

Service learning in preservice teacher education programs

by

Sarah Ellen Wise

B.A., Mid America Nazarene University, 2002

M.A., Benedictine College, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

This qualitative case study explored how preservice teachers experience service learning when it is intentionally integrated within a *School as Community* course. Grounded in experiential learning theory, teacher visioning, and reflective practice, the study followed three participants as they completed the required forty hours of service-learning experiences in their teacher education program. Data were collected from multiple sources guided by the course, including an initial teacher visioning assignment, course goal reflection papers, an end-of-semester field experience reflection paper, and post-semester interviews.

Findings revealed that when preservice teachers were enrolled in a course that intentionally incorporated guided reflection assignments, they were better able to connect their lived service-learning experiences with their developing beliefs and understanding about teaching, community, and vocation. Participants described a shift in how they viewed teaching, not simply as a career, but as relational work and a mission-driven profession, with a better understanding of how to connect pedagogy to real life. Engagement in service-learning opportunities, paired with reflective assignments embedded throughout the *School as a Community* course, deepened participants' awareness of the school within its community, strengthened their commitment to students, and clarified their motivations for entering the profession. Through reflection, preservice teachers grew in self-awareness, empathy, and alignment between their personal values and their professional development.

This study contributes to the literature on service learning in teacher education by highlighting how reflection within a course context increases the meaning and impact of service-learning experiences. The findings suggest that teacher preparation programs should

intentionally embed meaningful, guided reflection into service-learning requirements to create purpose-driven, community-oriented educators who see teaching as more than a career.

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Dedication

To God, whose presence has guided me, strengthened me, and shaped every step of this journey. You were present in every experience, guiding me and showing me that true service is more than giving; it is also about learning, growing, and bringing joy to others.

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joy, and hope you bring to my life. You remind me that life is far bigger than achievement. It truly is about “doing small things with great love!”

Preface

As I reflect on the journey of completing this doctoral program and dissertation, I am reminded that it began much earlier than I anticipated. It began not in a classroom or the decision to pursue a doctorate, but it began with a softball, a bright yellow ball that, at the time, seemed to hold little academic significance. Yet the summer I was five years old marked the beginning of a path that would lead me to this study.

Throughout my schooling, I enjoyed learning. Balancing academics with competing as a three-sport athlete in high school instilled discipline, perseverance, and an appreciation for my coaches. During my senior year, encouraged by my basketball coach, I recognized that I wanted to pursue teaching and coaching. She modeled what it meant to influence students and players in the classroom and on the court.

I continued playing softball in college while earning my degree in Math education. The summer after graduation, an unexpected opportunity further expanded my understanding of teaching and service. I traveled to China on a mission trip as a member of the softball team. Serving others through sport revealed a profound connection between action and learning. Though I did not yet have the “language” for it, I was experiencing what I would later study as service learning, the integration of meaningful service with reflection.

Since that first trip, I have taught and coached in a variety of school settings and participated in six additional mission experiences across four different countries. Each setting deepened my conviction that education extends beyond classroom walls. Teaching is not solely the transmission of knowledge; it is community and service. These experiences shaped my philosophy as an educator and, ultimately, my direction as a scholar.

Looking back on these experiences, I realized service learning had to be the focus of my dissertation. The research presented in this dissertation has shaped me just as much as it has informed my understanding of preservice teachers. Studying service-learning, teacher visioning, and structured reflection has made me more intentional in my own practice. It has challenged me to create space for reflection, to prioritize experiential learning, and to step into the role of a facilitator, trusting preservice teachers to see their growth and professional identities.

In many ways, this study is rooted in that bright yellow softball. What once seemed ordinary became a pathway for service, leadership, and transformation. It opened doors to communities across the world and revealed how teachers are meant to serve others. This dissertation extends that belief. It reflects a journey shaped by sports, service, teaching, and reflection. It affirmed that meaningful learning often begins in the most unexpected places and experiences.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

“Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it!”

This quote by Father Greg Boyle (2011) highlights the power of serving others through human connection, a central concept in education. Teachers are responsible not only for delivering content but also for creating positive classroom environments supporting students in all aspects of learning and development, while providing meaningful learning opportunities (Bluean & Ibnat, 2024). Effective teaching extends beyond the classroom walls into the broader communities surrounding schools. In this sense, service to others is both a professional responsibility and a commitment for educators (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984).

Service learning is an important pedagogical approach in teacher education programs, enabling preservice teachers to engage in experiential learning (Kolbe, 1984), equipping them with the skills necessary for teaching while creating a deeper understanding of the communities in which they will work and serve (Anderson & Erikson, 2003; Resch & Schritteser, 2021). Through intentional engagement in service-learning activities, preservice teachers can develop such skills as empathy, respect for diverse cultures, and a sense of responsibility (Butcher et al., 2003; Mergler et al., 2017). Practicing service learning also enables pre-service teachers to develop important relational skills, such as assisting others, building connections with diverse populations and people of all ages, and navigating situations outside their comfort zones within the community (Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Tatebe, 2013). Additionally, service learning provides pre-service teachers with opportunities to observe and reflect on students' diverse needs, helping them develop a better understanding of educational contexts and the communities around

them (Anderson et al., 2015; Root et al., 2022; Mergler et al., 2017; Resch & Schrittemser, 2010).

Motivations guiding future teachers often stem from a desire to make a difference in others' lives, especially in students' classrooms and the broader community (Tuomin, 2005). Service learning can reinforce and deepen this motivation by providing authentic experiences in which preservice teachers witness the impact of education and community engagement firsthand (Barenthien et al., 2020; Mergler et al., 2017). However, the benefits of service learning are maximized when paired with structure and purposeful reflection within a course, enabling students to connect theory and practice in their learning (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; White, 2021). Guided reflection enables preservice teachers to examine their experiences, link service to their professional development, and consider how their actions contribute to their growth as teachers (Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Kaye, 2004; Resch & Schrittemser, 2010). Service learning remains an important component of preservice teacher education. It not only supports the development of essential teaching dispositions but also strengthens preservice teachers' commitment to their future roles as educators serving students and the broader community (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Root et al., 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the role of course-aligned service-learning opportunities in undergraduate preservice teacher education programs. Specifically, this study explored how reflective practice and meaningful assignments work together to support preservice teachers' professional growth, learning, and development as future educators.

Although service learning is a common requirement in many preservice teacher preparation programs, the way these experiences are structured for students varies across institutions. In many programs, service learning is defined primarily by the completion of required hours, with limited integration of coursework or guided reflection by a professor or professional. As a result, it remains unclear whether service-learning experiences aligned with the course provide greater meaning for preservice teachers in their professional development. This lack of clarity represents a gap in the literature and provides a need to examine preservice teachers' perceptions of the meaningfulness of course-aligned service-learning experiences guided by reflective assignments and practices.

Service learning, as a pedagogical approach, offers preservice teachers more authentic opportunities to connect theory to practice through real-world experiences in schools and the surrounding communities (Anderson & Erikson, 2003; Carrington et al., 2010; Resch & Schrittmesser, 2021). Through these experiences, preservice teachers can begin to develop a deeper understanding of a range of skills and ideas related to effective teaching. These experiences can help preservice teachers understand the diversity of students and the communities they will serve, and recognize the relationships among community engagement, social responsibility, and teaching beyond the classroom (Anderson & Erikson, 2003; Holmes et al., 2022; Reeves & Lowenhaupt, 2016).

Participation in service-learning experiences has been shown to promote personal growth and foster educational dispositions such as empathy, compassion, and respect for students and others; all qualities considered essential for effective teaching (Butcher et al., 2003; Resch & Schrittmesser, 2010). These experiences can enhance preservice teachers' awareness of student diversity (Mergler et al., 2017), strengthen their ability to build relationships with diverse

individuals (Chambers & Lavery, 2012), and encourage them to step outside their comfort zones (Tatebe, 2013). Given that many preservice teachers enter the profession with a desire to help students and make a meaningful difference (Tuomin, 2005), service learning has the potential to deepen this motivation while strengthening the connection between pedagogy and service in educational settings (Barenthien et al., 2020; Mergler et al., 2017).

However meaningful learning through service can be, it needs to be supported by structured and purposeful reflection to promote professional and personal growth. Guided reflection enables preservice teachers to critically examine their experiences, make sense of their learning, and connect service-learning activities to their future teaching practices (Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Kaye, 2004). With intentional instructional support, reflective practice can enhance the overall service-learning experience and help preservice teachers recognize its value in transforming their instructional approaches and professional identities (Resch & Schritteser, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

Research supports the positive impact of service learning on preservice teacher development; however, less is known about how structured service-learning experiences embedded within a dual-credit course influence preservice teachers' learning and professional growth (Furco, 1999; Choquette et al., 2024). This study examined service-learning opportunities in a dual-credit course taught by an educational faculty member who intentionally integrated instructional content with reflective, thought-provoking assignments. Students completed their required 40 service-learning hours concurrently with enrollment in the *School as Community* course. This structured model creates an integrated learning experience connecting theory to practice. Guided by the frameworks of Experiential Learning and Teaching Visioning, this study

positioned self-reflection as an important component of service learning and explored its role in supporting preservice teachers' professional growth and classroom readiness (Kolb, 1984).

Analysis of the Theoretical Framework

This study was supported by three theoretical frameworks: Experiential Learning Theory, Teacher Visioning, and self-reflection as a theory. Together, these frameworks provide a conceptual foundation for understanding how transformative service learning fosters practical learning and deeper professional growth in pre-service teacher education programs.

Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential learning theory was first developed by John Dewey (1902). Still, throughout the history of educational theory, many other theorists have developed a better understanding of this “learning by doing” approach (Reese, 2011). Within teacher education, transformative service learning aligns closely with experiential learning, as it provides preservice teachers for their future roles in the classroom (Steiner & Lemke, 2023). When these experiences are paired with intentional reflection, they move beyond skill development and support transformative service learning (Kiely, 2005; Mezirow, 1991).

Teacher Visioning

In addition to experiential learning, the theory of teacher visioning provides a framework for understanding how preservice teachers see themselves in the profession. According to Duffy (2002), teacher visioning is “a career sense of becoming,” suggesting that preservice teachers develop confidence in their professional roles as they begin to envision their future. For preservice teachers, education programs provide opportunities for students to develop a clear vision of the kind of teacher they would like to be as they begin to understand how to become educators (Hammerness, 2006). Within a transformative service-learning context, these

experiences not only support skill development but also encourage preservice teachers to reflect on their values, purpose, and identity as future educators (Hammerness, 2006; Jones & Abe, 2013). One approach to supporting this development is through self-reflection.

Self-Reflection as a Theory

Self-reflection is a widely recognized strategy in teacher education programs, especially when applying pedagogical theory to instructional practice. In transformative service learning, reflection is an important component of preservice teacher programs, as it deepens understanding and supports the development of professional identity (Nduagbo & Casale, 2023; Shandomo, 2010). According to Shandomo (2010), structured reflection, guided by a teacher, provides a meaningful process for preservice teachers to examine their learning, particularly in areas challenging to conceptualize. Shandomo (2010) also emphasizes problematic areas of authentic reflection, involving the analysis of the values and beliefs of different communities in comparison with preservice teachers' own lived experiences, thereby creating a broader perspective for meeting the needs of all learners. This reflective process is what allows service learning to become transformative, as preservice teachers begin to shift their understanding of teaching and learning, and of their role in their future profession.

Participants in this study engaged in several modes of reflection throughout the course to capture the overall themes and ideas learned from their transformative service-learning experiences. Each reflective method was structured and facilitated by the instructor, with guided prompts that helped participants genuinely analyze their service-learning experiences. These reflections were integrated into the *School as Community* course alongside the required 40 hours of service-learning field experience. Journal reflections were completed at the end of each month, while additional written reflections were assigned after significant group activities,

prompting preservice teachers to engage in personal reflection on their experiences. At the conclusion of the semester, participants presented their group projects to the class, sharing insights from planning and implementing community-based service activities and reflecting on how these experiences contributed to their development as future educators. Finally, individual interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, providing an additional layer of reflection and enabling participants to share deeper insights into their personal and professional growth as preservice teachers (Nduagbo & Casale, 2023).

Synthesis of Literature

The literature provided research supporting the positive implications of transformative service learning and the opportunities it offers for preservice teachers. Additionally, the theoretical frameworks of experiential learning, teacher visioning, and self-reflection provide a foundation for integrating service learning into the classroom, helping to properly prepare preservice teachers for their future roles (Kolb, 1984; Hammerness et al., 2005). Research further identifies how teacher visioning serves as a tool to guide and assess the professional growth of preservice teachers as they progress toward program completion and teacher licensure, primarily through intentionally directed student self-reflection (Hammerness, 2001). Overall, the literature highlighted the significance of transformative service learning in preservice teacher education programs, emphasizing its role, purpose, and meaningful outcomes.

