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Cover Page Footnote

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"I want them to feel heard. I want their voices to be agents of change": Exploring a Community-Engaged Partnership Focused on Critical Service-Learning

Elizabeth Soslau and Sara Gartland

Abstract

This study explored the successes and informative challenges of a partnership forged between an elementary school, a university, and a nonprofit educational agency. The purpose of the partnership was to research the implementation of a yearlong critical service-learning framework in third and fifth grades. Teachers were engaged in a series of professional development sessions and workshops to learn how to enact My VOICE, a pedagogical approach that leverages student voices to develop a community-based service project that addresses a student-identified social issue. Using qualitative approaches, we systematically gathered teachers' perspectives and recorded the apparent strengths and weaknesses of the partnership. We posit suggestions for strengthening the partnership and highlight the benefits of critical pedagogies that can be impactful for all children.

Teachers are continuously searching for instructional approaches that will enable them to deliver standards-based curricula in ways that are authentically connected to their students' lived experiences. This search becomes even more urgent for teachers working in schools that serve marginalized populations with high rates of poverty and trauma. Teachers at these schools must navigate the pressures associated with implementing curricular approaches intended to raise test scores while working hard to engage schoolchildren who have suffered erasure by traditional curricula and endured traumatic lived experiences. Implementing trauma-informed, culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogies has been theorized as a way to help close opportunity gaps between BIPOC students and white students (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Paris & Alim, 2014). One such approach is called *critical service-learning* (e.g., Hart, 2006; Kinloch et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2008). Critical service-learning is an authentic, asset-based learning approach that uses student voice and community partnerships to drive curriculum development and delivery. Students explore relevant social issues that they have personally experienced or witnessed these issues affecting their community (e.g., discrimination, homelessness, violence, addiction, food insecurity, and so on).

Positive outcomes are likely to result when children and teachers authentically and collaboratively address social issues and real-world problems by acting and speaking out on behalf of and alongside effected community members. Benefits of this work include increased academic engagement, acknowledgment of civic responsibility, and development of critical thinking skills among participating students (Hatch et al., 2007). Too often students from underserved communities are positioned as passive recipients of service, and outsiders' efforts to "help" fail to recognize the strength that already exists in these communities. Outsider-led initiatives may consequently exacerbate community members' feelings of powerlessness and insecurity that result from enduring poverty and trauma. Critical service-learning flips the directionality of *recipient* and *provider* and creates space for students to build connections, exercise empathy, become civically engaged, recognize and leverage the power and resilience that already exists in their communities, and explore social issues in structured and safe ways while simultaneously building a sense of agency to make changes for themselves, their families, and their communities.

The goal of this project was to explore the successes and challenges of the engaged research partnership between a local state university (which we will call State University), a local urban public elementary school, and an educational nonprofit (Need in Deed [NID]). The study also captures teachers' perspectives on the partnership and their own attempts to implement critical service-learning in the classroom after engaging in a yearlong professional development series provided through the partnership. Training

was provided for teachers at a public school in an urban center on the East Coast of the United States that serves children from a historically underrepresented community affected by a high rate of poverty and concentrated trauma. Working in collaboration with highly experienced trainers from NID, we, the researchers, helped teacher participants learn how to facilitate their students' yearlong critical service-learning projects. Following NID's My VOICE (2017) multistep framework, teachers worked with students to build safe and supportive classroom communities; explore personally relevant social issues; identify an issue to deeply research; partner with community members to learn more; and implement, evaluate, and reflect on service projects carried out in their classrooms, school, and community.

Contributing Literature: Power of Critical Service-Learning

Researchers have long found fault with superficial applications of "citizenship education" and have posited that these approaches lack transformative outcomes (Banks, 2014), are not sufficiently connected to students' lived experiences (Hart, 2006), ignore the reality of structural inequalities plaguing the American education system and society (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002), and fail to take up the ways in which youth already participate in social justice movements (Mirra & Garcia, 2017). The solutions to these criticisms lie in the tenets developed by culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogy theorists (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Paris & Alim, 2014). Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies recognize both students' lived experiences and the brilliance that they bring to the classroom through their diverse funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). The work of Paris and Alim (2014) and Milner (2010) also teaches us that teachers should not ignore structural inequalities or perpetuate the myth of meritocracy, as these approaches harm students of marginalized races, ethnicities, home languages, immigration statuses, economic backgrounds, genders, sexuality, and so on. Rather, teachers must provide structured opportunities for students to learn about and work toward disrupting injustices and to stem their negative impacts on marginalized people. Similarly, Janine de Novais's "Brave Community" pedagogical approach requires "academic grounding" that allows students to take up the work of deeply understanding injustices and fosters learners' "intellectual courage and interpersonal empathy" (2019).

