differences between the service-learning student and the group or individual being served—namely, what one group has that the other group needs. To foster authentic relationships based on connections, rather than issues of power and privilege, service-learning experiences should focus on reciprocity, with participants learning from and with each other (Kendall, 1990, as cited in Mitchell, 2008).

As such, even though this research did not study teacher engagement, school leaders and teachers committed to developing experiential service-learning programs could consider preparation that will help them understand the underlying structures and systems that create and

sustain the unequal distribution of power and privilege often inherent in programs that simply do service for those with less. This preparation could impact the overall school culture, preparing both school leaders and teachers to include the following elements in their curriculum design: (a) discussions, readings, and reflective writing about biases, unearned privilege, societal and power differentials; (b) acknowledgement that learning can take place outside the physical boundaries of the classroom, such as in the community and from nontraditional sources, such as community members; and (c) involvement with those being served in the process of identifying their need, rather than the need being selected by those doing the service. As Barber (1991, p. 17) as cited in Hepburn, 1997) emphasized, “An experiential learning process that includes both classroom learning and group work outside the classroom has the greatest likelihood of impacting on student ignorance, intolerance, prejudice” (p. 51). According to Cook et al. (2004, as cited in Mitchell, 2008), service-learning programs that fail to name issues of power and access may inadvertently perpetuate misperceptions of one individual or group as broken and the other as equipped to save them from their brokenness.

### ***Evaluation and the Importance of Voice***

Catholic school leaders and teachers interested in evaluating their service-learning programs could use Carver’s (2019) ABC framework to evaluate their program effectiveness in developing students’ agency, belonging, and competence. I observed in my research that asking students about their service-learning program experiences and their perceptions on Catholic identity provided important feedback for me as a school leader, including their suggestions for changes to the SHA program. The ABC framework provided the structure for me to code their responses and identify themes and subthemes in answer to both my research question and sub

question. As mentioned in a previous section, a recommendation for future research is to hear the voices of other members of the school community, such as non-Catholic students and service-learning program teachers.

Finally, because experiential service-learning programs are grounded in the dynamic of experience, the assessment of such service-learning programs should be ongoing and integrated into the everyday practices of staff and students (Carver, 1997). In addition to individual interviews, program assessment can consist of written reflections, surveys, presentations, and group discussions.

### **Emphasizing the Catholic School’s Commitment to Community and Social Justice**

Beltramo (2022, as cited in Campa, 2023), a lecturer at Santa Clara University and diocese director of San Jose and Monterey Catholic school teacher development programs, recommended Catholic school recruitment efforts focus on highlighting what sets them apart from their public and charter school counterparts: faith and spirituality. According to Beltramo (2022, cited in Campa, 2023), “Schools shouldn’t focus as much on secular goals but, rather, on building this sense of belonging” (p. A1).

I also observed in my conversations with Catholic school administrators and educators that some are not clear on the effectiveness nor the specifics of their school’s service-learning programs; in some cases, these programs have not been prioritized in recent years. This lack of prioritization is understandable given the unprecedented challenges of running a school during the COVID-19 global pandemic with countless public health mandates and protocols, followed by the current challenges of addressing learning loss, student social–emotional health issues, financial concerns, and troubling attrition rates for Catholic schools (National Catholic

Educational Association [NCEA], 2021). In Los Angeles, ADLA Catholic schools reported a 12.3% decline in enrollment from 2019–2020 to 2020–2021, a loss of 9,045 students and the largest decline of the 174 Catholic schools’ dioceses nationally (NCEA, 2021). During the 2019–2020 school year, “underserved groups were over twice as likely to have their Catholic schools close” (NCEA, 2021, p. 2) than all other schools nationwide, both public and Catholic.

### ***An Epidemic of Loneliness***

In the November 2022 edition of *Angelus News*, Father Dorian Llywelyn (2022) referred to an “epidemic of loneliness,” stating:

As attractive as it might be to blame COVID for this phenomenon, the evidence suggests otherwise. Loneliness is a long-term social sickness, something that the pandemic certainly made worse, but didn’t cause. . . . Academic studies and investigative journalism are both presenting evidence that young people are among the worst affected by feeling isolated. (paras. 2–3)

Despite this concern, there is a glimmer of hope; although the ADLA “reported a 2.05% increase for this school year during its October survey . . . they are not close to erasing the effects of the massive student exodus during the pandemic—with overall enrollment down 8.9% when compared with that of fall 2019” (Campa, 2023, p. A1). Still, it is worth noting that this modest gain may be due to parents realizing their children need more than quality instruction and enrichment activities to help them flourish; these students need to feel welcomed and feel as if they belong to the sort of community that Catholic schools can provide. According to one parent (as cited in Campa, 2023):

When I researched local public and private schools, I of course checked the academics and test scores, but I also asked about the campus community . . . I just didn’t want my daughter to attend school but to feel welcomed, to grow spiritually, and to develop special bonds that were broken during the pandemic. (p. A1)

Ultimately, this parent enrolled her daughter in an ADLA Catholic school that she believed would foster a sense of community (Campa, 2023). According to the school's principal (as cited in Campa, 2023), the principal "doubled down on efforts to promote belonging, family and community to families hit by the pandemic" (p. A1).