Significance of the Problem

Understanding how preservice teachers experience service learning can help improve teacher education programs and design more effective, meaningful service-learning courses and requirements (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco, 2002). This study offered an opportunity to explore in depth what preservice teachers find most valuable in their hands-on learning across community

settings outside a course-based classroom. The findings identified specific skills participants developed through a variety of service-learning opportunities, including empathy, adaptability, and the ability to address diverse student needs (Eyler, 2002). Additionally, this research highlighted how preservice teachers' professional vision develops as they actively apply concepts from a *School as Community* course alongside their expectations of service-learning hours (Hammerness, 1999; Zeichner, 2010). By providing these connections, education programs can better design classes and requirements that provide preservice teachers opportunities to become more reflective and community-engaged educators, thereby positively impacting their future classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Study Purpose and Research Questions

For preservice teachers in an undergraduate program, service learning offers a practical application of the skills they are developing, providing the hands-on experience needed to become effective educators (Stein et al., 2004; Maples et al., 2024). Teacher preparation programs integrating service learning into their undergraduate curricula can provide numerous benefits for students, schools, and surrounding communities by combining experiential learning with community service, allowing students to apply their educational skills to real-world situations in their communities (Parker et al., 2009; Maples et al., 2024).

The purpose of this study was to examine service learning within a teacher education program and to explore how it can support preservice teachers in developing a professional vision of themselves as future teachers. Through structured opportunities for self-reflection and envisioning their professional identities integrated within a concurrent course, preservice teachers can better understand the impact of service learning on their development as they engage with a variety of community experiences (Donninson & Itter, 2010).

Research Questions

The following research question and sub-questions were addressed in this qualitative case study:

1. How does the service-learning experience influence a preservice teacher's vision of teaching after a *School as Community* Course?
 - a. How do preservice teachers experience service learning when integrated into a "School as a Community" course?
 - b. What do preservice teachers describe as the value of engaging in service-learning experiences when becoming a teacher?
 - c. What are the affordances of service learning that preservice teachers describe as impacting their visions for teaching?

Study Overview

This case study was conducted at a college in a small Northeast Kansas town, referred to as *Emerald City*. Students at this institution majoring in education are required to take a course aligned with the School of Education's conceptual framework of "Preparing Educators as Builders of Community." The course *School as Community* aligns with a concurrent field experience credit, which requires students to complete 40 service-learning hours throughout the semester, guided by a faculty member.

This study aimed to examine the role of a course, such as *School as Community*, in shaping preservice teachers' learning experiences and their teacher vision during service-learning opportunities. Specifically, this study explored how preservice teachers engage in reflective practices, such as teacher visioning and guided self-reflection, during their service-learning hours. The study looked at their motivations for becoming teachers and how they see themselves

as teachers in the future. In addition, it aimed to investigate their perceptions of service learning and how their experiences influenced their understanding of the societal impact of what they learned through the course and through hands-on experience (Vaghn et al., 2021).

A qualitative case study approach was used, and three female preservice teachers were randomly chosen from the *School as Community* course. All participants were in their second year of the education program, majoring in elementary education. Using qualitative research methods, including teacher visioning assignments, reflective assignments, and end-of-year interviews, this study aimed to analyze what preservice teachers value as they complete their service-learning hours within the *Emerald City* community.

By assessing how preservice teachers perceived their future roles in education through teacher visioning, the findings can be used to show how experiential learning and service learning support and enrich a preservice teacher's professional development (Kolb, 1984; Vaghn et al., 2021). This research contributes to the broader field of teacher preparation by examining the effect of guided self-reflection on the development of socially responsive and effective educators (White, 2021). Additionally, the findings may provide valuable insights for program improvements and highlight the importance of integrating structured coursework with service-learning requirements within teacher education programs.

Limitations

This study is set within the specific context of a faith-based, private college and a structured service-learning course designed for preservice teachers. The participants mostly came from affluent and relatively similar educational backgrounds, including homeschooling, private schools, and Catholic schools, which likely influenced how they engaged with and made meaning of their experiences of diversity. As a qualitative study, the intent is not to generalize

the findings but to provide a deeper, more contextualized understanding of participants' experiences in service learning within the *School as Community* course. Therefore, the findings are meant to support transferability, allowing readers to consider how the results may apply to similar contexts.

Delimitations

Delimitations were established for this study to support an in-depth examination of the phenomenon and alignment with the case study's purpose. Participants were randomly selected from a single course, *School as Community*, in the Spring 2025 semester. Only elementary education majors were included to protect participant confidentiality, as approximately 80% of the class consisted of elementary education majors, and the remaining 20% were secondary education majors or education minors. Prior to data collection, all participants received and signed an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the case study and the procedures to be followed. One semi-structured interview was conducted during the final week of the course, after the participants had completed the coursework and required service-learning hours in early May.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Data analysis followed Creswell and Poth's (2018, p. 186) data analysis spiral, a process involving repeated reading, coding, categorizing, and refining of the data to identify emerging patterns and, in this case, emerging themes. This approach enabled multiple reviews of the collected data to support accurate coding and meaningful thematic development, answering the case study's research questions.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are key terms used in this study, with definitions explicitly created for this research:

Preservice Teachers: an individual who is undergoing formal training and education to become a teacher but has not yet begun teaching in a professional setting (Kennedy, 1999; Labosky, 2003; Mack, 2021). With changes in education and a shortage of teachers, some institutions in the United States offer graduate programs that can lead to a teacher license in a particular state at both the elementary and secondary levels. These graduate-level programs typically require participants to hold teaching positions while taking courses aligned with pedagogical training. Thus, such candidates do not fall within the scope of the definition of preservice teacher used in this study.

Service Learning: a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course contents, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (McIntosh, 2006).

Self-Reflection: a reflective process in which teachers carefully examine the impact of their pedagogical decisions within their specific teaching context, with the goal of improving their practices (Tripp & Rich, 2012, p.678).

Semi-Structured Interviews: a qualitative research method created with a set of questions allowing open-ended responses and adaptive follow-up questions, allowing participants to share in-depth service-learning experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Non-Profit Organizations: an organization established and run to support charitable or socially beneficial causes rather than to generate profit. For this study, these organizations are classified as educational and charitable (Kenton, 2025).

Local Public Schools: a kindergarten through twelfth-grade school within a community supported by property taxes plus state and government funding (Rau & Cano, 2024).

College-Based Activities: service-learning opportunities supported, organized, and run by the college staff, faculty, and students (Furco, 1996).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the case study, which examined how service-learning influenced preservice teachers' visions and perceptions of teaching as they began the teacher education program. The case study focused on participants enrolled in the *School as Community* course, taken concurrently with the field experience course facilitated by an education faculty member. As part of their coursework, participants completed 40 hours of service learning within the *Emerald City* community.

The study emphasized the role of structured reflection in teacher preparation, arguing that service learning alone was insufficient for meaningful experiential learning. Preservice teachers require intentional, guided reflection to develop an understanding of what it means to be an effective teacher. This chapter also highlighted the significance of service learning as a pedagogical approach, which is more meaningful when connected with coursework aligned to community engagement. The study aimed to contribute to ongoing discussions regarding best practices for integrating service learning and structured/guided reflections within the teacher education program.

Chapter two will explore the theoretical frameworks for service learning in teacher education, along with a brief history of service-learning requirements for preservice teachers. It will build on the foundation of relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, including experiential learning theory, reflective practice, and teacher visioning. All of which will help to

understand how to examine applications within teacher education programs. Through synthesizing research, this chapter will help readers better understand how service learning is a transformative approach to preservice teacher development.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

Teachers serve a diverse range of students from various and unique familial and cultural backgrounds, each bringing distinct needs, experiences, and learning styles to the classroom (Furco, 1996). As a result, learning to serve within teacher education programs is important as it encourages preservice teachers to broaden their perspectives and develop a deeper understanding of the diversity among their future students. (Adams et al., 2005). This chapter provides a comprehensive review of research and literature on service-learning opportunities in teacher preparation programs and their role in expanding preservice teachers' instructional and professional perspectives.

Educators have long recognized the profound impact of serving others. Whether through religious, educational, or community-based initiatives, these initiatives benefit those being served and those providing the service (Tietjen, 2016). Over time, service has evolved into a reciprocal relationship in which meaningful learning and personal growth occur for all persons involved (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Teacher education programs have increasingly acknowledged this transformative potential for their students and, for years, have incorporated service learning into coursework to foster empathy, reflective practice, and connect pedagogy to real-life teaching (Boggs, 2013; Kiely, 2005).

History of Service Learning

Service learning dates to the early 1900s, when John Dewey emphasized the importance of learning through experience for students. In *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey noted that learning is most effective when it is connected to experience and hands-on activities. John Dewey (1986) is credited with founding the philosophy of “students learn by doing,” claiming

that students learn knowledge through interaction with their environment. His work continues today through effective teaching and learning at all levels of education, as a foundational pedagogical approach. As a result, Dewey set the stage for service learning through experiential and service-learning opportunities.

In 1969, Edgar Dale proposed the “Cone of Learning,” introducing an active-learning approach that included, but was not limited to, group discussions, simulations, presentations, and hands-on activities (Lee & Reeves, 2017). Dale proposed that, within two weeks, students would remember 70%-90% of what they learned due to an active approach to learning (1969). Dale's idea of learning while doing also laid the foundation for David Kolb's (1984) experiential approach to education.

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning is a process of understanding concepts through experience (Morris, 2020). This process is formed and reformed through experiences along the learning path (Kolb, 1984). Learning is a continuous process gained through doing, as described in Dale's 1964 model of learning levels. Students fully understand material concepts when immersed in the learning process, and as they become more comfortable with those concepts, learning becomes more profound (Brail, 2016).

Dale's “active learning” approach, combined with Dewey's philosophy of “students learn by doing,” created a pathway for service learning to be effective in preservice teacher education programs. Kolb's theory of learning as a process and experience provides preservice teachers with opportunities to learn in ways that can lead to real-life applications in their future classrooms (Brail, 2016; Morris, 2020). Dewey, Dale, and Kolb's theories of learning laid the foundation for the effectiveness of service learning in preservice teacher programs.

Dewey's philosophy of education has had a prominent effect on education, especially in today's society (Dewey, 1938; Furco, 1996). However, it was not until the 1970s that preservice teacher programs began integrating service learning into their requirements (Lake et al., 2015). These programs are designed to foster a sense of community and belonging by encouraging students to become more involved in their communities, build connections, and gain real-world opportunities to work with a variety of people, including students, parents, administrators, stakeholders, and community members (Bringle et al., 2006; Dewey, 1938). This inclusive approach aims to open their minds to the world around them, challenge their existing perspectives, and prepare them to reflect a more diverse perspective in their future classrooms (Butcher et al., 2003).

Definitions of Service Learning

Service learning is an educational approach that combines meaningful community service with opportunities for self-reflection and learning (Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Tietjen, 2016). Rooted in Dewey's concept of "learning by doing," emphasizing the idea that learning occurs through experience (Lake, 2006). As both a teaching and a learning framework, service learning offers a useful lens for understanding how these experiences support student learning when paired with structured reflection (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Weber et al., 2018).

Sigmon's (1994) work offers a clear way to distinguish among service-learning approaches by examining the balance between service and learning outcomes. According to Furco (1996, p. 3), "each of the four program types is defined by the intended beneficiary of the service activity and its degree of emphasis on service and learning." Sigmon (1994) identified four definitions: (1) Service-LEARNING: where learning goals are primary and service outcomes are secondary; (2) SERVICE-learning: where service outcomes are primary and

learning goals are secondary; (3) Service learning: where service and learning goals are present but remain separate; (4) SERVICE-LEARNING: where service and learning goals are equally important and enhance one another for all participants. Among these definitions, the last model best reflects how service learning is typically implemented in educational settings, particularly in teacher education programs (Furco, 1996; Bringle & Hatcher, 2006).

In education, the term service-learning is commonly used to describe a teaching and learning approach in which service and learning objectives are intentionally aligned (Tietjen, 2016). Both elements are considered equally important and work together to enhance students' learning experiences. For the purpose of this case study, the goal was to identify a definition of service learning that best aligns with undergraduate teacher preparation programs that emphasize serving others as a learning opportunity. In this context, service learning can be defined as “a combination of community service and academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility” (Centre for Service and Leadership, n.d., p.1).

One of the most frequently cited definitions comes from Bringle et al. (2006), supporting the idea that service learning is more academically focused. They describe service learning as a “course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in organizing service activities that address identified community needs and engage in reflection to gain a deeper understanding of course content, develop a broader appreciation of the discipline, and strengthen personal values and civic responsibility (Bringle et al., 2006).

Taken together, these definitions highlight service learning as both a teaching strategy and a learning tool that, when used intentionally, can enhance preservice teachers' educational experiences and connect learning to real-world contexts. The connection between reflection and civic responsibility supports the use of service learning as an effective approach in preservice

teacher education programs, providing future educators with meaningful experiences that connect coursework, pedagogy, community engagement, and professional growth.