We do not mean to suggest that the responsibility for addressing social ills like systemic racism falls solely on teachers and students. Rather, our work recognizes the unique opportunity that teachers have to take up part of the charge during the school day and to position their students as change agents. Teachers who successfully incorporate culturally relevant and sustaining approaches to instructional design are able to center student's voice and authentic inquiries throughout the school day. One such instructional strategy is critical service-learning: a transformational approach that redistributes curricular decision-making power from the teacher to the students, centers students' voice, connects children to their community, and makes space for students to push back against injustices that disadvantage and actively harm their community (Hart, 2006; Kinloch et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2008).

Since we viewed critical service-learning as a promising practice to support learners, we were motivated to bring a yearlong professional development series to a local elementary school and to study how the partnership facilitated teachers' engagement in critical service-learning with their students. Thus, in this study, we asked two questions:

- What were the partnership's successes and informative challenges?
- What can be learned by exploring teachers' perspectives on implementing critical service-learning as a pedagogical framework?

Context and Participants

State University is a land-grant, midsize institution located on the mid-Atlantic coast. There are teacher preparation programs across six of the university's seven colleges. We are affiliated with the College of Education and Human Development, which houses an undergraduate elementary teacher education program within the School of Education. One researcher is a faculty member who provides field instruction for teacher candidates during student teaching, and the other researcher is a doctoral candidate who studies the use of critical pedagogies. The local public school site, which we will refer to here as Emily Elementary, was selected because the first author's own teacher candidates have successfully completed full-

time student teaching placements there for over six years under the mentorship of the teachers who participated in the current study. Thus, a deep and trusting relationship already existed between the first researcher and the participants.

Emily Elementary is a Title I school serving third through fifth graders in an urban center of a small state. The school is routinely described as "failing" and is populated by the most economically disadvantaged children in the state: 99% of students' families are below the poverty line, 98% percent of students identify as Black or Hispanic, and less than 2% identify as White. The student population has also been identified as living in a community with a high concentration of trauma. Over 90% of students report having witnessed violence, and many students are homeless or living in transient housing. For example, all of the students from the city's homeless shelter are bussed to Emily Elementary. In the face of these challenges, students and teachers at Emily report positive relationships with each other, and the teachers in this study have had long-term tenures at Emily. Teacher participants included six full-time elementary public school teachers (third grade, $n = 2$; fifth grade, $n = 4$). Each teacher taught 20–30 students. Based on our interview protocol, which explicitly asked teachers to name their racial identity, four teachers self-identified as Black or African American (respondents used these terms interchangeably) and two teachers self-identified as White. Each had between 8 and 19 years of teaching experience. Only one of the teachers shared that she grew up "around the corner" from the community served by Emily Elementary. All of the teachers reported attending either a private parochial school or a community public school that was better resourced compared to Emily Elementary.

Need in Deed (NID) is a 30-year-old, Philadelphia-based nonprofit agency that supports the professional development of public school teachers who want to learn how to implement critical service-learning as a pedagogical framework in their third- through eighth-grade classrooms. NID was selected to partner with State University and Emily Elementary School by the research team. The first researcher was trained by NID during her tenure as a teacher in a Philadelphia public middle school. Since then, she has served on the NID teacher advisory board and is a current board member. Through a small, internal, university-based research grant, NID was hired as a fee-for-service partner to provide professional development training associated with the My VOICE framework.

This study explores the Emily Elementary teachers' experiences as first-year NID members. NID's professional development program is modeled around a Philadelphia-based teacher network and is designed to engage teachers over several years. In the first 2 years, teachers learn and practice the framework through structured professional workshops and peer sharing meetings. These sessions bring together Philadelphia public school teachers from over 35 elementary and middle schools. In year 3 and beyond, Philadelphia NID schoolteachers become experienced network members (ENMs). ENMs serve as models for new NID teachers and are often invited to partner with NID staff to present their work at local conferences, workshops, and educational trainings. For the purposes of this project, NID was contracted to work with six teachers at Emily Elementary for one academic year, with the intent to host a second year of training to build capacity among the returning teachers should school-based funding become available. Notably, since this work took place outside of Pennsylvania, Emily Elementary teachers could not join the teacher network that has existed in Philadelphia for decades. All fee-for-service contractual trainings and peer meetings were held on-site at Emily Elementary exclusively for the six teachers. We cohosted these meetings, and the principal and assistant principal attended nearly every session.

