



## *Creating a Sense of Belonging through an Extended Service-Learning Experience for Pre-Service STEM Educators*

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### **Abstract**

*This research focused on unpacking the perceptions of preservice and early career science and mathematics teachers of a service-learning experience embedded within an undergraduate teacher preparation program. Participants completed 30 hours in a high-need school setting for multiple semesters, designed to provide an opportunity to deeply understand the context of these settings and the populations they serve. In these placements, participants were encouraged to go beyond observation and instruction and attend faculty meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and student extracurricular activities. Supplementing this service, seminars were designed to bring together participants, graduates, faculty, and mentor teachers to consider issues relevant to teaching. Data analyzed included Likert-scale questions and open-ended prompts from the external evaluators focusing on the value of interacting with the students, faculty, administration, and high-need settings. The project team also used semi-structured interviews with ten Noyce graduates focusing on the service-learning component. Review of Likert-scale questions in the annual surveys indicated that all the participants found the service-learning component to be valuable or extremely valuable for them with respect to their future careers. The open-ended prompts and the interviews were open coded inductively, yielding four emergent themes—gaining perspectives, relationships, confidence, and transformational experiences, and scholarship funding. Evidence supporting these themes and the implications of the service-learning experience for the participants is discussed.*

**Keywords:** *service-learning, STEM teacher preparation, high-need schools, possible-selves theory, community engagement, teacher retention*

**T**eachers continue to be cited as the single most important factor contributing to student success (Opper, 2019; Shen et al., 2020). Close relationships between teachers and students are cumulative over time, and support and strengthen both academic achievement and socio-emotional development (Ansari et al, 2020). Therefore, as educators, it is concerning that conservative estimates have suggested 36,000 nationwide vacant teaching positions and an additional 163,000 positions filled by underqualified teachers (Nguyen et al., 2022). Contrast this with data from the Learning Policy Institute that placed the number of unfilled teaching positions and those filled by uncertified teachers at 406,964 (Tan et al., 2024).

Suggested causes for this shortfall are varied. The National Council on Teacher Quality cited a drop in enrollment and completion in preservice teacher preparation programs of approximately 30% in the period between the 2010-11 and 2020-21 academic years (Saenz-Armstrong, 2023), perhaps suggesting problems with the supply side of the equation. Ingersoll (2023) suggested the issue was not a shortage of teachers entering the field as much as the large numbers leaving well before retirement. This departure has been disproportionately represented by early career (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), special education and STEM teachers (Dee & Goldhaber, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2019), and those teachers in schools serving low-income students (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Dee & Goldhaber, 2017; Ingersoll, 2001).

It has been recognized there is a need for educators, especially early career teachers, to develop a sense of belonging to the school, students and culture. Dewhurst et al. (2020, p. 17), identified this sense of belonging as being “crucial to preservice teachers’ cognition” and “well-being” in early field placements. This aligns with Deci and Ryan (2000) who identified “relatedness” as one of the three innate, essential psychological needs of humans that help us achieve “effectiveness, connectedness, and coherence” (p. 229).

Liou et al. (2010) suggested preservice teachers (PSTs) should be provided with positive experiences in challenging contexts to help develop a level of comfort in those settings. Similarly, in a study exploring the perceptions of seasoned teachers in an urban setting, Diffily and Perkins (2002, p. 57) stressed the need for early experiences that helped PSTs “understand intergroup and intragroup cultural differences and the culture of poverty.” Therefore, creating a sense of belonging in these high-need contexts is essential for PSTs (Pendergast et al., 2020), and may support both the initial recruitment and retention in these challenging settings.

This research examined the following question: What are preservice and early career STEM teachers’ perceptions of the value of a service-learning experience (SLE) embedded in their preservice teacher education program?

### **Service-Learning**

Service-learning has a long history in higher education (e.g. Bringle et al., 2013). Finley (2011, p. 2) labeled it “an umbrella term,” used to represent a variety of programs and activities with varying pedagogical emphasis. At its core, service-learning is experiential in nature and situated within a social framework (Conway et al., 2009). Its roots have stemmed from the philosophical writings of John Dewey (Giles & Eyler, 1994), who first emphasized the fundamental link between real-world experience and learning (Dewey, 1938).