Implications of Service Learning

Research has shown that service learning has numerous benefits for students, teachers, communities, and all stakeholders (Tietjen, 2016). Myers and Pickeral (1997) stated that:

The service-learning process is a powerful paradigm that brings future teachers closer to the notions of what it means to teach and learn, and to collaboratively create learning communities and organizations that support lifelong learning and continuous renewal. Service learning has a vital role to play in forming new visions of learning at all levels throughout the kindergarten to higher education continuum. (p. 38)

In higher education, instructors and teacher educators have recognized the positive implications of service learning in preservice teacher education courses. An effective classroom is “built on relationships, making connections with students, peers, families, and the local community” (Lake et al., 2015). Consistent with Dewey’s theory of experiential learning, education programs have recognized that service learning fosters awareness of social change and significantly impacts teaching, including the development of a deeper ethic of care (Dewey, 1938; Eyler & Giles, 1999). These qualities are essential for effective teaching, particularly as education continues to evolve in the 21st century. Dewey’s influence remains evident in how teachers are prepared to engage students, communities, and real-world learning experiences.

For preservice teachers, participation in service-learning experiences supports personal growth and professional development across a range of areas, including empathy, compassion, and respect for diverse social cultures (Butcher et al., 2003). These experiences provide a unique lens through which to view the world, strengthening a teacher’s knowledge and understanding of the people and communities around them. This perspective highlights why service learning

remains a critical component of higher education and a meaningful element of teacher preparation programs.

Qualities Learned Through Service Learning

A significant component of service learning is developing knowledge and understanding of diversity among people, as well as learning how to guide and support them. Undergraduate education programs should provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to learn these valuable lessons and skills while working with diverse populations across various settings (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In teacher education programs, explanation, interpretation, and application are important skills often associated with traditional learning taxonomies. Still, service learning goes beyond the conventional and provides the skills necessary to understand students in the classroom (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). In particular, aspects of education, empathy, perspective, self-knowledge, communication, acknowledgment, and an understanding of community are critical skills learned through service learning and are essential for effective educators (Kaye, 2004; Wilson, 2011).

Empathy

According to Merriam-Webster (2024), empathy is the ability to understand, be aware of, and be sensitive to another person's feelings, thoughts, and experiences, and to experience them vicariously. Wilson (2011) also defines empathy as “walking in another’s shoes” to gain a new perspective on life. Service learning provides preservice teachers with opportunities to work with diverse people from various backgrounds, including culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, age, and life experiences (Eyler and Giles, 1999).

Perspective

Perspective is a key aspect of empathy, involving maturity and open-mindedness toward the many plausible accounts of meaning and understanding (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005). In the classroom, students may focus on a particular subject, idea, or action. Exposure to diverse perspectives in service learning helps preservice teachers become more open-minded about the community and the people around them (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jacoby, 2014). Developing perspectives can be challenging because it requires individuals to step outside their own experiences to better understand others' lives.

Open-mindedness

The capacity for open-mindedness is developed through self-knowledge and understanding, as well as through intentional self-reflection and assessment (Wilson, 2011). Through service learning, self-knowledge can be better reinforced academically through reflection and analysis of personal growth and development, as reflected in the service performed and the people served (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Knowing each other's strengths and weaknesses helps break down barriers, and genuine empathy begins to shed light on the lives and circumstances of different people. This process fosters a genuine sense of community in the classroom.

At the heart of any school or classroom is the community. Merriam-Webster (2024) best defines community as a unified body of people with common interests living in a particular area. In educational settings, this definition is expanded to include all students in the classroom, recognizing their differences and unique gifts and talents. Opportunities for learning must extend beyond textbooks and classroom spaces to include families, neighborhoods, home resources, extracurricular activities, and other out-of-school contexts that influence a preservice teacher's

learning (Honig et al., 2001). In this way, the community extends beyond school boundaries and engages meaningfully with communities, increasing learning within teacher preparation programs.

Opportunities for Service Learning

In addition to the qualities they develop and the connections they make, students gain valuable skills essential to effective teaching through service-learning experiences (Lavery, 2006). Service learning, when combined with academic goals and ideas, provides a meaningful and beneficial learning experience for preservice teachers in undergraduate programs. Service learning encompasses a wide range of opportunities for students to engage in community-based experiences.

Service learning differs slightly from community service due to its intentional focus on learning outcomes. While both involve service, service learning includes clearly defined academic goals tied to the service experience. In teacher education programs, service learning is intentionally designed to support specific learning objectives aligned with course content (Lavery, 2006). These experiences are structured to help preservice teachers connect theory to practice in meaningful ways.

One goal of implementing service learning in coursework is to expose students to people, communities, and experiences that may be new to them, thereby providing a broader, more diverse perspective for their learning and future teaching (Felten & Clayton, 2011). These goals are usually small, and learning through service offers an opportunity to develop transferable, functional, and practical skills for effective teaching (Brail, 2016). Skills gained through service learning may include empathy, leadership, confidence, self-reflection, and societal awareness

(Chambers & Lavery, 2012). These are just a few of the many skills service learning can provide to prepare students for the wide variety of students they will teach and encounter in the future.

Paradigms of Effective Service Learning

The implementation of service learning in a preservice teacher education program can encompass a diverse range of ideas to provide beneficial academic learning opportunities (Bringle et al., 2006). Morton (1995) narrows these opportunities to three paradigms important for the effective implementation of service learning: charity, project, and social change. Each category offers a distinct learning experience. Charity-based service learning focuses on immediate needs and provides direct assistance for individuals or groups. Project-based service-learning involves students in longer-term projects that address community needs. Social change-based service-learning aims to address the root causes of social issues and promote systemic change (Furco, 1996). Each category yields specific goals and provides a different skill set, all of which are beneficial for preservice teachers' education.

According to Morton (1995), charity is defined as providing direct services to individuals or groups. Based on research, charity can be the preferred choice for coursework when students are given only a short period to serve, such as over a semester (Bringle et al., 2006). However, service-learning projects are more evident when a person commits to a specific cause or a specific group of people in their community, "throughout their life"- type projects (Morton, 1995, p. 19). Project service learning is implementing or participating in service programs through community service organizations that can occur over an extended period (Bringle et al., 2006). It provides students with a greater sense of purpose in serving their community, often extending beyond a course grade or academic setting and becoming a long-term commitment to others.

The last paradigm is social change, which provides “transformational models of systemic change in the community” (Morton, 1995, p. 21). This paradigm is the most difficult to achieve and requires a team of committed people working together to bring about community change over an extended period. However, of the three, it is the most transformational and impactful service for others, making a substantial change in the community. Each paradigm offers a distinct perspective, yet each build on the others to create lasting change in one’s community, and all are essential to preservice teacher programs (Furco, 1996).

Purpose of Service-Learning Experiences

The experiences that preservice teachers receive from participating in service-learning in their community are far more valuable than sitting in a classroom learning about the same social issues (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Hands-on experience provides preservice students with a firsthand look at working with diverse populations and can help develop their interpersonal and relationship skills (Donninson & Itter, 2010). These populations encompass greater diversity, lower socioeconomic status, various family structures, and diverse geographical areas, providing a more comprehensive view of the community being served.

These qualities all form the foundational framework of experiential learning, which is essential for understanding the pedagogical groundwork of service learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). The progressive education movement, initiated in the early twentieth century by John Dewey, emphasized the centrality of active engagement and the intrinsic value of experiential learning opportunities (Dewey, 1902). Dewey (1986) assumed that education should be rooted in real-world experiences, promoting critical thinking and reflective practice.

As Giles and Eyler (1994) observed, “Service-learning, either consciously or unconsciously, is a Deweyan influence” (p. 78). This assertion underscores the enduring impact

of Dewey's philosophy on contemporary educational practices. Service-learning integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle et al., 2006).

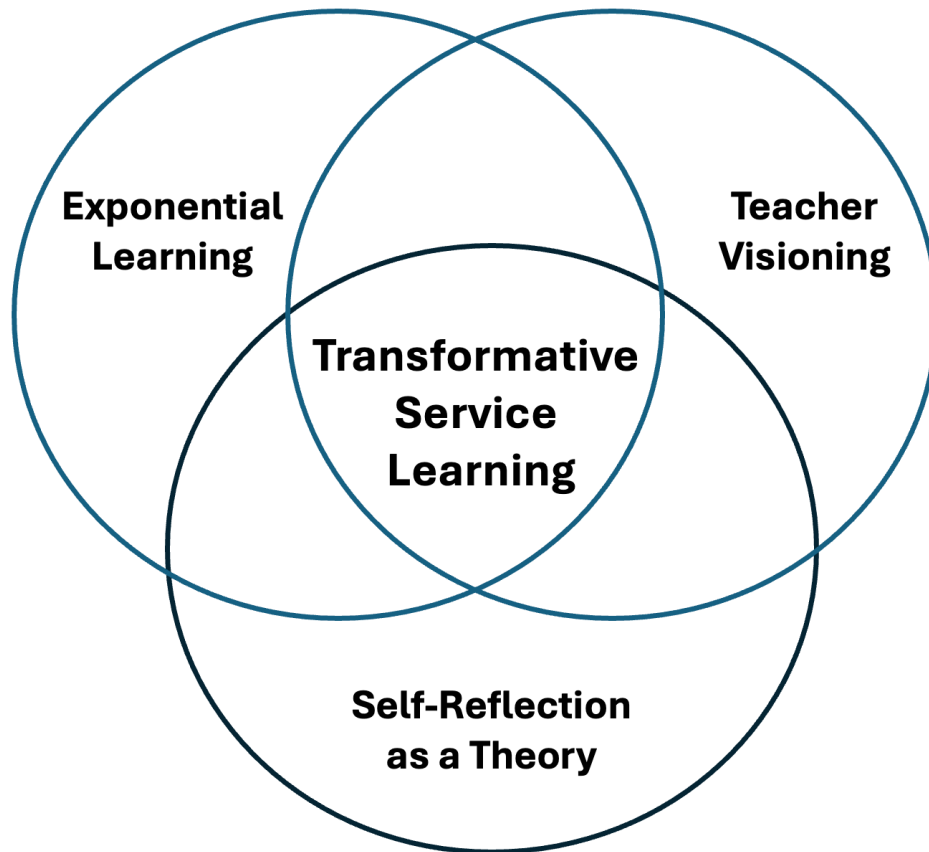
The act of learning, central to service learning, is not merely about acquiring knowledge but about transforming the learner through practical, community-engaged experiences. This approach aligns with Dewey's (1938) assertion that education should be a process of living rather than a preparation for future living, thereby reinforcing the importance of active participation and experiential learning throughout the educational journey.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this case study was grounded in three primary service-learning frameworks, each conceptualized as both an educational experience and a guiding theory for preservice teacher development. The first framework, experiential learning theory, positions service learning as a form of experiential education (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007) and aligns with John Dewey's (1938) philosophy of education, which emphasizes learning through experience, often described as "learning by doing." The second framework, teacher visioning, emphasizes reflective practice and purposeful thinking as essential components of professional growth (Vaughn et al., 2021), particularly within preservice teacher education programs. The third framework is self-reflection as a theoretical lens through which preservice teachers connect pedagogical knowledge with real-world experiences, using service-learning hours as a bridge between theory and practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Together, these frameworks provided a comprehensive lens for understanding the effectiveness of transformative service learning in preservice teacher education programs and guide the development of research

questions and the analysis of how preservice teachers made meaning of their experiences. Figure 2.1 illustrates how experiential learning, teacher visioning, and self-reflection collectively inform the theoretical foundation for transformative service learning in this case study.

Figure 2.1 *Theoretical Framework for Transformative Service Learning*



Experiential Learning Theory

In addition to John Dewey, another prominent figure in the discussion of service learning is David A. Kolb, who developed the experiential learning theory, which best fits service-learning models. Kolb (1984) developed six propositions that align with preservice teacher education programs that have implemented service-learning opportunities. These include:

1. Learning is best conceived as a process rather than in terms of outcomes.
2. All learning is re-learning

3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world.
5. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment.
6. Learning is the process of creating Knowledge. (Kolb, 1984, p. 212)

These propositions form the foundation of experiential learning, within which service learning is best defined as “learning by doing” (Reese, 2011). The progressive education movement, initiated in the twentieth century by John Dewey, emphasized the importance of learners' activities and the value of experience as a learning opportunity (Dewey, 1902). As Giles and Eyler (1994) observed, “Service-learning, either consciously or unconsciously, is a Deweyan influence. At the heart of service learning is learning itself.”

Teacher Visioning

This second theoretical framework for this study involved teacher visioning. One of the most influential foundations of education is having a personal vision for the future and giving meaning or purpose to what is to come as a teacher (Hammerness, 2001). Teacher visioning provides a backbone for good teaching and serves as a means of reflection to continue good education throughout the year. According to Duffy (2002), the basic understanding of teacher visioning is:

A teacher’s conscious sense of self, of one’s work, and one’s mission ... a personal stance on teaching that rises from deep within the inner teacher that fuels independent thinking (p. 334).