NID's My VOICE framework is a guiding philosophy and pedagogical framework that has been developed and refined over three decades. The name *My VOICE* is both indicative of the centrality of student voice within the framework and an organizing feature of the curricular materials. VOICE stands for "Value your voice," "Open the issue," "Identify your project," "Conduct meaningful service," and "Evaluate and celebrate." Thus, each letter represents a distinct section of the curriculum, and VOICE suggests an order for curricular activities. Sample lesson plans and activities are provided for each of these sections. NID's professional development training sessions are designed to support teachers at what NID identifies as "pivotal moments" in the My VOICE framework. It should be noted that although My VOICE suggests an order for curricular activities, teachers and students select a yearlong rhythm and pace that works for them.

Methods

After we pursued and secured the approval of our university's institutional review board, classroom teachers who had previously served as cooperating mentor teachers for State University teacher candidates were invited to a recruitment event to participate in both the NID professional development series and the related research study. Teachers were offered the district's hourly compensation rate for participating in the professional development series plus additional financial compensation for participating in interviews and completing surveys. All seven teachers who volunteered were accepted; one teacher dropped out due to a transfer.

In between NID's professional development sessions, we hosted several hour-long after-school peer sharing sessions and provided weekly on-site support to teachers and students through modeled lessons, coteaching, small group reflection, lesson plan development, classroom-community partnerships, and Google Drive resource development. Data sources included partnership meeting minutes, interpersonal communication, teacher surveys administered once before and once after the professional development sequence, video recordings of all trainings and peer sharing sessions, field notes and photos, and reflective teacher exit interviews of 1–2 hours in length. Video and audio data were transcribed verbatim.

Figure 1 shows the timeline and topics for NID's professional development sequence, our peer sharing and support interventions, and data collection.

Coding: Open, A Priori, Negotiated

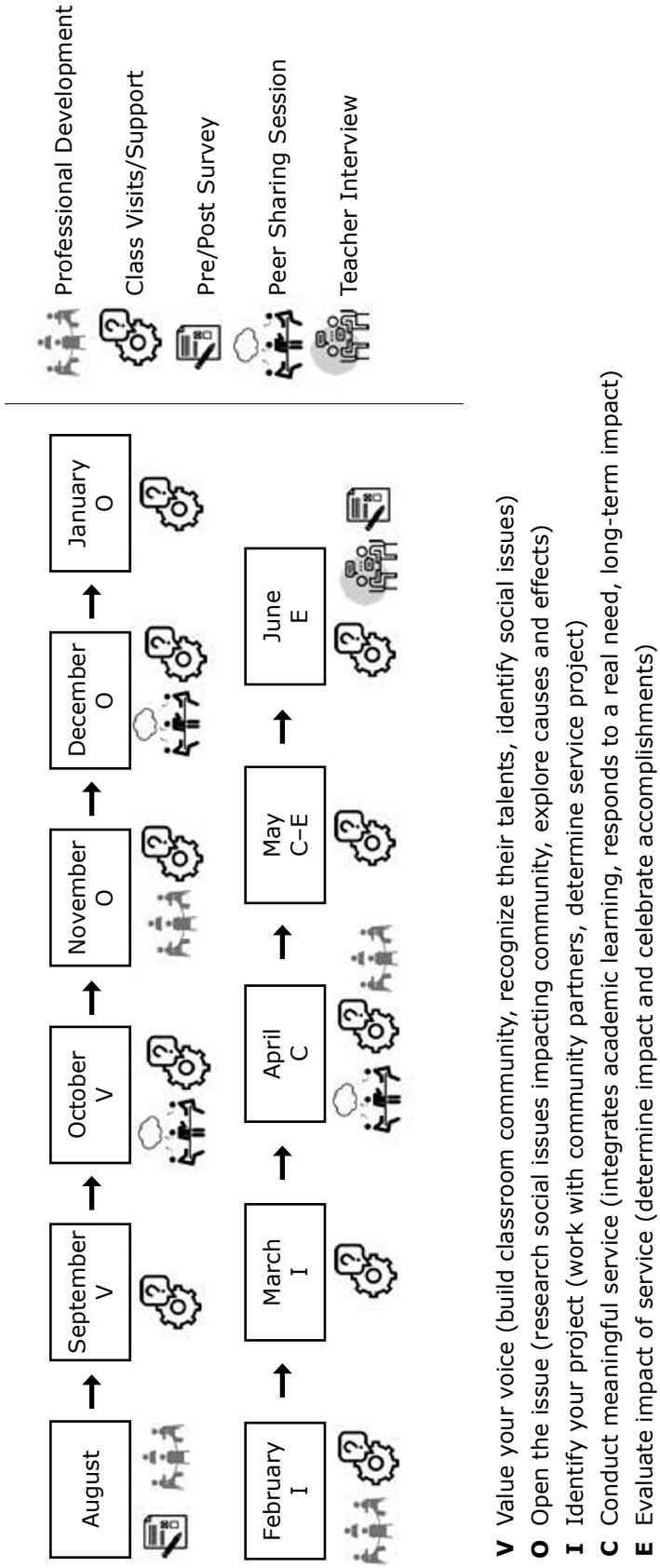
To answer our first research question, we first coded data collected from recruitment meetings, discussions with school administrators, and teacher interviews to learn more about how the partnership functioned. Specifically, we were interested in what supported the success of the partnership and what challenges could be used as opportunities for strengthening the partnership. Data were stored in a shared, password-protected Google Drive. Google Drive enabled us to share data and codevelop and conegotiate the coding scheme. In our negotiation phase, we debated the meanings of coded units to build consensus, or intersubjectivity, to "determine whether agreement [could] be reached" for each code (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 1993, p. 6). We continuously and iteratively moved through the three phases detailed by Taylor and Bogdan—"discovery, coding, and discounting" (1984)—as we cycled through all available data, including transcribed interviews, meeting notes, and field notes of classroom observations. Borrowing from methods of critical discourse analysis, we worked collaboratively when coding the data to determine the relationships between the teachers' "social practice" and "social relationships" to help us explain what we observed about the teachers' "social behaviors" (Titscher et al., 2000).