I observed in my research that the students considered spending time with other students as a highlight of their service-learning program experience. They emphasized feeling connected to and welcomed by their classmates as being a highlight of their service-learning program experience, so much so that when asked what they would change about the program, the main recommendation was more time together to work on their service-learning projects, either by extending the length of the class or increasing the frequency. The participants expressed feelings of happiness when able to interact with those they served, referencing feelings of empathy for fellow human beings and acknowledging their role in caring for others. They also expressed appreciation for being able to put their faith into action, rather than just reading and writing about it. Catholic school leaders and teachers concerned with recruiting and retaining students could emphasize the strong sense of community, belonging, and social justice advocacy that experiential service-learning programs foster in their students.

### ***Catholic Identity***

The goal of Catholic education is for its students to develop and grow their understanding of their Catholic identity and be prepared to contribute and work for justice and peace. In doing so, the students become the best versions of themselves and are ideally equipped to serve others and address social injustices (Mixa, 2021). Catholic schools are grounded in a tradition that differs fundamentally from that of public and charter elementary schools. They share the same

expressed commitment to academic excellence as their public and charter counterparts; the central difference is the Catholic school tradition calls its members to view their realities and lived experiences through a lens that combines both faith and reason and is grounded in CST.

Experiential service-learning programs that are grounded in CST have the potential to foster a stronger Catholic identity in students by providing them with more opportunities to experience the social justice work of serving others because “the experience of Christian community leads naturally to service” (ADLA, 2023, p. 4.3.14). In his June 11, 2019, remarks to the spring general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in Baltimore, Bishop Barron (2019) reiterated that studies have shown “the more involved young people are in this work, that the closer they stay to the life of a church” (7:31).

Catholic schools concerned with fulfilling their mission while facing declining enrollment and increasing disaffiliation, could consider emphasizing their commitment to community and social justice. According to Most Reverend Robert E. Barron (2019), Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, young people understand and appreciate the church’s social justice teachings: “We have a very powerful tradition around doing the works of justice and young people like that. I think we should lead with it” (Barron, 2019, 6:30).

### **Conclusion**

ADLA Catholic schools reported a 12.3% decline in enrollment from 2019–2020 to 2020–2021, which translates to a loss of 9,045 students and the largest decline of the 174 Catholic schools in dioceses nationally (NCEA, 2021). Moreover, these declines in enrollment have been higher for students in historically marginalized communities, further exacerbating



social inequities (Gasper, 2021). During the 2019–2020 school year, “underserved groups were over twice as likely to have their Catholic schools close” (NCEA, 2021, p. 2) than all other schools nationwide, both public and Catholic. According to Baxter (2011), “Yet this is the time to do everything possible to save these beacons of hope for so many who look to Catholic Schools as a transformational vehicle for their children’s lives” (p. 3). Walsh and Spells (2020) stated, “Service-learning can be a vehicle for reclaiming students who were marginalized by society” (p. 11) and student voice, according to Kidd and Czerniawski (2011), can serve “as a catalyst for change in schools” (p. 288).

### **The Value of Voice**

As made clear from my research, hearing and honoring students’ perceptions on their service-learning program experiences improves their engagement and interest in the work of social justice and provides important feedback regarding program effectiveness. Educators should amplify “the roar that lies on the other side of the silence of the classroom, for it is only in that roar that we can begin to develop an understanding of the lived experiences” (Kidd & Czerniawski, 2011, p. 265) of the students.

School leaders and teachers seeking to implement and/or improve their service-learning programs to meet the belongingness needs of their students and remain viable, relevant options for 21st-century youth must prioritize listening to the students’ roars and heed their cries to feel empowered as social justice advocates, to feel a sense of belonging to a community, and to feel prepared and hopeful for their futures.

## APPENDIX A

### MINI MAGIS REFLECTION ASSIGNMENT: TRIMESTER 1

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Due \_\_\_\_\_

(Submit to both your Language Arts and SL Google Classroom)

*Please write a grade appropriate reflection on your experience. Include the following information in your paper.*

#### 1. Awareness of Purpose of Mini-Magis

- What does Magis mean?
- What is the origin of the word?
- What project did you choose? Why?

#### 2. Critical Thinking

- How did my Magis help others and make a difference in the world?
- How did my project change my view of others in need?
- What did I learn about myself through this experience?

#### 3. Synthesis of Theory and Practice

- How does my Magis relate to Servant Leadership and Catholic Social Justice Teaching?
- We receive a call to discipleship through the Rite and Sacrament of Baptism. How did I answer the call through my Mini-Magis?
- How will I continue to serve those in need?