As Duffy (2002) states, teacher visioning is "a career-sense of becoming." For preservice teachers, education programs must provide opportunities for students to develop a vision of the

kind of teacher they would like to be as they begin to understand how to become educators. This theory is grounded in practice through coursework and fieldwork, including classroom observations, service-learning, and instructional practices. Hammerness (2005) described this act of visioning as:

Reaching as one uses their understanding of what works for children and what they hope to construct in their present and future classrooms during their teacher trajectories. Thus, visions evolve over space and time and are influenced by a host of dimensions (pp. 358–389).

Teacher visioning is essential for preservice teachers, as it helps them develop a sense of what they could become or what they might experience in their future classrooms (Hammerness, 2001). Just as each student differs in their learning, the visions teachers create are unique to everyone. Teacher visioning varies across three dimensions: focus, range, and distance (Hammerness, 2001). These dimensions are essential because they help a teacher understand their feelings about teaching, their students, the community, and their commitment to the profession. Hammerness (2001) defined these dimensions of teacher visioning as follows: focus refers to the distinctness or clarity of the vision; range refers to the scope or extent of the focus; and distance refers to how close or far the vision is relative to what one is currently doing.

Each dimension builds upon the others to form a comprehensive and idealistic view of the present and future for the teacher and their classroom. The first dimension, focus, refers to the clarity of the vision. This vision can range from sharply defined to somewhat blurred, which enhances the effectiveness of teacher visioning (Hammerness, 2001). Focus is the initial step in the teacher visioning process and is shaped by prior knowledge and experiences, such as those gained in a preservice teacher program.

The focus sets the scope of the teacher's vision. This field of vision can be narrow or specific, depending on the scope of the vision. If a teacher is focused on their specific classroom

or a particular instructional strategy, the vision is narrow and could be centered on the present. However, a narrow, long-term vision includes more elements related to the school, the community, and the future (Hammerness, 2001).

This leads to the third dimension described by Hammerness (2005): distance. A vision can be perceived as quite close, aligned with current practices, or distant, extending into the future. This dimension helps teachers understand how their current practices connect to long-term goals and aspirations.

Teacher visioning functions as both a guide and a measurement tool for educators and thus must be taught to preservice teachers (Hammerness, 2001). For undergraduates, Hammerness (2005) says it acts as a "measuring stick" to assess their current status as educators and envision their professional growth and development in the near and distant future. By providing preservice teachers with opportunities to articulate their aspirations and goals, teacher visioning promotes significant growth and helps them become more effective educators. This process encourages reflective practice, which is essential for continuous improvement and adaptation in the dynamic field of education, as Hammerness (2002) found.

Self-Reflection as a Theory

Self-reflection is a pivotal component of teacher education programs, particularly for bridging the gap between pedagogical theory and instructional practice when preservice teachers cannot observe practice in real life (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). The process of reflection enables pre-service and in-service teachers to critically evaluate their teaching methodologies, adapt strategies for effective classroom management, and integrate theoretical principles into real-world applications (Nduagbo & Casale, 2023). Reflective practices are essential for the growth

and development of all educators, preservice, and in-service (Braun & Crumpler, 2004; Nduagbo & Casale, 2023).

Service learning, as an experiential approach, is no exception to this type of reflective practice, as it deepens preservice teachers' understanding of the more abstract qualities of becoming an effective teacher when connecting theory to practice (Nduagbo & Casale, 2023; Shandomo, 2010). According to Shandomo (2010), structured reflection, guided by a teacher, provides a meaningful process for preservice teachers to examine their learning, partially in areas that may be challenging to conceptualize. Shandomo (2010) also emphasizes that problematic areas in true reflection involve analyzing the values and beliefs of different communities in relation to preservice teachers lived experiences, thereby creating a broader perspective for meeting the needs of all learners.

Reflective practices connect experiential learning theory with teacher visioning by providing preservice teachers with a tool to expand on their learning experiences (Rogers et al., 2024). Dewey (1933) described four attributes of reflective practices: open-mindedness, responsibility, wholeheartedness, and directness. By applying these attributes to self-reflective assignments during service learning opportunities in a guided course, preservice teachers begin to see more transparently their own biases and shortcomings, strengths and weaknesses in understanding society, be more open to welcoming other perspectives and viewpoints, and better envision their classrooms and students they will teach in the future (Bailey, 2012; Nguagbo & Casale, 2023).

Transformative Service Learning

Service learning is often described as a way to connect coursework with real-world experience (Bringle et al., 2006; Eyler & Giles, 1999). However, it can also extend beyond skill

development and become a meaningful, transformative experience, especially for preservice teachers (Kiely, 2005; Mezirow, 1991). While traditional approaches to service learning emphasize participation and application, this study recognizes service learning as a process that can shape preservice teachers' understanding of teaching, learning, and their role in the profession of education. When intentionally designed, service learning has the potential to influence not only what preservice teachers learn, but how they see themselves as future educators (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

A key component that supports this shift is structured self-reflection. Reflection within service learning is not just an opportunity to describe experiences, but a process that allows preservice teachers to make sense of those experiences and connect them to their developing beliefs about teaching (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Eyler & Mezirow, 1991). Through guided reflection, preservice teachers begin to examine their assumptions, consider new perspectives, and make connections between course content and real-world experiences (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Schank & Halberstadt, 2022). This aligns with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), which posits that learning occurs when individuals reflect on their experiences and shift their understanding of teaching.

In teacher education, this type of learning is especially important for success. As preservice teachers engage in service-learning experiences, they are often placed in uncomfortable settings or communities that challenge their prior experiences. These moments can prompt deeper reflection on students, families, and the role of schools in the community. When paired with intentional reflection, these experiences can lead to increased awareness, empathy, and a stronger sense of responsibility as future educators (Eyler & Giles; Kiely, 2005).

Rather than simply completing required service hours, preservice teachers begin to think more deeply about the impact they can have in their classrooms and communities.

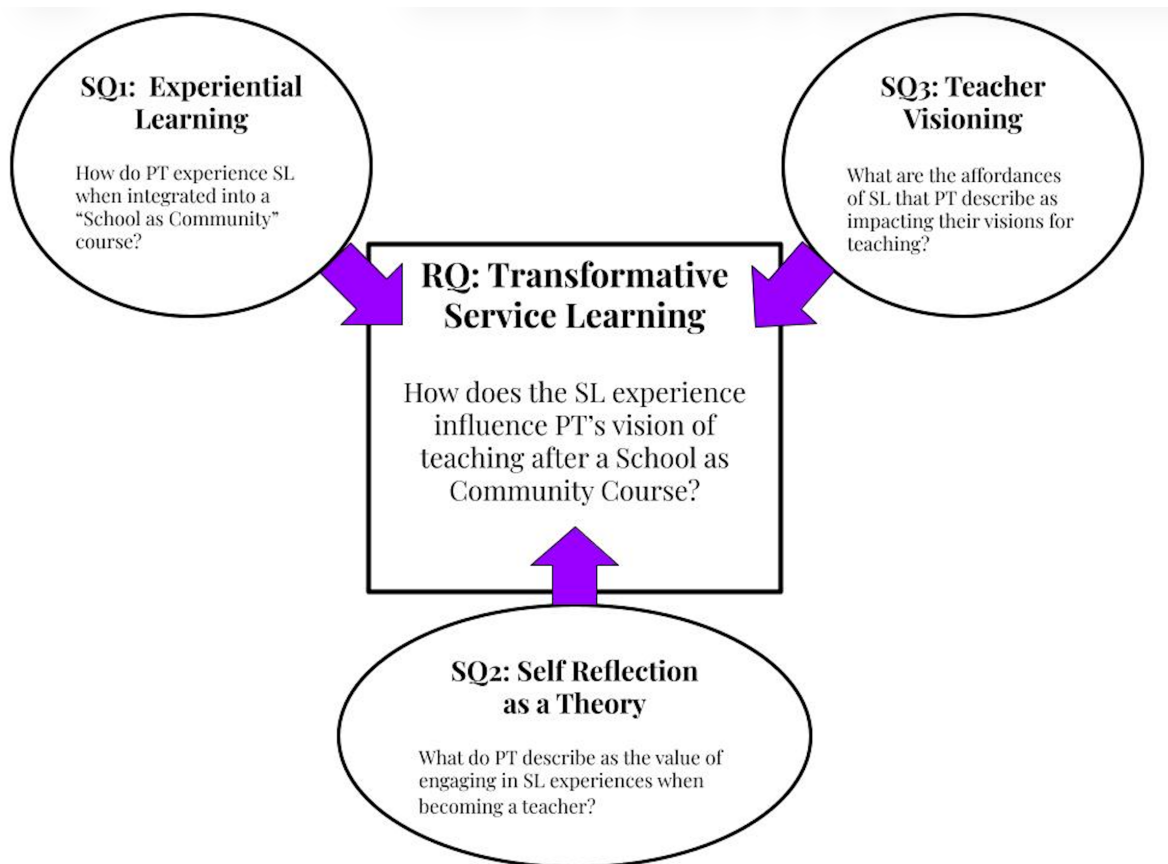
In addition, service learning supports the development of teacher visioning. As preservice teachers reflect on their experiences, they begin to form a clearer understanding of the kind of teacher they hope to become. This includes not only instructional practices, but also their values, goals, and sense of purpose. This shift reflects a move from learning about teaching to beginning to see oneself as a teacher. Service learning becomes more than an instructional strategy. It becomes a space where preservice teachers start to define their professional identity (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hammerness, 2003).

For these reasons, this study approached service learning as a transformative lever within preservice teacher development. By incorporating structured reflection, real-world engagement, and opportunities for visioning, service learning can support meaningful growth in preservice teachers' understanding and development. This perspective provides a foundation for examining how participants in this study experienced service learning as part of their preparation for and how those experiences contributed to their growth as future educators.

Development of Research Question

The theoretical framework served as a foundation for the design of this case study, with each of the three theories, experiential learning, teacher visioning, and self-reflection, intentionally guiding the development of the research sub-questions. All of them collectively supported and provided a deeper exploration of the central research question of transformative service learning in teacher education programs. The alignment and relationship between these three theoretical frameworks and the overarching questions, along with their corresponding sub-questions, are illustrated in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2 *Theoretical Framework and Research Questions*



Chapter Summary

Chapter Two reviewed the related literature on the history, definitions, and implications of service learning, as well as the opportunities it provides for preservice teachers. Additionally, the theoretical frameworks of experiential learning and teacher visioning were explored in relation to teacher education. The literature highlighted the significance of service learning in preservice teacher education programs, emphasizing its role, purpose, and outcomes. Key references were made to John Dewey's progressive education philosophy, underscoring the importance of real-world experiences in learning, particularly in today's educational landscape. The chapter also discussed how teacher visioning serves as a tool to guide and assess the professional growth of preservice teachers as they become licensed and tenured.

Building upon the theoretical frameworks and research reviewed in Chapter Two, Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach used in the case study to examine how service-learning experiences aligned within a course shape preservice teacher. Chapter Three also details the research design, participant selections, and data collection procedures aligned with the study's purpose to ensure credibility and trustworthiness.

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Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative case study examining how service-learning experiences influence a preservice teacher's vision of teaching after completing a *School as Community* course. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of the affordances of service learning as students engage in their visions as future teachers and participate in a course aligned with the goals of integrating service learning into an undergraduate program in a school of education. The application of the theory and the constructivist approach for this study is discussed in depth in this chapter. This chapter further presents the research plan, detailing the methodology, study participants, procedures, and methods of analysis.

Purpose of the Study

For preservice teachers in an undergraduate program, service learning is a practical application of the skills they are learning, providing them with the hands-on experiences necessary to become effective teachers (Stein et al., 2004). Schools of education programs that integrate service learning into their undergraduate programs can provide numerous benefits for students, schools, and surrounding communities. It combines experiential learning with community service, allowing students to apply their educational skills to real-world situations in their community (Parker et al., 2009). The purpose of this study is to examine service learning within the context of a teacher education program and how it can provide preservice teachers with opportunities to develop their vision of themselves as teachers. By providing students with opportunities to self-reflect in the course and envision their future, preservice teachers can see the impact of service learning on their education while being exposed to diverse experiences, as

outlined in the course description (Donninson & Itter, 2010). This study aims to capture preservice teachers' visions and reflections through service-learning experiences throughout the semester.

Research Question

To achieve these objectives, the following research question and sub-questions guided this case study:

1. How does the service-learning experience influence a preservice teacher's vision of teaching after a *School as Community* Course?
 - a. How do preservice teachers experience service learning when it is integrated into a "School as a Community" course?
 - b. What do preservice teachers describe as the value of engaging in service-learning experiences as they prepare to become teachers?
 - c. What are the affordances of service learning that preservice teachers identify as shaping their visions for teaching?

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate students' service-learning experiences in the *School as Community* course within the college's School of Education teacher program. Case study research examines a bounded system or a case through comprehensive, in-depth data collection from multiple sources, including individuals or groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach ultimately presents a detailed case description and identifies case-based themes centered on the research questions (Creswell, 2007). A reflective approach was employed to collect data through teacher vision assignments, final reflection papers, and post-interview questions for each participant. This reflective approach provided the

analytical framework for examining preservice teachers' understanding of and perceptions of the affordances involved in completing their required service-learning hours in alignment with course objectives (Walsh & Mann, 2015).