Our initial coding scheme included large categories with smaller, granular data tied to quotes or excerpts from field notes. We also used both a priori and open coding approaches. For example, the a priori codes were associated with teachers' perceptions of success around the NID projects; thus we coded phrases such as "breath of fresh air," "honest conversations," and "student buy-in increase." We were also open to new codes that we had not predicted. For example, the teachers continuously (and unexpectedly) referenced an overlap between the NID framework and "trauma-informed care." Our openness to new codes, in addition to our a priori codes, allowed us to identify an unanticipated finding that connected the NID framework to social-emotional learning opportunities.

Teacher Profiles

To address the second research question, which focused on teachers' perspectives on their own engagement in critical service-learning, we relied heavily on data from teacher interviews, observations of classroom practice, and recorded peer sharing conversations. Based on these data, we drafted teacher profiles and analytic memos using the constant comparison method (Merriam, 1998). This process involved reading and rereading all teacher interview transcripts and available teacher data multiple times, developing themes that related to each teacher, and then identifying crosscutting thematic categories that were apparent across the teachers' data sets. Each resulting teacher profile included the following categories: teachers' beliefs about schooling, their perceptions of their schoolchildren, and the ways in which they defined their own roles in the classroom. We then used the teacher profiles to draft analytic memos that highlighted what could be learned by exploring teachers' perspectives on implementing a critical service-learning pedagogical framework.

Figure 1. Project Timeline and Alignment to My VOICE Framework



Findings

Successes Identified Within the Partnership

Trust, Rapport, and Ongoing Support

As mentioned earlier, the relationship between the first researcher and the teacher participants had been developed and sustained over a period of six years prior to the initiation of the study. The teachers reported that this preexisting relationship heavily influenced their decision to make a yearlong commitment to the professional development series and to engage in the research study. Three of the six participants reported that they shared values and other commonalities with the first researcher. For example, several teachers noted that they felt a kinship with the first researcher through a "shared passion for education," a need to get involved with "addressing inequality in schools," and a desire to "[shift] power" to children so that "students felt heard and loved."

The teachers also commonly noted and appreciated our ongoing support. The second researcher engaged heavily in coplanning and coteaching, which the teachers reported was "invaluable" and "supportive." Ultimately, teachers claimed that we "walked the walk" and "put [our] money where [our] mouth is" because we not only collaborated with NID program staff to provide training but also stood shoulder to shoulder as partners with the teachers throughout the year: delivering lessons, problem-solving issues, conducting peer sharing sessions, and sharing our own resources and time when called upon to do so.

Programmatic Objectives

Teachers also reported that the NID program itself encouraged them to engage in the partnership and sustained their attendance throughout the year. Teachers commonly cited aspects of the framework such as service, hands-on activities, strategies for building community in the classroom, and opportunities to discuss social issues that directly affected their own students as reasons why they maintained a high rate of buy-in throughout the program. Teachers described the curriculum as a "true need for this population" and noted that it helped them to "put the power in students' hands" because "kids want to be heard" and "they want somewhere safe to talk about their community."

Valuable Professional Development

Without exception, each teacher raved about the quality of the professional development, both in terms of its structure and its content. Regarding structure, teachers shared that there was "flexibility and understanding for the school dynamics" and that the trainings were especially beneficial because they were "held on-site" with "meals and compensation provided." The teachers described the NID-provided professional development sessions as "meaningful," "fresh," "responsive," and "conversational." NID presenters were described as being "authentic," giving real "feedback and support," and maintaining "realistic expectations" while also providing space and "freedom to vent."