Most scholars and practitioners have aligned service-learning within the paradigms of social justice and democratic principles (e.g. Sheffield, 2011). Sheffield, who used the term community service-learning (CSL), differentiated between weak and strong CSL. While both are based in democratic pedagogy, the strong version “has the radical potential to reconstruct individuals, communities, and institutional structures that are currently oppressive” (Sheffield, 2011, p. 125).

Although there are variations of definitions of service learning, Bringle and Clayton (2012, p. 105) offered the following definition that is broadly applied:

service learning involves the integration of academic material, relevant community-based service activities, and critical reflection in a reciprocal partnership that engages students, faculty/staff, and community members to achieve academic, civic, and personal learning objectives as well as to advance public purposes.

This study most closely aligns with the related perspective offered by Tatebe (2013) who considered service-learning “as a means of bridging the socioeconomic divide between teachers and students through the provision of experience in disadvantages settings as part of PTE [preservice teacher education] programs” (p. 241).

### **Theoretical Framework**

While universally agreed that service-learning has its conceptual basis in the philosophy of Dewey, Warchal and Ruiz (2004) have suggested that it lacks a comprehensive theoretical framework able to capture the complexity of the experience. With this in mind, the researchers adopted the dual lenses of belongingness and possible-selves theory to understand the students’ perceptions of the SLE. There is ample evidence to support the “belongingness hypothesis” that represents the human need to develop interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Within educational settings, the opportunity to “build a sense of belonging is a highly significant aspect of student teachers’ identity development” and “is closely linked to students’ sense of themselves as real teachers” (Johnston & Dewhurst, 2021, p 8).

Aligning with this construct, possible-selves theory considers an “individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming,” and links together “cognition and motivation” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). This image of oneself in the future may be positive or negative and arises from the individual’s goal, hopes and fears, all situated in a specific context. Possible-selves theory has been used to study preservice science teachers’ views of themselves as future teachers (Hong & Greene, 2011), and to frame identity development of new teachers (Erdem, 2020; Hamman et al., 2010; Pellikka, et al., 2022).

### **Setting**

The setting for this research was a preservice teacher education program (PTEP) at a comprehensive university in the southeastern U.S. The participants were preservice teachers and recent graduates that participated in a service-learning experience that was part of the implementation of a Robert Noyce (Noyce) Teaching Scholarship Grant (Noyce Award #1852688). Noyce is administered by the National Science Foundation and has a primary goal of increasing the STEM teacher workforce in high-need settings (Feng et al., 2021). Preservice teachers were classified as interns or scholars. Interns were STEM undergraduates that were considering teaching as a career, while scholars were STEM undergraduates that had already committed to receiving secondary teaching certification. Over the span of this study there were 26 scholars and 14 interns; only five of the interns transitioned to scholars. Also participating were 10 in-service teachers that were former scholars (graduates) teaching in high-need settings ranging between 6-36 months. Interns, scholars and graduates are all classified as study participants and referred to as PSTs.

### **Noyce Service-Learning**

PSTs were required to complete 30 hours of service in a high-need classroom related to their content area each semester of financial support. In addition to observing classroom interactions, participants were encouraged to immerse themselves into the culture of the school, attend faculty meetings, observe parent/teacher conferences, provide individual tutoring, attend school-related extracurricular activities, and discuss classroom issues with their mentor teacher. The goal

was to broaden the typical experience of placements to engender a more comprehensive understanding of the context of high-need settings.

Twice a semester, PSTs were asked to participate in evening seminars focused on reflection. These seminars brought together scholars, interns, mentor teachers, university faculty and clinical faculty, and occasional external speakers to develop a community where issues surrounding secondary STEM education could be problematized and discussed. Each seminar began with casual conversations that related to experiences from the field to develop rapport and opportunities to foster a deeper understanding of PST involvement in the school and community. This was followed by special presenters from the educational community with expertise in particular areas such as co-teaching, co-planning, equity, social justice, asset-based mindsets, and other areas of research known to improve and sustain schools labeled as at-risk. After these focused sessions, participants engaged in a modified dilemma protocol (McDonald et al., 2015), where one PST suggested a dilemma from their experiences and the other attendees were positioned as informants and discussants offering valuable opportunities to think critically as both problem providers and solvers.

### Methodology

The research utilized a single-case methodology (Yin, 2017), that was bound within the PTEP within years 1-4 of the Noyce grant. Data came from surveys completed annually at the end of academic years 1-4 of the grant by the external evaluators of interns, scholars and recent Noyce graduates, and semi-structured interviews of graduates completed in year 4 by the principal author.