Using a reflective data approach to gather qualitative data revealed common themes related to the qualities developed during the service-learning hours. This approach sought to understand and describe how students perceived and made sense of their service-learning experiences in the course through a series of interviews (Stein et al., 2004). Differences in participants' responses were analyzed to identify patterns and common themes, providing deeper insight into the value of engaging in service-learning experiences within a *School as Community* course.

School as Community Course

Preservice teachers are enrolled in a three-hour class paired with a corequisite one-hour field experience. The *School as Community* course is designed to expose and engage preservice teachers in diverse educational experiences while providing structured opportunities to discuss topics that directly connect to their field experience hours. Within the course, preservice teachers engage with course readings and class discussions to broaden their understanding of the classroom and the diverse learners they will serve.

Topics

Key topics include social capital, opportunity gap, achievement gap, privilege, multicultural education, race and ethnicity, sex and gender, religion, socioeconomic status, language, and geography. These topics provide preservice teachers with opportunities to better understand students whose backgrounds and experiences may differ from their own, while also

equipping them with the knowledge and tools to create a more inclusive and responsive classroom environment for all students.

Goal of the Course

One goal of the *School as Community* course is to provide an in-depth exploration of the education program's conceptual framework, which centers on preparing "Educators as Builders of Community." Beyond applying knowledge gained through service-learning contexts, the course emphasizes fostering a sense of community and collaboration among preservice teachers, as well as building community within a teacher's classroom and within the school community. Course discussion and structured reflections are intentionally designed to provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to better understand how they can contribute to and engage with the broader educational community, thereby developing a more engaging and inclusive classroom environment. Through guided self-reflection, preservice teachers assess how they are actively building community in their future classrooms, reinforcing the central themes of connection, equity, and community at the heart of the course (Hassan et al., 2023).

Goal of the Field Experience

The goal of the field experience is to provide preservice teachers with opportunities to work with children and adolescents from diverse racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds, as well as individuals with exceptionalities. Through structured service-learning experiences, preservice teachers are able to examine multiple dimensions of diversity, including social capital, privilege, multicultural education, and the achievement gap, with particular attention to how culture, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, exceptionality, sex and gender, geography, religion, and language influence school-age children and adolescents (Cho & Johnson, 2020).

The course is intentionally designed to provide preservice teachers with opportunities to apply their knowledge and understanding of the course topics during their required 40 hours of service-learning field experience. Preservice teachers meet with the professor for three hours each week in a classroom setting and complete approximately two to three hours of field experiences each week. This intentional alignment between coursework and field experience allows preservice teachers to engage in hands-on applications of concepts explored in weekly class sessions. Table 3.1 provides a visual representation that further supports understanding of the weekly topics discussed throughout the semester and aligns with the approximate number of hours a student should complete for the field experience requirement.

Table 3.1 *School as Community Course Outline per Semester*

Week	Topic(s) Discussed in Class	Field Experience Hours
1	Culture & Community within & outside of a School	3
2	Rule of St. Benedict & Conceptual Framework of the School of Education	3
3	Social Capital, Privilege & Bias – teacher & student view	3
4	Multicultural Education in the Classroom	3
5	Exceptionalities with Students & Adults with Disabilities	5
6	Race & Ethnicity within the Classroom	2
7	Class, Poverty & Wealth how they affect the School	3
8	Achievement Gap within Schools	3
9	Family Structure & Dynamics in classrooms	3
10	Book Club Discussions	3
11	Sex & Gender learning	3
12	Languages within the classroom & Geography in communities	2
13	Religion & place within the classroom	2
14	Motivation & Mentorship as teachers for students and with each other	2

Context & Setting of the Study

This case study is set in a small liberal arts college located in a rural town in northeast Kansas. For the sake of anonymity, the town will be referred to as *Emerald City* in this study; it has a population of just over 10,000. The college is *Emerald City's* largest employer, providing jobs to roughly 20% of the local population. According to the United States Census Bureau (2024), 15.1% of *Emerald City* residents live below the poverty line, which is higher than the national poverty rate of approximately 12.4-12.5%. According to the Kansas Department of Education (2025), 64.6% of students in the local school district qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. In response, community organizations offer a range of services to support their residents and surrounding communities (e.g., community church food banks, local public school food pantries, Catholic Charities, Salvation Army, Project Concern, and Sleep in Heavenly Peace).

The college's School of Education offers three undergraduate programs: Elementary Education, Special Education, and Secondary Education. As part of their program curriculum, all education students are required to take a course called *School as Community* and a concurrent corequisite field experience course, which requires 40 service-learning hours. These courses, key components of the undergraduate education program, provide students with the opportunity to engage in service learning within the local *Emerald City* community, connecting their hands-on experiences to the program's conceptual framework of being *Builders of Community*. This course is one of four offered, bringing together all undergraduate education majors to collaboratively explore and better understand the culture of a school and its community.

The *School as Community* course is offered every semester to all education majors and is optional for students pursuing a minor in education. This case study focused on one semester of the course, using a random sample of students majoring in elementary education. These

organizations with which the preservice teachers work in town have established relationships with both the college and the school of education to provide services to a consistent group of students who volunteer each semester.

Service-Learning Locations

Students have several options for conducting their service-learning experiences in the *School as Community* course. During the time of this study, these opportunities fell into three categories: non-profits, local schools, and college-based activities. The non-profit organizations have maintained relationships with the School of Education for many years, providing services to school-aged students and adults with disabilities. Specifically for this course, students work with the local public elementary school in *Emerald City*, which serves students in PK-5th grade, including those with special education needs.

Non-Profit Organizations

Preservice teachers in the course volunteer at the local Boys and Girls Club, which provides a safe and trusted space for children before and after school. Boys and Girls Club of America is a national organization whose mission is “to enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring and responsible citizens” (Boys and Girls Club of America, 2025). The club in *Emerald City* serves approximately 30-35 elementary- and middle-school-aged children enrolled in the local public school each year, as well as during the summer break. The Boys and Girls Club offers a variety of programs in reading, STEM, art, physical education, and other areas designed to support their physical, emotional, academic, and social development during the school year and during summer break. In addition to these programs, college students have the opportunity to create special community

projects to provide children with additional opportunities, such as sports, band, swing dancing, and cooking courses, fostering new interests and aspirations.

In addition to working with K-12 students, preservice teachers engage with individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities through the local Achievement Services program. This program is operated by a nonprofit organization that receives funding from both state and federal sources. Achievement Center Services provides a range of support for individuals with disabilities, including vocational training, life skills development, physical activities, and community engagement opportunities. As part of the course requirements, students will visit the center during the day to facilitate community activities such as playing games, leading arts and crafts sessions, and engaging in conversation with the program participants. Additionally, preservice teachers will be responsible for planning and organizing a themed social event, such as a Halloween or Valentine's dance/social, depending on the semester in which they are enrolled in the course. The spring semester courses organize a Valentine's dance/social for the center. This event offers individuals with disabilities an opportunity for social interaction and recreation in collaboration with college students and the surrounding community.

Local Public Schools

The School of Education has established a partnership with the local public elementary school in *Emerald City* to provide additional classroom support for teachers. College students volunteer their time in specific classrooms, serving as teacher aides and assisting with various activities during school hours. These volunteers work in a range of PK-5 classrooms, including special education settings. Throughout their time at the school, students collaborate with teachers in multiple ways, such as leading group activities, facilitating reading groups, offering extra help

to struggling students, grading assignments, making copies, and providing tutoring across subjects.

College-Based Activities

The college has also implemented a program that allows residential students to donate the cost of one meal from their weekly meal plan. The funds support a Hunger Coalition initiative in which students, staff, and faculty collaborate on Friday nights to pack and prepare over 200 sack lunches. On Saturday mornings, volunteers distribute these lunches along seven different routes in *Emerald City*, reaching families in need throughout the community. This experience not only supports local families but also provides preservice teachers with a deeper understanding of the surrounding community and the lived realities of individuals experiencing poverty. The program operates year-round, with students enrolled in the course required to participate for a minimum of two weekends each semester.

Field Experience Requirements and Expectations

At the start of the course, students are introduced to all service-learning activities, but a key component of the requirement is a collaborative community service project with their peers. Working in teams of four to five, preservice teachers are responsible for designing, organizing, and implementing a community service project that addresses a specific community need, with a focus on working with people with diverse needs. This project, as outlined in the course syllabus, requires instructor approval before proceeding to fulfill the project requirements. Preservice teachers are encouraged to identify a pressing community need and establish partnerships with relevant organizations or college groups to support their initiative, thereby strengthening the connection between the college and the community. Many will choose to collaborate with local public or private schools, the Boys & Girls Club, assisted living facilities, nursing homes, or

other approved community organizations within *Emerald City*. Through these partnerships, preservice teachers develop meaningful service projects that promote engagement and positive social interaction, as well as the skills to organize and implement successful community projects.

A total of 40 hours of service learning across the designated activities is required to fulfill the *School as Community's* requirements. This requirement aligns with the course learning outcomes, ensuring that students engage in meaningful service experiences that enhance their academic and professional development and reflect the School of Education's conceptual framework of being "Builders of Community." Beyond this alignment, this service learning is rooted in experiential learning theory, as emphasized by Dewey (1902), who highlighted the importance of active engagement and the value of experience in the learning process. Through hands-on participation, students gain deeper insights into their roles as educators and community members, reinforcing the connection between theory and practice in the course (Swick, 2001).

Participants

The participants in this study were preservice teachers enrolled in the *School as Community* course. This course typically enrolls 25-30 students per semester; however, in Spring 2025, only eight female students were enrolled. Seven of these eight students were pursuing degrees in elementary education, while one was majoring in secondary education.

All students in the course completed the required assignments and the required 40 service-learning hours. To ensure that the sample represented students with similar educational backgrounds, three elementary education majors were randomly selected from the course roster. Each chosen participant was invited to participate in the case study and provided informed

consent by signing a Kansas State University IRB-approved consent form (Appendix A), which permitted the use of their information for research purposes.

Participants Portraits

The case study focused on three elementary preservice teachers: Elphaba, Glinda, and Dorothy. All three participants were concurrently enrolled in the *School as Community* course and a corresponding field experience course, in which students complete 40 hours of service learning at various service-learning locations in *Emerald City*. Data were collected through multiple instruments throughout the semester, including a course goals assignment, a teacher visioning assignment, an end-of-semester reflection, and a post-course interview. These sources provided a comprehensive understanding of each participant's experience in the course at the start and as they completed their field experience service-learning hours.

Elphaba, Glinda, and Dorothy were all sophomores in college at the time of the study. Glinda and Dorothy applied and were accepted into the School of Education in the fall semester of 2024, while Elphaba applied and was accepted in the spring semester of 2025. Enrollment in the School of Education is required before students can take upper-level courses, numbered 3000 or higher, as part of their degree in education through the college's School of Education program. For all three participants, the *School as Community* course was their first upper-level education course, and it included their first significant field experience component. This component requires students to complete 40 service-learning hours at various locations in *Emerald City's* community.

Understanding each participant's educational background and family history provides important context for interpreting the data. Elphaba attended a Catholic elementary school through third grade and was homeschooled through eighth grade before completing high school

at a Catholic institution. She grew up in the Midwest in an affluent family; her father is a cardiologist, and her mother is a retired OB-GYN. Dorothy grew up on the East Coast, was homeschooled through fifth grade, and then attended a private Catholic school for the remainder of her education. Her father is a lawyer, and her mother is a stay-at-home parent. Glinda's educational background differs slightly from that of Elphaba and Dorothy. She attended a private school from pre-kindergarten through fourth grade, was homeschooled through high school graduation, completed online courses through a Catholic school, and dual-enrolled at a local community college. Like Elphaba, Glinda grew up in the Midwest in an affluent household; her father is a neurologist, and her mother is a labor-and-delivery nurse.

Data Collection/Instruments

The data sources used to answer the research questions include teacher visioning assignments (Appendix B), course goal assignments (Appendix C), the field experience final reflection assignment (Appendix D), and a semi-structured post-interview (Appendix E). The course goals, assignment, and teacher visioning assignments were completed at the beginning of the course, while the final website portfolio/reflection and semi-structured interview were completed after completing the course and their required 40 service-learning hours.

Reflection is a fundamental component of teacher education, particularly for preservice teachers as they develop their professional identities and instructional practices (Beauchamp, 2014). Effective teaching requires continuous self-examination, making reflective practice essential in both teaching and learning (White, 2021). In the context of service learning, preservice teachers must not only reflect on their personal goals for the course (Appendix C) but also align their development with the broader objectives outlined by the college's School of Education. To support this reflective process, a teaching visioning exercise assignment

(Appendix B) was used to facilitate self-assessment and professional growth through a teacher visioning framework. Through this guided assignment, preservice teachers engaged in the teacher visioning process in preparation for their service-learning experience and the concurrent course. The teacher vision framework encourages them to critically examine their perspectives on teaching, their connections with students and communities, and their commitment to the profession (Hammerness, 2001). By engaging in structured reflection in the course that aligns with the service-learning hours, preservice teachers can gain deeper insight into their motivations and the societal impact of their community work (Hassan et al., 2023).