Informative Challenges Identified Within the Partnership

Professional Development Sessions Too Dense and Need More Practical Approaches

While the partnership enjoyed many successes, several informative challenges must be addressed. First, though teachers enjoyed the half-day institute that kicked off the professional development series, they also reported that the day felt crammed with too many topics and ideas. Since the framework was new to them, teachers reported needing additional time to process ideas and fully understand the unfamiliar pedagogical approaches. Teachers also noted some redundancies in topics during later professional development sessions and wanted more "make and take" activities that they could implement in their classrooms the next day.

This finding might point to the need for more frequent and shorter workshop sessions. It was difficult, however, to find meeting time when all six teachers were available. We originally attempted to work with the principal to find a common planning time for the third- and fifth-grade teachers, but this was logistically impossible. Thus, evening meetings (with the invitation to bring children/dependents along) were frequently interrupted by teachers' needs to shuttle their children to extracurricular activities, their own after-school teaching responsibilities, and unresolved pupil issues that required teachers to engage in nighttime parental outreach. Attempting to hold evening meetings more frequently may have proved incredibly difficult.

Structural Issues

Structurally, the teachers noted that the standardized testing window impeded their ability to work consistently on the service-learning project throughout the last quarter of the school year. The teachers also confessed that since the program was not mandated, the required curriculum

often took precedence over their NID work, which resulted in service-learning projects being shelved for long stretches of time. Though the teachers very much appreciated our availability to support their work, they confided in us that they underutilized the support structure provided within the partnership. This finding dovetails with the experience of the second researcher, who consistently found herself alone in the professional development space reserved for weekly check-ins, coplanning sessions, and support.

NID trainings and peer sharing sessions specifically included work time for teachers to bring out their curricular materials and plan NID lessons that integrated with their mandated core standards. Similarly, administration gave teachers permission to "put down the textbook" and teach NID lessons. Unfortunately, these lesson-planning sessions were not structured in ways that resulted in "make and take" activities or lessons, which the teachers expressed were necessities. Teachers needed more support in the form of modeled lessons and clear examples that utilized their own curricular materials.

Administrative Support

The Emily Elementary principal and assistant principal attended all peer sharing meetings and most professional development sessions. We captured ample field notes that bolster the claim that the administration was supportive of the program. For example, upon hearing teachers discuss the challenge of finding time for the NID curriculum amid a host of other initiatives, the principal said, "you can put that down, you don't have to do that curriculum, you can do Need in Deed instead" (peer sharing field note). While we found the administration to be very supportive of the program, some teachers wanted the administration to formally check in with teachers during project development. Thus, we consider this to be an informative challenge from the perspective of the teachers.

Improvements Possible Through Stronger Partnering

Reflection on the challenges presented above suggested ways to improve the partnership and the professional development model. The following proposed improvements were developed based on feedback from the teachers and on our own experiences. These suggestions should be tempered with the acknowledgment that Emily Elementary is a very particular context, and therefore some suggestions may not be applicable across school types.

Providing Additional Structure

Teachers asked for stricter deadlines and more supportive check-ins. The service-learning framework is not a standardized, lockstep curriculum. Rather, teachers are given strategies aligned to the My VOICE framework and a suggested project completion timeline, and they are encouraged to remain flexible and responsive to the needs of their students. For teachers with many competing demands, this flexibility did not work. Counter to our initial assumptions, teachers explained that they needed incremental due dates with accountability check-ins from us to monitor and support project progress. Additionally, teachers suggested that we should not wait to be invited in to teach demonstration lessons but rather schedule weekly or monthly lessons. The teachers argued that this would keep them on track and provide live modeling of the pedagogical framework.

As researcher-partners, we erred on the side of waiting for the teachers to come to us for support or invite us into classrooms. While we sent weekly emails reminding teachers about our availability to support them, locate resources, or coordinate community partners, teachers wanted us to take control of scheduling time with them for planning and demonstration or partner teaching. Our overly cautious approach was rooted in our intent not to damage our long-standing and ever-strengthening relationships with the teachers, but we missed the mark. We failed to understand that "pushing in" would not be misconstrued as judgmental and invasive but rather as a sign of love and support. We should have been more transparent with the teachers and sought their collaboration to codevelop a support model and then collectively revisit the usefulness of the model throughout the year.

Prioritizing Professional Development

In most public school districts in the state, each school provides professional development for teachers based on preselected and prescribed topics. The teachers suggested negotiating at both the district and the school level to be excused from these required professional development sessions so that they could attend additional NID workshops and peer sharing sessions during the regular school day. One teacher suggested lobbying the school to integrate NID training

with the required professional development to extend the program school-wide. Further, some teachers wanted the school-based administrators to teach NID lessons so that they would become more familiar with the framework and even more supportive of the program.