### Data

The annual survey contained 4-point modified Likert-type scale questions (Likert, 1932) and several open-ended response questions. Likert-type questions used a value scale or an agree scale. Those questions pertinent to the research question are provided in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. The 10 graduates participated in individual interviews after the completion of year 4 using the semi-structured protocol outlined in Table 3. Of that total, nine were still teaching and one had left to pursue an alternative career.

**Table 1:** *Likert Questions from Annual Survey used in the Study & the Scale Category used for Each*

Question	
1.	Value of being able to interact with school administrators and teachers in high-need schools
2.	Value of the field experience/service-learning experience
3.	Program provided opportunities to gain experience serving high-need students
4.	Program has increased my motivation to teach high-need students
5.	Program has increased my interest in pursuing teaching
6.	Program has expanded my skills to teach high-need students

**Table 2:** *Open-Ended Questions from Annual Survey used in the Study*

1.	Please describe ways in which the internship/scholarship Program has impacted your experience this year.
2.	What aspect of the internship/scholarship Program has been most useful to you this year? Why?
3.	What aspect of the internship/scholarship Program has been most challenging to you or other interns this year?

**Table 3:** *Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Graduates*

1.	How many semesters/years have you been teaching in a high-need school or district?
2.	How important was the scholarship funding to your completion of your degree and certification? Can you provide specifics?
3.	If you had not received the Noyce scholarship, would your trajectory have changed at all?
4.	How did the experience gained through the Noyce service experience impact your ability to be successful in a high-need school or district?
5.	How did the experience gained through the Noyce seminars or collegial support impact your ability to be successful in a high-need school or district.?
6.	What specific skills or knowledge do you think you gained through the service-learning experience?
7.	What specific skills or knowledge to you think you gained from overall participation in the Noyce Program?
8.	What specific skills or knowledge to you think you gained from overall participation in the Noyce Program?
9.	Is there anything you wish you had received in training, professional development, course work, etc. to better prepare you for teaching in high-need settings?

### **Data Analysis**

The Likert-type scale questions from the annual survey were converted to numerical values (4 = strongly agree/very valuable; 3 = agree/valuable; 2 = disagree/somewhat valuable; 1 = strongly disagree/not valuable) and analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Responses to open-ended questions from the surveys and from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim. Open coding of the data was completed by the principal author, and analysis continued iteratively until codes were stable and no new codes developed. These codes, along with a code book and a random sample of the transcripts, were provided to two coauthors. Reviewers independently reviewed and coded the data to assess reproducibility of the codes (Patton, 2002). Discrepancies were negotiated and the codes were adjusted as necessary. A modified thematic analysis procedure was employed to coalesce codes into themes representing the perspectives of the participants (Braun & Clark, 2006; Creswell, 2012).

## Results

The response rate for scholars and interns across years 1-4 on the annual surveys was 95% and 83%, respectively. Since most participants received more than one academic year of support, the total number of survey responses exceeded the total number of unique participants. Ten of the 16 scholars that had graduated and began teaching responded to requests to participate.

### Quantitative Data

The six questions asked of both interns and scholars (Table 1) were determined to have good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.915. Most PSTs considered the ability to interact with administrators and teachers in high-need schools and the SLE as very valuable or valuable. They also agreed or strongly agreed that the SLE provided opportunities to gain experience serving high-need students, increase their interest in pursuing teaching, and increase their motivation, interest and skills to teach high-need students. Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 4.

**Table 4:** *Descriptive Statistics for Likert Scale Questions*

Question	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	60	2	4	3.85	.404
2.	60	2	4	3.82	.431
3.	60	3	4	3.92	.279
4.	60	2	4	3.75	.508
5.	61	2	4	3.80	.477
6.	61	2	4	3.80	.477

### Qualitative Data

All transcript and short answer data were combined for the qualitative review. A total of 22 open codes were derived from the data and coalesced into four dominant themes representative of PSTs and graduates—Gaining Perspectives, Relationships, Confidence, and Transformational Experiences.

#### *Gaining Perspectives*

This theme represented new or revised understandings of teaching and of the culture within high-need settings. A graduate offered that the experience "...highlighted the needs of all students, and this has helped refine what I need to focus on as a teacher." Another felt the experience allowed them to be "able to interact with high-need students and learn about their interests and the ways in which they like to learn."