This reflective practice enhances preservice teachers' awareness of their progress and reinforces the importance of intentional self-reflection, a crucial component in becoming an effective teacher (White, 2021). As with all coursework in an education program, reflective assignments provide a "measuring stick" for assessing a student's self-growth and development in knowledge, understanding, and the application of their education program through their service-learning hours (Saidahmadovna, 2025).

Throughout the semester, students engaged in various reflective assignments designed to deepen their understanding of their evolving teaching practices. The department intended these assignments to promote practical reflection and help meet the goals of this service-learning course. One key component is weekly peer discussions, in which students reflect on the skills they are developing during their service-learning hours. These discussions foster collaboration, allowing students to share experiences, identify common challenges, and consider new perspectives (Hassan et al., 2023). Given that the course includes education students from a variety of specializations within the School of Education, these discussions provide a broader perspective on how service-learning applies across all different educational contexts.

Collaboration is essential in reflective practice, supporting preservice teachers in their development into effective educators and in working with their colleagues (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005).

In addition to peer discussions, students completed a series of journal entries throughout the semester, offering opportunities for continuous reflection. These journal entries coincide with three designated hour checkpoints, ensuring that students not only track their progress toward completing required hours but also take time to analyze and reflect on how they are putting their service-learning hours into practice. The reflections are structured through guiding questions, helping students to articulate their experiences and growth in a meaningful way.

During the course, preservice teachers developed an educational website portfolio that they continually built throughout their education major. Each course contributes to this portfolio by incorporating reflections, projects, and assignments that showcase their growth and learning for future job opportunities. One of the final projects in the *School as Community* course requires students to write an end-of-year reflection on their field experience (Appendix D). This paper serves as a comprehensive reflection on their coursework and its connection to their service learning experiences in the community. In this final reflection on their field experience, preservice teachers assess how they have met or not met the course objectives, demonstrating their overall professional and personal growth.

In addition to the website portfolio, participants completed a semi-structured interview (Appendix E) at the end of the course, after completing their service-learning hours and submitting their coursework. This semi-structured interview used a series of questions to guide students into a deeper discussion of their knowledge and understanding of how service learning can prepare them to be effective teachers (Walsh & Mann, 2015). The interviews were the final

data-collection instrument and were recorded to ensure accurate transcription. Interviews and all other data were coded to identify common themes and ideas that address the research questions.

Table 3.2 *Timeline for Data Collection and Assignments*

Month	Week	Coursework & Instrument	Persons Involved
January	Week 1	Teacher Vision Assignment	All students, including participants
February	Week 3	Goals Statement Assignment	All students, including participants
April	Week 14	Field Experience Reflections	All students, including participants
May	End of Semester following Exam	Post-Interview	Participants only

Assumptions and Biases

As the instructor of the *School as Community* course for the School of Education program, my role may have introduced assumptions and biases into the research process for this case study. One key assumption is that service learning benefits preservice teachers by enhancing their knowledge and understanding of their communities. Engaging in structured service-learning activities can foster more meaningful connections for preservice teachers, enabling them to develop a deeper understanding of pedagogical concepts and build relationships that are important to effective teaching and the creation of a classroom community. Additionally, presuming that students will actively participate with a genuine interest in the service, rather than solely fulfilling a course requirement. These assumptions shape the researcher's perspective on the effectiveness of service learning for educational purposes and may have influenced how preservice teachers' experiences and research data are interpreted.

Biases may also arise from being both the researcher and the instructor. The researcher's belief in the value of service learning may unconsciously influence the analysis of data, particularly when interpreting the student reflections and journal entries completed throughout the course. Additionally, prior experience in education and community service may have shaped expectations for students' outcomes. To mitigate these biases and keep them in check, implement strategies such as using the data analysis spiral throughout the research process, using anonymous feedback, and maintaining reflexivity. By acknowledging these biases, I aim to create an objective analysis of the data and its impact on service learning in this course for educational and pedagogical purposes.

Data Analysis

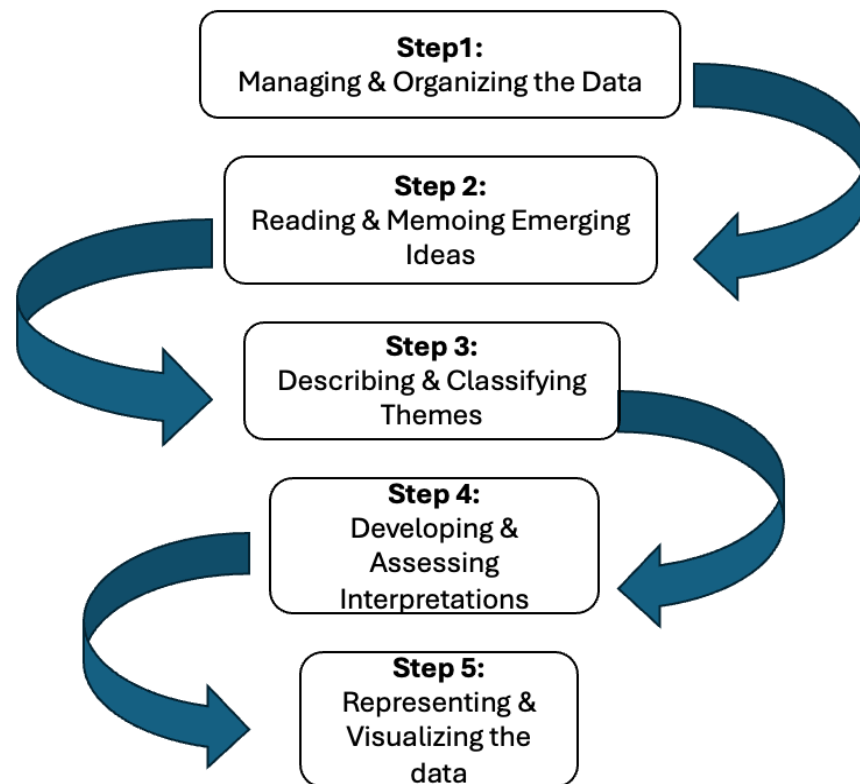
Since qualitative research was used to collect data for this case study, coding was used to analyze the raw data from interviews, reflections, and assignments. Coding allows qualitative data to be organized, categorized, and interpreted effectively to understand the information obtained throughout the course (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Data Analysis Spiral

For this case study, a data analysis spiral was used to examine data as students completed service-learning hours and reflected throughout the semester. Creswell's (2007) data analysis spiral guided the interpretation of the qualitative research and data. Within this model, the processes of describing, classifying, and interpreting data involve organizing codes into meaningful themes to develop a deeper understanding of the data being studied (Creswell, 2007, p.152). The spiral approach is being used because it involves a repetitive cycle in which text and visual data are examined, coded, categorized, and refined to identify emerging patterns and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 186). As illustrated in Figure 2, this systematic approach

provides an effective framework for identifying and interpreting patterns and themes that emerged from the students' data analysis throughout the semester-long course.

Figure 3.1 *The Data Analysis Spiral adapted from Creswell & Poth (2018)*



The data analysis process followed the five-step spiraling procedure outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) and was intentionally aligned with the data collected from the reflective coursework in the *School as Community* course. This approach enabled the data to be fully reviewed and understood, revealing the relationships among service-learning experiences, self-reflections, and professional growth in preservice teachers (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984).

Managing & Organizing the Data

First, after all the data were collected, they were managed and organized using clearly labeled documents. Google Docs and Sheets were used to organize and track coding across

participants and data sources. Each document was structured with consistent headings and subheadings to support clarity and organization during review. This allowed the researcher to become familiar with the data and establish a baseline framework to guide the analysis (Creswell, 2007).

Reading & Memoing Emerging Ideas

Second, the researcher carefully reviewed all data sources to identify emergent ideas, patterns, words, and insights across the reflection assignments and interviews. While the first step focused on data organization, this phase supported early interpretation by highlighting broad patterns and recurring ideas across all the data (Saldaña, 2021). During this stage, in vivo coding was employed, using participants' exact words and phrases to preserve data authenticity (Saldaña, 2021). This coding process provides consistency, ensuring that emerging themes remain grounded in participants' experiences and reflections rather than any preconceived assumptions.

Describing & Classifying Themes

Third, as patterns became more apparent, the researcher assigned descriptive codes and organized them using a color-coding system to visually represent the relationships across the data sources. This phase aligns with axial coding and constant comparative analysis, allowing the researcher to examine similarities and differences across each of the participants and contexts (Saldaña, 2021; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Codes were continuously compared, refined, reworded, and grouped into overarching themes and subthemes. This step was revisited multiple times to ensure that the themes accurately reflected the depth and understanding of the data (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Developing & Assessing Interpretations

Fourth, as themes and patterns emerged, the researcher examined their relationships and meanings within the study's context. This interpretive phase involved asking questions such as, “What does this experience reveal about preservice teachers’ understanding of service learning?” And “How does this theme connect to the goals of the course and the research questions?” Through this process, the researcher moved toward deeper interpretation, allowing the data to show how preservice teachers made sense of their service-learning experiences within the *School as Community* course.

Representing & Visualizing the Data

Finally, the last phase of the spiral analysis of the data involves representing and visualizing the collected data to help the researcher to understand the findings. Using the color-coded themes and the organization of data across various documents and sheets, the researcher was able to see relationships among the themes and subthemes, providing greater clarity to the collected data. These representations provided an organized, transparent overview of the findings and strengthened the presentation of the qualitative analysis by clearly showing how the themes emerged across the various data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Throughout the data analysis process, the researcher engaged in analytic memoing as an ongoing reflective practice. Analytic memos were developed throughout the process to document emerging interpretations, decisions, and connections among the data (Saldaña, 2021). This process allowed the researcher to examine assumptions, track shifts of thinking over time, and intentionally connect the reflection to analysis to create themes and subthemes. Analytic memoing also contributed to the rigor and trustworthiness of the study by creating a transparent

record of the researcher's decision-making throughout the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Brief Summary

This case study provided a snapshot of how service-learning experiences shaped preservice teachers' perceptions of teaching while dual-enrolled in the *School as Community Course* in their education program. Data were collected through course assignments, written reflections, and interviews, allowing for an in-depth examination of each participant's service-learning experiences within the *Emerald City* community throughout the duration of the semester. These experiences included hours completed in non-profit organizations, local school settings, and college-based initiatives.

A data spiral analysis guided the examination of the collected data to identify emerging patterns and themes. The approach required repeated review of the data through multiple readings and cycles of analysis, allowing themes to emerge over time. Through this systematic process, recurring ideas and shared experiences were identified, providing a deeper understanding of how service learning influenced preservice teachers' developing perspectives on teaching. The resulting themes served as the foundation for addressing the study's research questions and offered insight into the role of service learning in teacher preparation programs.

Positionality Statement

As a researcher examining the role of service learning and reflective practice in preservice teacher education, I acknowledge that my own experiences shape my perspectives, especially as the course educator. My background includes fifteen years of teaching and administrative work at the high school level, followed by a transition into higher education. I now work closely with preservice teachers enrolled in the PK-12 undergraduate education

majors, primarily in secondary education. However, this particular course is the only one that I teach to all education majors, including those preparing for elementary and secondary school teaching. This new career path has given me firsthand insight into the challenges and opportunities preservice teachers face in developing the art and science of teaching through pedagogical skills and instructional strategies.

Recognizing the influence of my positionality, I intentionally incorporated reflexive memoing throughout the research process as a strategy to promote transparency and trustworthiness. Consistent with qualitative practices outlined by Trena M. Paulua et al. (2014), I maintained written memos throughout data collection and analysis to examine how my prior experiences, commitments to service learning, and instructional role may have shaped the framing of questions, interactions with participants, and interpretations of findings. The process allowed me to acknowledge potential biases and assumptions and to intentionally set aside personal perspectives, thereby strengthening the credibility and rigor of this case study.

A guiding philosophy in my work and my own life is “*Greatness is the Minimum.*” This personal standard reflects my belief that excellence should not be the goal but rather the foundation for continuous improvement. In my research, this translates into a commitment to high expectations and to meaningful impact in teacher education. However, I recognize that my own experiences and perspectives are not universal, and I remain committed to consistently questioning my assumptions, engaging in critical self-reflection, and focusing on the views of the preservice teachers in the course. I am committed to guiding preservice teachers, valuing their unique experiences, and ensuring that my analysis remains grounded in each of their authentic reflections. By maintaining an open and responsive approach, I strive to conduct rigorous research that makes meaningful contributions to teacher education.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology guiding this qualitative case study, which followed three participants enrolled in the *School as Community* course as they completed their service-learning hours for their preservice teacher education program. Data were collected from four primary sources: the teacher visioning assignment and course goals assignments administered at the beginning of the semester, the field experience final reflection, and a post-interview conducted at the end of the semester. Together, these instruments provided a snapshot of participants' knowledge, understanding, and application of service learning as future teachers. Data analysis followed the spiral model described by John W. Creswell (2007), which includes five phases of reviewing, organizing, reflecting, and interpreting data to identify emerging patterns and develop common themes aligned with the study's research question and sub-questions.