We could have partnered with school administrators to identify common planning time that the administrators would help the teachers hold sacred (that is, in which administrators would not schedule individualized education program meetings or pull teachers to cover other classes). Similarly, we could have partnered with NID to provide additional examples of curriculum integration using materials from the teachers' classrooms. Though we did routinely communicate with NID program staff to coplan upcoming workshops, there was no systematic communication with administrators outside of the peer sharing sessions. This was a missed opportunity to air challenges and engage in collaborative problem-solving to better support the teachers.

Navigating Perceived Barriers In The Partnership

Teachers reported the need to navigate a number of perceived barriers when attempting to implement the framework. While teachers felt successful at building community and exploring social issues with their students (the first two stages of NID's framework), they reported (and we observed) being less successful at carrying out a complete service-learning project before year's end. This finding aligns with the experiences of veteran NID program staffers, who reported that first-year NID teachers should focus on learning and trying out the framework and are only expected to conduct minimal service their first year. In general, NID teachers begin to focus on more fully developed service and reflection during their second year and beyond.

Discussions about exploring and selecting social issues and project topics concerned the teachers for a variety of reasons. First, narrowing the project down to one issue was challenging, and students had some difficulty buying in to the class-selected topic if it was different from their own first choice. One teacher noted that "a challenging part may have been trying to narrow down an issue, because it was so easy to just say violence and bullying and things like that" without truly considering specific types of violence or bullying. Similarly, once students explored an initial topic, some children fixated on that single social issue and narrowed their topic selection before exploring other issues. Additionally, some teachers had a difficult time taking on the role of facilitator and letting go of control, a key feature of the model. In the words of a fifth-grade teacher, "something that was difficult for me was letting them be in charge. I know for a fact that me and [my partner teacher] really wanted the kids to pick stress in the classroom—and we sold it to them. Then, when they voted, they were like, 'gun violence,' and we were like, 'what?' I really wanted them to do stress." Finally, teachers explained that navigating difficult topics that arose during class discussions, such as sexual discrimination and child abuse, proved to be challenging.

As noted earlier, teacher participants attended either private religious-based schools or well-resourced public schools in their own childhoods. These schools did not mirror the Emily Elementary community's racial makeup, economic status, or urban location. Sometimes teachers noted that these differences in childhood experiences made them more conscious of saying or doing the "right" thing in a way that would not harm their students' perceptions of their own community. For example, one of the two self-identified White teachers shared that her race and the fact that she "didn't grow up the way her students are growing up" complicated how she discussed social issues that affected her students' neighborhoods. She explained, "As a White teacher, I am careful not to be perceived as talking down to or being negative about the community. I want them to feel proud, which is the whole point of this—to find positivity in their community. I need to be very careful with my wording."

Power Sharing and Connections to Lived Experiences

Despite having to navigate several barriers, teachers also reported a plethora of benefits that came from implementing the pedagogical framework. When prompted, teachers cited many examples of the ways in which they leveraged the framework to support power sharing with their students and to make space for students to share their lived experiences. All of the participants spoke passionately about power sharing and shifting to include more student voice in all aspects of the school day. Claiming that children "want to be heard" was a common refrain among the participants. As one teacher shared, "different kids stepped up and took control and participated than normally had done in the past." Another teacher noted that there was a "high buy-in rate,

they wanted to research stuff, and they wanted to share." The NID framework also provided space for students who had historically been unsuccessful in traditional curricular lessons an opportunity to feel academic success. As one teacher noted, "kids who don't excel in other areas of school can excel in NID." Teachers also consistently claimed that the NID lessons provided ample opportunities for students to be vulnerable and share their experiences with events that occurred outside of the classroom. Teachers said, for example, "they don't have to hide what they experience at home or in their neighborhood," "kids really opened up and wanted to talk about gun violence," and "they want somewhere safe to talk about their community and their concerns."

Critical Framework Components

All of the teacher participants reported that the O stage ("Open the issue") and the V stage ("Value your voice") were the most influential and important aspects of the five-part framework. The teachers described the V stage as a way to show students that "they each had something important to contribute in the classroom," and it enabled the teachers to build a solid classroom community. It also encouraged students to share about their home lives and how they viewed their neighborhoods. "Open the issue" (O Stage) was another helpful stage. One teacher described the O stage as "eye opening because the students talked about things that they would not have normally shared." Another teacher said that students were able to "dive right into research" and fully "explain why they picked a particular issue, why it is personally valuable" while "using their own opinions and not what they have been told is wrong with their communities." The teachers' selection of the V and O stages as most valuable could be rooted in their understanding that many traditional curricula do not explicitly foster a sense of community by elevating student voice and exploring personally meaningful topics. The teachers' selection of the V and O stages tracks with the stages that they were able to accomplish with their students. Though all teachers made it through the I stage ("Identify your project"), it is unknown if they would have selected the C or E stages as essential. Witnessing schoolchildren carrying out meaningful and authentic service (C) or evaluating and reflecting on their own successes at employing their agency to address a real community issue (E) are powerful and critical steps in the process of service-learning.