- Use Servant Leadership Vocabulary (Hands and feet of Jesus, St. Francis, St. Ignatius of Loyola, Discipleship, leadership, Catholic Social Justice, etc.)

## APPENDIX B

### SERVANT LEADERSHIP HOUSE ROLE APPLICATION

1. What is your first and last name? \*

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2. What House are you a member of? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Saint Anthony of Padua  
 Saint Francis of Assisi  
 Saint Clare of Assisi  
 Saint Joseph of Cupertino

3. What grade are in? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- 8th Grade  
 7th Grade  
 6th Grade

4. What positions have you hold last year (2021-2022)? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Supply Coordinator
- Sargent at Arms
- Graphic Designer
- Mass Ministry
- Marketing
- Germ Rep
- Assistant Magis
- Sorting Ceremony
- Faith Formation (Prayer Leader)
- Accountant
- Secretary
- Vice President
- None - I'm a new student
- I don't remember

5. What is your first choice position for this year (2022-2023)? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Supply Coordinator
- Sargent at Arms
- Graphic Designer
- Mass Ministry
- Marketing
- In the Middle Rep
- Assistant Magis
- Sorting Ceremony
- Faith Formation (Prayer Leader)
- Accountant
- Secretary
- Vice President
- President
- SL Delegate

6. Why would you like to serve in this position? \*

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7. What is your second choice position for this year (2022-2023)? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Supply Coordinator
- Sargent at Arms
- Graphic Designer
- Mass Ministry
- Marketing
- In the Middle Rep
- Assistant Magis
- Sorting Ceremony
- Faith Formation (Prayer Leader)
- Accountant
- Secretary
- Vice President
- President
- SL Delegate

8. Why would you like to serve in this position? \*

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9. What is your third choice position for this year (2022-2023)? \*

Mark only one oval.

- Supply Coordinator
- Sargent at Arms
- Graphic Designer
- Mass Ministry
- Marketing
- In the Middle Rep
- Assistant Magis
- Sorting Ceremony
- Faith Formation (Prayer Leader)
- Accountant
- Secretary
- Vice President
- President
- SL Delegate

10. Why would you like to serve in this position? \*

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11. List three areas of strength? \*

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12. List three areas of growth \*

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13. What does it mean to be a Servant Leader? (Best Guess) \*

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14. How do I serve others on daily basis? Who do I serve? \*

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15. What is your "Magis?" (past, present, or future/micro, mini, median, or mega) Ask a friend if you forgot what or do not know what Magis means. \*

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16. What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ? \*

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17. List all leadership positions you have held past and present. (OLG, other schools, service organizations, scouts, sports, clubs, bands, etc.) \*

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18. What did you contribute to your house last year? What can you do differently? \*

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19. If you could tell me anything about yourself, what would it be? \*

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## APPENDIX C

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: STUDENTS

The following is the complete set of interview questions for the sixth through eighth-grade student participants. The interviews are intended to be dialogic conversations between the me, as the researcher, and the participant, creating space for the participants to share their experiences in their own words. Some questions may not be used during the interview and additional questions may be asked if the participant's initial response requires clarification or supplemental information. Participants will be asked to bring an artifact from a recent service-learning project and describe the artifact, thereby contextualizing their service-learning experience through storytelling.

#### **Questions**

##### *Introductory*

1. How would you describe SHA's service-learning program?
  - Frequency? Duration? Location? Graded?
2. How do you and other students participate in the program?
3. What role do the service-learning teachers have in the program?

##### *Involvement*

4. Tell me about one of your recent experiences with SHA's service-learning program.
5. When and where did this experience take place?
6. Describe and share the artifact that you chose to bring with you to the interview.
7. Why did you choose this artifact?  
Significance? Representative sample?

## *Impacts*

8. What do you like most about SHA's service-learning program?
  9. How did it make you feel to participate in SHA's service-learning program?
  10. Did you participate in SHA's service-learning program while remote learning during the school closures due to the pandemic?
  11. How did it make you feel to participate in SHA's service-learning program remotely?
    - Same, different, as in-person? If different, how so?
  12. If you could change one thing about SHA's service-learning program, what would it be?
    - Why?
- Catholic Identity [adapted from Information for Growth Assessment of Children/Youth Religious Education (IFG/ACRE), 2023, Level 2, Questions 7, 10, 11, 12, 41]*
13. How does the service-learning program relate to your Catholic faith?
    - Connected? Related? Important?
  14. Does your Catholic faith help you understand what God's call is for you in this world?
    - In what ways?
  15. Can you talk with me about how prayer affects your life?
    - Important? If so, in what ways?
  16. What does it mean to you to be a Catholic?
    - Why or why not?

*Closing*

Is there anything you would like to add that I didn't ask about?

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