Chapter Four presents the study's findings, highlighting the themes that emerged from the analysis and examining how participants' service-learning experiences shaped and refined their teacher vision through the *School as Community* course. The results are organized by theme, with connections drawn to each participant whose experiences contributed to the development of those themes.

Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter presents the findings from a case study examining how service-learning experiences influence preservice teachers' developing visions of teaching after participating in the concurrent *School as Community* course. The case study focused on identifying recurring themes that emerged from an analysis of participants' course goals, assignments, teacher vision assignment, end-of-semester reflection paper, and a post-interview collected during their studies in the preservice teacher program.

Presentation of Themes

Through the process of spiral analysis, several themes emerged from the data collected throughout the semester. Each theme aligns with the study's purpose and contributes to a deeper understanding of the overarching research question: How does the service-learning experience influence a preservice teacher's vision of teaching after completing a *School as Community* course? In addition to the research questions, the themes align with the case study's three sub-questions:

1. How do preservice teachers experience service learning when integrated into a *School as Community* course?
2. What do preservice teachers describe as the value of engaging in service-learning experiences when becoming a teacher?
3. What are the affordances of service learning that preservice teachers describe as impacting their visions for teaching?

In total, six key themes were identified, each offering insight into participants' experiences, professional growth in the *School as Community* Course, and completion of service-learning hours. The six themes include: (1) strengthening professional skills; (2) role modeling

in practice; (3) building community as a teacher; (4) real-world outcomes and traits learned; (5) greater awareness of diversity; and (6) teaching as a mission. Collectively, these themes reflect key elements of transformative service learning, as participants moved beyond completing service-learning requirements to engaging in experiences that shaped their perspectives, professional identities, and understanding of teaching. The discussion section will further explore the meanings and implications of each theme in relation to the case study. Table 4.1 shows which preservice teachers contributed to each theme in this study.

Table 4.1 *Themes by participants*

Emerging Theme	Elphaba	Dorothy	Glinda
Theme 1: Strengthening Professional Skills	X	X	X
Theme 2: Role Models in Practice	X		X
Theme 3: Building Community as a Teacher	X	X	X
Theme 4: Real-World Outcomes	X	X	
Theme 5: Greater Awareness of Diversity		X	X
Theme 6: Teaching as a Mission		X	X

Theme 1: Strengthening Professional Skills

One theme identified in the data was that all participants viewed service learning, when combined with the course, as a valuable opportunity to *enhance their professional teaching skills*. This finding confirms Brail's (2016) prior research, which provides educators with evidence that effective service learning integrated into a preservice teacher program can offer

teachers valuable insights and opportunities to develop and better understand dispositions related to the teaching profession

Across the three participants' reflections and interviews, a consistent pattern emerged: teaching was not merely a position of authority or leadership in the classroom, but a profession that requires continuous growth, reflection, and development to be effective. This was evident when comparing participants' goals at the start of the year with how they reflected on them in their end-of-year reflections and interviews.

Glinda's initial goal for the course (Appendix C) reflected her desire to build confidence as a teacher:

As a teacher, I must be comfortable standing in front of a class of students, learn and practice getting out of my comfort zone, and speak up to share my opinion in the classroom. All of which I can learn by doing service learning.

Her initial focus centered on developing confidence and comfort in her teaching role. However, throughout her service-learning experience, her vision of teaching evolved. In the post interview (Appendix E), she reflected, "Service learning and working with a variety of kids kind of inspired me to change the way I would like to teach and manage the classroom, especially in seeing each student for who they are." This shift demonstrated a shift from self-focused growth toward greater awareness of effective teaching practices, particularly in classroom management and individualized instruction. Her end-of-the-year reflection (Appendix D) further illustrated this development:

It is crucial to ensure that the classroom is a peaceful, supportive environment for children because it should provide an optimal learning space for students to succeed. We should mirror Christ in the way that we treat our students in class each day by showing patience, kindness, and excellence in all that we do.

Glinda's reflections reveal her growth in understanding the importance of fostering a positive learning environment, which is a valuable skill essential for any preservice teacher to develop (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Elphaba had a similar experience to Glinda, in that she connected the service-learning experience to the development of her professional communication skills. In her goals assignment (Appendix C), she wrote, "I want to grow in my communication skills because that skill is important to be a good educator working with my colleagues, parents, and students." Her goal indicated an early understanding of the significance of communication in teaching. Later, in her interview, she revisited this goal, stating:

This course and the service-learning hours made me more excited to learn in future classes like Classroom Management and methods courses. I talked about wanting to learn more about the profession in my goals, and the service learning exceeded my expectations. I now feel more confident in communication with students because I stepped outside of my comfort zone this semester.

Like Glinda and Elphaba, Dorothy also reflected that service learning strengthened her professional skills as a teacher. One of her goals (Appendix C) was, "In teaching, I need to be a lifelong learner because teachers are continuous learners, too." She recognized the need to grow in her knowledge and understanding of teaching through reflection (Zeichner, 2010). In her end-of-course reflection (Appendix D), she shared:

This course was not academically difficult, but it challenged me in unexpected ways. It pushed me outside of my comfort zone, and it helped me become a leader, and taught me the value of serving others, like teaching, with humility.

In her post interview (Appendix E), she elaborated more on this development:

Yes, it's fun to work with kids and, sometimes, it can be easy, but at the same time, like the career takes a lot of work, grit, and perseverance. These were skills I needed to experience and learn as a teacher.

Dorothy's comments emphasize the role of service-learning in shaping a preservice teacher's understanding of teaching as a meaningful profession.

The real-world outcomes and personal growth that preservice teachers gained through service-learning experiences often differed from those they had at the start of the course. When they are immersed in the community and helping others, they encounter both the challenges and rewards of teaching, which prompt meaningful reflection on the development of their professional identities. Consistent with experiential learning theory, these hands-on experiences deepened their passion for education. They reinforced their desire to positively impact students' lives and strengthened key instructional and interpersonal skills necessary for success in the teacher education program and in their future classrooms (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kolb, 1984). As their confidence and understanding deepened, participants recognized that their actions and attitudes towards students reflected their growth and inspired them to become effective role models. When paired with structured self-reflection, these experiences extended beyond skill development and aligned with transformative service learning, as participants demonstrated shifts in their confidence and understanding of teaching as a reflective profession.

Theme 2: Role Models in Practice

In addition to strengthening professional skills, preservice teachers also perceived service learning as a valuable and eye-opening experience. The real-world outcomes and personal growth they gained through service learning often differed from their initial visions at the start of the course. A common pattern among participants was that service learning deepened their passion for education and their desire to help students. The hands-on nature of their field experience enabled them to move beyond theoretical understanding and engage with the real challenges and rewards of teaching (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kolb, 1984). Through this process,

Elphaba and Glinda discovered that service learning offered preservice teachers' meaningful opportunities to serve as role models for students while also deepening their understanding of their potential impact and vision as future educators.

Elphaba stated at the beginning of the course (Appendix C) that one of her goals was, "I am hoping to become more of a mentor to kids than a buddy while growing in love for education." She demonstrated early awareness of the importance of serving as a role model for students and a desire to transition into the professional role of a teacher. Reflecting on this goal at the end of the course in her post interview (Appendix E), she shared, "Service Learning made me realize I have to be more of a mentor to kids than their buddy and share my love for education with them."

Elphaba also connected kindness to her development as a role model in her end-of-the-year reflection (Appendix D):

Seeing how my kindness affected others helped me grow in my authority. Kindness definitely has a power behind it, and if we are confidently kind, the more power there is to it. You're helping at the Achievement Center or even at the Boys & Girls Club, and there are so many moments where I get to be confidently kind as a role model for others [students].

Glinda expressed a similar understanding of being a role model and building connections with both students and her peers. One of her goals at the beginning of the course (Appendix C) was:

I really want to work on my connection as I can have that support, and we can all support each other through the next few years as we become teachers. And be a positive example for my peers and those I am working with.

She emphasized that maintaining a positive attitude is key to serving as a role model and to demonstrating how to support others in need. In her post interview (Appendix E), she reflected,

“I realized I just had to be a positive light and cheer them up and be able to make their day as a model for the students.”

Through their service-learning experiences, Glinda and Elphaba discovered that being a role model requires intentional actions, empathy, and leadership to have a positive impact on those around them. By engaging directly with students and community members, preservice teachers began to see themselves evolving into the kind of role models they had once looked up to as students. This development reflects the transformative nature of service learning, in which real-world engagement fosters growth in teacher identity and professional dispositions (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997). As participants experienced an authentic community education setting, they began to model professional responsibility, build relationships, and engage meaningfully with the community they served. These experiences reinforced the understanding that effective teaching extends beyond the classroom. This shift in perspective set the stage for recognizing that effective teaching extends into building meaningful connections and fostering community among students, colleagues, and families (Bachman et al., 2024). This growth reflects the principles of transformative service learning, as participants not only practiced professional behaviors but also began to internalize their roles as educators, demonstrating a shift from participation to being an actual educator.

Theme 3: Building Community as a Teacher

For many preservice teachers, their visions of teaching do not initially include building connections beyond their own classrooms. They recognize the importance of creating a positive classroom environment to promote engaging relationships with the students (Hammerness, 2006). However, participation in service learning can transform preservice teachers' perceptions of teaching by emphasizing the importance of building relationships and fostering community as

they transition into their roles as future educators (Eyler & Giles, 1999). All three participants identified *building community* as a vital component of their learning during their service-learning experiences.

Glinda demonstrated notable growth in this area. In her teacher vision assignment (Appendix B), she reflected, “I want to focus more on other people this semester and listen to them and serve them instead of worrying about myself completing the hours.” Her emphasis on being present and serving others revealed a shift from meeting course requirements to prioritizing engagement with those she served. As the semester progressed, she described her growing appreciation for sustained connection with the community of *Emerald City*, stating in her post interview (Appendix B),:

My fear was I am not going to finish it all, especially like how we spaced it out throughout the semester. At first, I was like No, I don't want to do that, I want to get it all done. However, as I began to go, cramming would not have been beneficial at all, because I wouldn't have formed the relationships I did with those kids. I think it is important that we are connected as a community and that the college doesn't stay separated from the community.

This pattern also continued for Dorothy, with *building community* outside the college or classroom being viewed as vital to the school. In her visioning assignment (Appendix B), Dorothy talked about the key aspects of service learning as:

I think the key aspects of service learning and elements that contribute the most to an individual's engagement would be personal relationships—building a positive community between students and their authority is so important. I am hoping that volunteering will help me connect with others and make a positive difference in the community.

By the end of her semester, she, too, found giving to the community of *Emerald City* was beneficial for all who were involved, as stated in her post interview (Appendix E),

I liked getting to know like the teachers and the people who lead the service-learning opportunities and getting to know them as well, to like help me be a teacher. It was kind of cool how the community of our school would come together to serve the Boys & Girls Club and the Hunger Coalition.

All of the participants discussed *building community* as an essential element of meaningful service learning in their end-of-semester reflections (Appendix D). Elphaba focused on the importance of communication, noting that “Strong communication builds strong community relationships.” Dorothy reflected on how her experiences connected her to multiple communities, writing:

Throughout my field experiences, I wasn’t just volunteering or helping in a classroom; I was contributing to a larger community, whether it was the local community of children in need at the Girls and Boys Club, the group of adults with exceptionalities at the Achievement Center, or the diverse group of kindergarten students at [the local public Elementary school]. My presence and willingness to serve became powerful ways to help build a compassionate community.

Similarly, Glinda described the connection between community and trust, emphasizing how these values inform her future teaching community-building:

During my service learning hours, I noticed that the stronger the community, the more trusting people are. I believe that it will be even more worthwhile to build a strong class community as a teacher than as a student for a grade in a class, because it will bear more fruit than a good grade that is mainly self-serving.

Through their reflections and experiences, all the preservice teacher participants came to view community building as essential to effective teaching. Their engagement with the *Emerald City* community allowed them to experience firsthand how authentic relationships, communication, and collaboration extend the purpose of teaching beyond classroom walls into the heart of the broader community (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Root, 2017). This understanding highlights the integral role of fostering relationships in the educational experience. Building on this awareness of community, participants began to see how engaging with real-world connections further supports their growth as educators, reinforcing their professional skills and providing opportunities to learn in real-world settings (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Root et al., 2022). This shift in understanding highlights how transformative service learning supports

preservice teachers in recognizing teaching as a relational and community-centered practice, extending beyond the classroom into meaningful engagement with the broader school community.

Theme 4: Real-World Outcomes

While *building community* emerged as an important aspect of the participants' experiences, they also began to see *real-world outcomes* as essential to their education in becoming effective teachers. Service learning was perceived as a valuable and eye-opening component of their education, as the outcomes and professional traits developed through these experiences often differed from participants' initial expectations at the beginning of the course. Through engagement in service-learning field experiences, preservice teachers began to recognize real outcomes related to skill development, relationship-building, and professional growth. Consistent with Boyle-Baise & Kilbane (2012), through their service-learning field experiences, participants began to recognize that they were developing essential skills for effective teaching while simultaneously building relationships with others and strengthening their professional skills.