Professional Growth

In addition to the obvious professional growth derived from the professional development series, the teachers also reported intrapersonal learning as a result of engaging in and delivering the critical service-learning framework. Teachers shared that they learned "more about themselves as a teacher" and that implementing the framework helped them learn "how to let go" and release responsibility back to the children. Teachers appreciated the opportunity to extend their teaching repertoire by using a pedagogical framework that not only "aligned with [their] teaching philosophy" but also provided them with practical activities to build community in the classroom as opposed to "just saying my classroom is a community." Another teacher reported that the framework helped her see her children and their communities in a new light. She shared, "kids articulate the beauty they see in their own community, which outsiders might not see, through their own lens. I get so caught up in the trauma, I don't stop and say there's murals, parks—just so many different things—NID helps me see the beauty [of the students' communities] through my kids' eyes." This finding aligns with what Love (2019) demands of teachers in her research: an explicit focus on love and joy when engaging in critical work.

Opportunities for Social-Emotional Learning and Curriculum Integration

Teachers were able to apply and integrate a culturally relevant curriculum that addressed both the required standards and students' social-emotional needs. For example, one teacher shared that two of her students often physically fought with each other, but during a NID class session, they found out that they were both in foster care, and they both had mothers who were incarcerated. The teacher described the love and care that the two students expressed toward each other over a shared trauma—and the physical fighting ceased. Another teacher claimed that the framework included "restorative practices" embedded throughout that helped students learn to manage their own behaviors and repair interpersonal hurts (Muhammad, 2019).

A veteran third-grade teacher shared that the discussion and thinking-aloud format of NID lessons carried over into her math classroom. Children had extra practice sharing their thoughts and feeling safe with their classmates during NID lessons, so they were able to implement mathematic think-aloud protocols with greater ease. This teacher said, "the students have extra

practice in talking and building trust in each other, which helped them engage in math talk, which positively impacted their math testing."

A fifth-grade literacy teacher shared that the trade books from the ReadyGEN reading curriculum that she was reading with her students included "everyday heroes," which presented a "perfect" way to embed a NID lesson about service to others. Other teacher participants commented on how great it was to incorporate grade-level articles from Newsela.com into NID lessons so that students could have more practice reading nonfiction text and writing constructed responses. We also learned that teachers were seeking resources for a social studies curriculum and that NID was a great way to learn about community, civic partners, social services, activism, and citizenry. Teachers were able to bring in "current events and outside news," and they also engaged in "looking up statistics about issues that the kids were interested in."

Teachers' Perceptions About Benefits for All Children

We asked the teachers if there were particular types of students or school communities who would benefit from the My VOICE critical service-learning framework. Teachers emphatically said that everyone could benefit. As one teacher put it, "All kids that breathe. Giving back doesn't have a socioeconomic bracket. Having social responsibility doesn't have a color, it doesn't have a gender. It's what you should do, period, as a human, just give back."

While the teachers thought the pedagogical approaches would be useful to all children, they also noted that the approaches were particularly germane to the population they serve. One teacher shared that the program allowed her to "put [her students] in a position of power when they feel powerless. You can't change everything, but you can be part of a change. My kids were ready for it because they live it." Similarly, another teacher contended, "if they can figure out gun violence, they can figure out order of operations, let them work through it." Teachers agreed that "this population [at Emily Elementary] needs to have power and feel the reward in helping others in their community" and that NID was a fit for the "students because they built compassion for each other without fear or judgement." One teacher summarized the benefits to her children as an opportunity for pride: "They can say, I did that. I made a difference."

Discussion and Significance

The informative challenges that we have discussed need to be addressed for at least two purposes. First, we need to continue thinking through how best to partner with the teachers and students at Emily Elementary, and second, consumers of this work need to determine if a student-led critical service-learning framework is possible in their own educational spaces. As mentioned, this project captures year 1 of a 2-year planned professional development sequence (funding dependent). The hope is that the second year of training will provide additional opportunities for teachers to facilitate their students' projects, ideally culminating in authentic partnerships with community members, deep reflection on social issues, and opportunities to develop organizing and activism skills that can disrupt and dismantle systems of inequity.