Some participants realized that high-need settings were similar to other settings they had experienced throughout their preservice journey. "The kids, they really aren't that much different." However, others developed a more nuanced understanding of the students and acknowledged the different challenges that high-need populations may face. One graduate offered:

They've got stuff going on at home, they've got jobs that they work after school, they help take care of their younger siblings after school, and everything. So, it kind of helped me to realize that sometimes I need to have a little bit more grace with them, you know, because they do have other stuff going on. And also, be prepared to encourage them to care about school more, whereas I feel like if I hadn't had the experience already, that I might have just gone into and being like, what the heck, why did these kids not seem to care? But it's because I knew, you know, like, they got a lot going on. There's outside factors here that I don't know about.

Another dominant thread within the theme was experience witnessing pedagogical strategies in action. A graduate offered:

I have always written very detailed lesson plans and tried to follow them flawlessly, but my experiences in the classroom at my mentor school have helped me develop my ability to think on-the-spot and respond to students in a way that helps them think without just handing them the answer.

One scholar gained insight on communication strategies. "I feel like I gained a little more knowledge about how high school students in my mentor school learn and communicate." A graduate felt that much of their ability to implement effective classroom management "...came from Noyce relationships."

Participants also gained insight in the Connections Seminars. One reflected on a seminar and the dilemma protocol.

...I really enjoyed, like connecting with the other scholars, and even with the teachers. I think it was just cool to see everyone's different perspectives and everyone's different placement of the schools...the dilemma protocol, I think that really helped just opened my eyes to what I could be facing in my job and given me, I guess, a good head start of how to navigate certain situations.

The Connection Seminars also fostered dialogue that was valued by the participants. When discussing issues raised, particularly through the dilemma protocol, one PST offered,

Really, there's not one answer for any of those things. There's multiple answers and it's going to depend on what works for the teacher and the student, [and the] ...seminars were so helpful in just breaking that barrier of knowing how to professionally talk about things.

Another graduate offered: "The readings this semester, the presentations at the Connections Seminars, and the experiences I had last semester and in the previous year have helped me stay conscious of the effect of my words and actions on students." The community that developed as a product of participation in the seminars was also relevant: ...being a part of those Noyce seminars really helps kind of structure what an educator community looked like...it helped me, you know, understand perspectives and also helped me learn how to, you know, discuss challenges I'm facing...

### ***Relationships***

This theme focused on the relationships that developed with the mentor teachers, the students and other scholars. Some of the experiences reported by the mentees reflected the value of seeing how their mentor teacher implemented class logistics. “The most useful part of this internship is learning the ‘tools of the trade’ from my mentor teacher.” Another commented on the value of first-hand knowledge of some of the profession's contextual aspects. “My mentor teachers...allows me to experience things I would never be able to experience as a student. I get to see behind the scenes of what teaching at high-need schools is all about because of her.” A similar perspective was offered by another scholar, “It allowed me the opportunity to connect with my mentor teacher and discuss issues I didn't even know existed.” A graduate offered, “My mentor allows me to experience everything that I can, and she strives to help me better understand the students.”

Several scholars and graduates appreciated interaction beyond the classroom. “I got to participate in recreational activities like setting up for a Halloween dance and going to events. Being able to experience the classroom and school activities made me feel even more excited to become a teacher.” Others felt they made connections with the students. “The relationships made with my students are valuable connections that have helped to guide and encourage me.”

In some situations, the insight gained by the candidate was more specific. “Miss Conner (pseudonym) taught me how to handle challenging situations...I think she handled tough situations with students very well and I took that to heart, and that I think of her whenever I handle a tough situation with a student.” Another graduate offered, “My first mentor had a really good ability to get the kids communicating with each other, and that's something that is carried over into my work significantly.” One scholar offered, “I am learning how the students think and talk the more I speak with them. On the other hand, I am learning how to be more professional when I speak to administrators.” One graduate adopted their mentor's style of greeting students:

I stand in the hall in between classes every time and I greet all of my students as they come the whole year, even the last week of school, as they're coming in, I'm like, hey, JoJo (pseudonym), hey...every single person as they come in.

In a minority of cases, the fit between the scholar or intern and the mentor teacher was misaligned. One scholar offered that it was difficult working with their mentor because they were “...kind of burnt out...” and lacked “commitment.” Another felt some disconnect because the mentor did not adopt the student-centered instructional practices modeled in the PTEP program. “That wasn't something that she would do.”