We know the possibilities of this work, since NID has an impressive portfolio that includes hundreds of projects led by thousands of students spanning 3 decades of serving Philadelphia public schools (Billig et al., 2008; Grimley & Straub, 2012; Hatch et al., 2007; Soslau & Yost, 2007). The difference between the program's successes in Philadelphia and our current work may be attributable to several manageable constraints. For one, Emily Elementary is located outside of NID's Philadelphia-based network of community partners, and Emily's teachers are not interconnected in peer sharing sessions with teachers from schools across the district. These two conditions made it difficult to secure community partners, and teachers at Emily Elementary were limited by learning solely from each other. They represented only two grade levels and focused predominantly on curricula integration attempts in math and English language arts. Teachers in the Philadelphia model use peer sharing sessions (which include teachers from approximately 35 different schools and are led by NID staff) to share ideas from third through eighth grades across multiple content areas; they often help one another identify community partners and collectively figure out how to navigate barriers created by mandated curricula and standardized testing.

While we do not have a ready-made solution that would replicate the benefits provided by the Philadelphia teacher network, we have begun to enact several ideas that could build upon our first-year experience. First, we have located a community member that leads activist work in the community that surrounds the Emily

Elementary campus. She has agreed to work with us to identify and secure community partners for future NID projects. Second, we are humbled by the teachers' emphatic open-door invitations to coteach and coplan with them. This, of course, calls into question our own capacity to support teachers in the NID model if including more teachers in the future is a goal. Continued released time from our own campus-based workloads will have to be negotiated.

We have also begun to build on an existing practicum course–based partnership between State University and a local middle school that is actively seeking funding to bring NID to middle school teachers and their students. If this partnership proves fruitful, teachers from the two school sites could develop a micronetwork and reap the benefits of a multigrade and cross-content teacher collaborative. Notably, though prior relationships between the State University and the middle school existed, these relationships are newer and more limited relative to our prior relationships with Emily Elementary, pointing to the promise of extending this work without a deep, multiyear prior relationship as a prerequisite.

As oppression, marginalization, and inequality continue to plague our nation's children, it is urgent that we educate students to see, name, frame, and call out societal failures and ills. Simultaneously, educators need to enact pedagogical frameworks that help schoolchildren develop competencies that allow them to become agents of change. While the teachers in this study reported that student voice was strong and that shifting power to children was a major focus in each classroom, the authentic agency of children was less apparent since no projects culminated in actual service. Additionally, children must understand that systems of inequity plague our nation and their communities and that they can affect those systems. Although students seemed to develop this systems-level understanding when exploring issues, they did not have opportunities to act upon their knowledge. The hope is that through continued partnership between Emily Elementary, the university, and NID, the goal of activism through action will be more fully achieved.

Despite the challenges of the partnership and the improvements that will need to be made, all teachers reported that they wanted to continue to enact aspects of the My VOICE critical service-learning framework in their future classrooms. One teacher, who is transferring to a new school, has already discussed NID with her new grade-team partners. She valued that NID centers children's emotional, social, and academic needs while keeping the focus on the heart and purpose of schooling: to generate self-actualized citizens ready to positively engage with their communities, both in the here and now and into the future.

Much of the research on critical service-learning explores after-school or other non-school programming (e.g., Sprague Martinez et al., 2017) or narrowly focuses on the application of service in a single content area or discipline (Coffey & Fulton, 2018). The current study explored a unique and flexible framework for critical service-learning that, if properly supported, could be implemented across grade levels and content areas and become integrated into the mandated school-day curriculum. Our goal is to figure out the proper supportive partnership structure for Emily Elementary, which serves brilliant and capable children who have endured high rates of trauma and are taught by masterful teachers who are understandably overwhelmed by a severely underresourced school system.

With their intense focus on test results, traditional teaching and learning models rest on the erroneous assumption that grown-ups know best. Our work will continue to push against this dangerous assumption. We view the My VOICE framework as a critical service-learning pedagogy that can create space for schoolchildren to authentically self-select and explore community-based social issues through power sharing with teachers and building authentic relationships with community members. The framework, if properly woven throughout the regular school day via authentic curricular connections, can serve as an antidote to traditional approaches that suppress students' understandings of social issues and limit children from becoming informed, engaged youth activists.

Ultimately, this project has inspired new avenues for further research and capacity development opportunities among university faculty and staff, K–12 partners, and students. This collaborative partnership between an elementary school, nonprofit organization, and university can serve as a model in numerous ways: it is (a) an example of how to practically enact culturally responsive pedagogy, (b) a flexible approach to connecting underserved schools with community and university resources, (c) a research site for faculty interested in centering issues of equity and justice in both teacher preparation and

in-service teacher development, (d) a training ground in which classroom teachers can host teacher candidates and model critical pedagogies, and (e) a transformational professional learning experience for both teachers and their teacher educator partners as they struggle to balance the world of standardized curricula against the need to give children voice and choice in what, how, and why they learn.

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