### ***Confidence***

The theme of Confidence, that was evidenced by a number of participants, describes ways the extended service experience supported their sense of self.

The program has significantly impacted my view of teaching in high-need schools. Before I would have been worried about handling such a situation, but now I feel I have the tools (and the support) of a broad range of teachers, faculty, and fellow education students to help me.

Another scholar offered, “This scholarship changed my life. I had little to no self-confidence. ...I’ve gained knowledge and skills that I feel will be very helpful in my years to come as a teacher. I am excited for the future.” A graduate reflected on the confidence gained in comparison to some other beginning teachers in their school,

I just think that the experience in total has definitely made me more confident and just a little more ahead of some of the first-year teachers that I’ve met before and all those teachers that have been in those alternate programs.

In some cases, confidence was reinforced by the mentee/mentor relationship continuing after graduation while in their full-time position.

She thought about me a few times this year...and she actually messaged me and said, hey, remember that day that you did the lab on genetics with my kids? Can I have that information from you? So, I think we mutually learned from one another during that experience, but that definitely was a huge confidence booster for me.

### ***Transformational Experiences***

This theme represents core shifts in scholar and graduate thinking related to the service-learning experience. One intern expressed how the experience changed their perspective: “It opened my idea of teaching. It’s no longer [just] helping these students academically, but emotionally as well. Providing students with a ‘safe place’ in the classroom is something that is now at the top of my list.” Several scholars commented on the impact participation in service-learning had on their educational path.

I was reconsidering my degree path...but being with the students reignited my passion to teach...Being part of the Noyce Program has made a huge difference in the trajectory of my life. Being in the schools and learning with my mentor was a major motivator that helped to propel me through the difficulty of the math portion of my degree.

Another offered, “This program has opened [my] eyes to schemas that I had previously about high-needs students...Without the Noyce Program I most likely would have never considered teach at a high-needs school.”

The holistic nature of the experience and the extended interaction with mentor teachers was summed up by one scholar: “I feel more aware of a teacher’s full role outside of just lesson planning and executing the lesson.” A graduate offered, “I learned that students in high-need schools deserve the time and attention that we give any other student. Their environment may make it difficult at first, but consistency and intentionally breaking the cultural barriers allows teachers to truly get to know their students.” Addressing the value of the experience one scholar offered “If it were not for the scholarship, I would not be a teacher. This has opened doors for me that I could have never imagined.” and other expressed, “This program opened my eyes to the need of good, caring, intentional teachers in high-need schools.”

In at least one case a graduate spoke of increased cultural relevance:

This program has been extremely valuable to me, especially in ways of racial awareness. Many of the readings and the overall experience of interning at a predominately African American school has opened my eyes to biases towards people of color and helped me develop skills to combat them in my future endeavors to thus help create a more inclusive environment.

### Discussion

While the SLE in this study could not be labeled as strong community service-learning, it did achieve what Sheffield (2011) termed reciprocity, where the provider of the service, in this case the preservice teacher candidates, also received a service. The data coalesced around the participants' sense that they belonged to and were part of the communities they served in the experience and will continue to serve in their careers. Overwhelmingly, the PSTs and recent graduates found substantial value in the embedded SLE associated with the Noyce grant. This was not only supported in the annual evaluation Likert-type scale questions but was also demonstrated in the exploration of the four major themes that arose from open-ended questions on the annual surveys and the interviews with recent graduates. Of the ten graduates participating in the interview, nine were still teaching in high need settings.

A sense of belonging is a basic human, physiological need, next in priority after water, food and shelter (Maslow, 1954) and is therefore at the core of human existence. Baumeister and Leary (1995, p. 497) defined belongingness as “the need for frequent, nonaversive interactions within an ongoing relational bond.” Allen et al. (2021, p. 87) defined belonging as a product of the “competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions” of an individual, all interacting within a cultural context over time. Central to this concept was feeling that one was part of a whole or of a system (Hagerty et al., 1992).

The research on K-12 student belongingness and the positive correlation to better learning outcomes, attitude and overall well-being has been considerable (e.g. Osterman, 2023), yet the application of this framework to better understand preservice and early career teachers has not been as robust. Balgopal et al. (2022) concluded that a feeling of belonging can develop when early career teachers feel a connection and support from professional organizations and their PTEPs. Research finds that PSTs' sense of belonging to their teacher education program was positively related to their increased self-efficacy, and that it was important for PSTs to be afforded the opportunity to build network connections and to be provided with opportunities to interact in meaningful ways (Bjorklund et al., 2020). Johnston and Dewhurst (2021) concluded that the ability to foster interpersonal relationships was one essential theme in the promotion of a sense of belonging with Scotland's equivalent of student teaching. Bjorklund (2023) found novice teachers struggled to feel a sense of belonging to their context.

Belonging has also been an important component to identity development as PSTs see themselves joining a group of practicing educators (Wenger, 1988). This enculturation into a community was initially spawned by a sense of belonging and then transitioned into a positive possible self, where the participants saw themselves as existing and thriving within the setting. This was evidenced clearly by one participant who remarked “I had never been to a high-needs school before, but after my experience at my mentor school I have fallen in love with the students and faculty.” Another participant's transformative experience was seen in their words “I have gained a growth mindset and believe I can be good at anything now.” Comments such as these demonstrated the PSTs were developing their own identity as a teacher in high need settings and gaining

confidence in that role. Possible selves “provides a way of conceptualizing the process of change” as they move from students to teachers (Hamman et al., 2010, p. 1358).

Possible selves, however, are dynamic and respond to the changing situational environment (Markus & Wurf, 1987), and these data only follow preservice educators and in-service teachers in their first three years teaching. In a meta-analysis of teacher attrition and retention, Nguyen et al. (2019) discussed significant correlates of attrition to level of experience, with teachers having less than three years of experience having a 54% increase in their odds of attrition when compared to those with more experience. Therefore, it remains critical to provide experiences for candidates in their preservice journey that help them navigate those early years. Those experiences aid students in developing a sense of belonging, via the themes documented herein.

Taken together, these findings provide a framework for understanding the perceptions of the value of the SLE to the PSTs and graduates, that helped to engender a sense of belonging and create a positive teacher image of themselves in the future. The themes emerging from the data align with the four components of belonging (competencies, opportunities, motivations and perceptions of an individual), interacting with the cultural context over time (Allen et al., 2021). Central to the SLE was providing an extended experience for PSTs to allow for the opportunity to challenge pre-existing perceptions of the students and the setting. Acknowledging “kids are kids, no matter where you go,” while also understanding that there are “outside factors here that I don’t know about” was a huge perceptual shift for PSTs. While the amount of time participating in the SLE varied individually, it was in most cases prolonged, allowing for their conceptual understanding of context to mature. The themes also showcased a sense of increased competence resulting from increased confidence in their ability to perform and even thrive in settings with marginalized populations, supported in part by the relationships. “...I made relationships with teachers...and like when I still talk to them, whenever I have questions about stuff, if nobody like in my group at school can answer them, you know, I have their phone numbers....”.

While evidence has suggested that early field experience in general was related to increased preservice teacher self-efficacy (Li & Zhang, 2000), the authors believe the current model with a direct and extended focus on the context of the school settings elevates efficacy to higher levels, allowing the emergence of a sense of belonging and a vision of themselves as educators in high-need settings. This model differs from other placement models where students are preoccupied with delivering carefully crafted student-centered lessons designed to address specific course learning objectives. One scholar offered, “I will say that I was more prepared...because of the semesters of the 30 hours, especially when I went into student teaching.”

Sleeter (2008 p. 1947) recommended that PTEPs develop avenues to counterbalance the neoliberal agenda rooted in high-stakes accountability and the shift “toward preparing teachers as technicians.” Connecting preservice candidates with marginalized and underserved populations can work to mitigate the dominant agenda and address what Milner (2013) identified as the de-professionalization of teaching. Coffey (2010, p. 335) supported Sleeters’ assertion of the value of a service-learning experience:

[S]ervice-learning offers an exceptional opportunity to engage pre-service educators in diverse communities in order to contextualize their classroom experiences and reflect on the stereotypes and assumptions they bring to the classroom, thus better preparing them to enter the diverse classrooms of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Providing students with the opportunity to immerse themselves in the school context and allow them to attend to the culture and the community, differs from observing in-service teachers and preparing lessons to demonstrate to university faculty that they have the appropriate pedagogical skills. Service-learning in conjunction with a professional learning community may be one strategy to help foster a sense of belonging in preservice educators, who are often unsure of their abilities to teach and address the needs of all students. This can lead to the development of a sense of self in these settings, envisioning themselves as future teachers able to meet their students where they are.

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