Dorothy's experience throughout the course provided a deeper understanding of this theme. At the beginning of the year in her teacher vision assignment (Appendix B), she viewed service learning as a way to find purpose in teaching, writing, "I am hoping to be fulfilled from the experience of volunteering. I think everyone gains a purpose when working with individuals." As she participated in various service-learning opportunities in *Emerald City*, this purpose began to unfold. During her post interview (Appendix E), she reflected:

This experience taught me how materials and money are not fulfilling as many people make it seem, but it is the people you are surrounded by that make you feel fulfilled.

Dorothy came to understand that the meaning of teaching stems from relationships and shared experiences rather than material success, as she expressed at the start of the course. Her reflection at the end of the year (Appendix D) revealed how much she had grown in the professional and personal virtues that effective education can foster: “My work will influence not just the individuals in my classroom but the entire school community, as I model values like compassion, empathy, and patience.”

Through this process, Dorothy’s perspective shifted, showing how service learning provides real-world outcomes for preservice teachers. As Dorothy’s perspective changed, Elphaba had a similar experience. At the beginning of the semester, one of Elphaba’s goals (Appendix C) was “Making a difference in the community for life & life skills.” She saw the service-learning opportunities as valuable for developing life skills and helping others. Throughout her experience in both the class and her service-learning opportunities, she began to connect the real-world outcomes learned in the classroom with her field experience. Elphaba stated in her post interview (Appendix E) that:

[I learned] about social networking and how our guidance helps students have a more growth mindset, and we are influential on them. I also recognize the privilege that you have, and like kind of see things I don't have to think about, but some kids do. This changed my perspective.

Dorothy and Elphaba’s experiences in the *School as Community* course and fieldwork highlight how service-learning helps develop personal growth and professional readiness in pre-service teachers. As each engaged in their service-learning opportunities within the *Emerald City* community, they began to see teaching as more than classroom management and content delivery. Teaching became a practice of achieving *real-world outcomes* as described in the research. These outcomes include, but are not limited to, empathy, perspective, self-knowledge, communication, acknowledgment, and an understanding of community, which are critical skills

learned through service learning and are essential for effective educators (Kaye, 2004; Wilson, 2011). Dorothy's journey revealed that fulfillment in teaching emerges from human connections rather than from material measures of success. Similarly, Elphaba's reflections demonstrated an understanding of social networking, privilege, and the broader outcomes teachers have on students' mindsets and lives. Through these experiences, both preservice teachers developed a deeper understanding of what it means to be a teacher and of the real-world outcomes associated with the role. Their perspectives illustrate how service learning provides preservice teachers with meaningful, *real-world outcomes* that prepare them to be reflective educators and facilitate professional growth (White, 2021). These findings further support the concept of transformative service learning, as participants connected real-world experiences to deeper personal and professional growth, demonstrating changes in their understanding of the purpose and impact of teaching.

Theme 5: Greater Awareness of Diversity

Building on their recognition of teaching as a relational and purpose-driven practice, another theme that emerged was that service-learning experiences fostered a deeper *awareness of classroom diversity*, prompting participants to reflect on how this diversity would shape their professional growth as teachers (Theriot, 2006). Through their work in the *Emerald City* community, participants encountered students and families from diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, which challenged many of their prior assumptions about teaching and learning. This aligns with findings from Gay (2018) and White (2021), experiences encouraged preservice teachers to consider how students lived experiences would shape their teaching practices, recognizing that effective teaching requires not only content knowledge but also an understanding of each student's and the community's unique needs.

As stated at the beginning, all three participants came from affluent, nuclear families and were either homeschooled or attended private Catholic schools. Attending private schools and/or being homeschooled limited their exposure to racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity during their K-12 schooling (Schaeffer, 2024). This background made their encounters throughout the semester particularly transformative, as each participant developed a greater awareness and understanding of the diversity within the *Emerald City* community and beyond the college's own community.

Elphaba, for instance, set a goal for herself to have patience, writing in her goals statement (Appendix C), "I believe that patience is not only being kind and generous with my time towards others, but also not being quick to judge as well." She was intentional about not being quick to judge while serving others in need. Reflecting later in her post interview (Appendix E), she shared excitedly, "Oh my gosh, before I would just think, can't the kids take a shower. But it was eye-opening seeing kids need breakfast, lunch, and other necessities provided by the school." Her reflection on these experiences revealed the depth of her initial biases and how they shaped her perceptions of others. Through working with diverse service-learning organizations in *Emerald City*, Elphaba came to recognize that children often cannot control their circumstances at home, particularly when their basic needs for food, hygiene, and stability are not met.

Dorothy's understanding of diversity also evolved through her service-learning experience. In her teacher vision statement (Appendix B), she reflected on her limited exposure to diverse groups: "In my experience as a camp counselor, I treated the different campers the same because they came for the same experience and did not embrace differences. I haven't been

exposed to much diversity.” By the end of the semester, however, her final reflection (Appendix D), demonstrated a deeper understanding of diversity:

This semester, I also learned about privilege and diversity, which helped me understand reality in a different way. Many people come from different backgrounds, and we should embrace each person for who they are. It is important to understand diverse cultures, build compassionate communities, and recognize the impact of social capital and privilege in education. As an educator, I’ll strive to foster an environment that values uniqueness, promotes empathy, and supports inclusivity. I will acknowledge that culture shapes individuals and communities and that creating an inclusive space requires adapting to meet the needs of all students.

Dorothy’s reflection demonstrates significant growth as she begins to embrace opportunities to engage with people from diverse backgrounds, including those who are different from her. As a future educator, she recognized that it is her responsibility to create a safe and positive environment for all students.

Similarly, Glinda also grew up with limited exposure to diversity. In her teacher vision statement (Appendix B), she acknowledged, “I haven’t had much experience in engaging with students from different backgrounds.” This statement made her realize that one of her goals (Appendix C) for the semester should be to learn more about and become more familiar with people from different cultures than her own: “One of my goals is to learn and become more familiar with people of different cultures than my own.” Through service learning, Glinda developed a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and reflected on how this awareness would inform her teaching. She stated later in her post interview (Appendix E),:

I think it’s super important to get familiar with people who have different backgrounds from myself because I only really have been surrounded by people who are living the same lifestyles as me and have similar beliefs, too. This course and the service-learning hours opened my eyes to a bigger and more diverse world, like I could see as a teacher.

Glinda’s reflection demonstrates that the service-learning hours required for the *School as Community* course not only deepened her cultural awareness but also helped her begin to

envision her role as a teacher who embraces and celebrates the diversity of the children in her classroom.

Collectively, participants' experiences demonstrate that service-learning hours provide preservice teachers with opportunities to develop cultural awareness and empathy for others with backgrounds different from their own (Hildenbrand & Schultz, 2015). Each participant entered the course with limited exposure to diversity and a narrow understanding of how a student's family and socioeconomic backgrounds influence learning. Through their engagement with the *Emerald City* community, they began to recognize the importance of understanding students' lived realities at home and the social factors that shape educational experiences in the classroom. This growing awareness marked a shift in realizing how teaching and learning differ from the lives they had as children. Reflection on previously held assumptions and biases led participants to reenvision teaching as a practice centered on cultural acceptance, compassion, and adaptability for diverse learners (Kaye, 2004; Wilson, 2011). Participants began to reflect on a core element of transformative service learning as participants critically examined their prior assumptions and developed a broader, more inclusive understanding of students, communities, and their role as future educators

Theme 6: Teaching as a Mission

Building upon their growing awareness of diversity and their recognition of teaching as a relationship-building endeavor, another central theme that emerged was viewing teaching as their life's mission. Preservice teachers described how the college's mission of "serving as Christ" shaped their understanding of teaching. Through their service-learning experiences throughout the semester, participants recognized education as more than a professional career, identifying it as a personal vocation grounded in faith and service to others. This perspective encouraged them

to view teaching as a vocation and a commitment to serving the needs of students and others, while reflecting on the college's mission to embody Christ's love in their lives, including their future careers.

Dorothy embodied this mission from the start of the semester in her teacher vision statement (Appendix B), describing service learning as, "I believe that service learning inspires a spirit of mission that one can carry onto one's career. When one serves another, both receive. Both receive love, gratitude, Christ, and worth." Her faith provided the foundation for her commitment to serving others throughout the semester. In her end-of-year reflection (Appendix D), she expanded on this vision:

I am certain that I will have to maintain this Christlike attitude once I become a teacher because it will be a sacrificial role that will require a lot of energy and love, but I know that the Lord will give me the strength to fulfill my vocation.

She also connected her mission to building community in diverse classrooms, noting, "Teachers must foster an environment where students feel valued, supported, and empowered. Building community isn't about earning grades; it's about how people are treated and loved like Christ." This connection to service to others and to Christ became the focal point of her service-learning opportunities.

Similarly, Glinda connected her faith to a commitment to serving others as Christ did. One of her goals (Appendix C) stated: "I really want to practice having a servant's heart and mirroring Christ's love while serving the people of *Emerald City*." She continued to emphasize how faith can transform and support personal and professional growth: "It's important that we are connected as a community and that the college doesn't stay separated from the city, especially since we are like a Catholic college that should be our mission to outreach in the small town." By aligning service learning with her focus on Christ's mission, Glinda saw an

opportunity to extend her faith-filled vocation, modeling love and care for all students, much like the college engaged with the *Emerald City* community. Glinda's mission to serve was evident most in her end-of-the-year reflection (Appendix D), where she saw how seeking Christ and mirroring His image are examples of how teachers should model their own classroom:

From the Rule of St. Benedict's Qualities of the Abbot, I found that the qualities of holding the place of Christ in the monastery and seeking God to provide all necessary resources to complete one's work would be most impactful in a classroom. It is crucial to ensure that the classroom is a peaceful, supportive environment for children because it should provide an optimal learning space for students to succeed. We should mirror Christ in the way that we treat our students in class each day by showing patience, kindness, and excellence in all that we do.

These reflections demonstrated how personal faith, combined with service-learning experiences, allows the participants to see teaching as more than a profession; it is a personal vocation. It is also their vocation rooted in love, service, and embodiment of Christ's mission (Sipper-Denlinger, 2022). Through direct engagement with students and communities, participants developed a sense of teaching as a purposeful action. This action integrates personal values, professional responsibilities, and sustained commitment to the growth and well-being of both students and the broader school community (Root et al., 2002). Collectively, the participants' experiences demonstrated how service learning can have a lasting impact by shaping preservice teachers' identities and commitments, leading them to recognize teaching as a lifelong mission of service, faith, and influence within their classrooms and the communities they serve (Sipper-Denlinger, 2022; Root et al., 2022). This theme clearly showed how transformative service learning enabled them to view teaching not only as a profession but also as a vocation rooted in service, commitment to others, and faith.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented findings from preservice teachers' assignments, reflections, and interviews in the *School as Community* course, illustrating how service-learning experiences, paired with reflection, contributed to their development as future educators. Through engagement with diverse school and community contexts in the *Emerald City* community, participants developed a greater awareness of the relational, diversity, and moral aspects of teaching.

The findings revealed that service-learning encouraged preservice teachers to examine their beliefs about education and diversity and to recognize the importance of developing skills essential to effective teaching. Participants acknowledged that meaningful teaching requires understanding the whole child. Participants emphasized that teachers must consider students' backgrounds, family structures, and community influences in addition to strong pedagogical practices (Gay, 2018). The variety of structured reflection in the concurrent course supported this process by allowing participants to connect their field experiences to the development of their knowledge and understanding of teaching. Service-learning experiences help bridge the gap between theory and practice in education through hands-on work (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kolb, 1984).

In addition to professional growth, participants' reflections highlighted the role of faith as a source of purpose and guidance in their preparation to teach. They began to view teaching not merely as a career, but as a vocation. Teaching is a mission rooted in love, service, and the example of Christ (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Sipper-Denlinger, 2022). Their experiences affirmed that faith-informed service-learning can nurture educators who are motivated by compassion and a desire to serve others through education (Toma, 2020).

When preservice teachers are provided with authentic opportunities to engage with communities and reflect on those experiences, they develop both the professional and moral skills necessary for effective teaching (Zeichner, 2010). Overall, these findings illustrate how service learning, when paired with intentional reflection and authentic community engagement can function as a transformative experience that shapes preservice teachers' beliefs, identities, and visions for teaching. Chapter five will discuss how these findings address the research question and its sub-questions, as well as broader implications for teacher preparation programs.

Chapter 5 - CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the role of service learning in undergraduate preservice teacher education and to explore how participation in a structured service-learning experience, within a guided course, *School as Community*, emphasizing reflective practice, would influence preservice teachers' understanding of the teaching profession. They completed the required 40 service hours while working on reflective assignments designed to connect theory to practice and deepen knowledge and application in teacher education. The findings, presented in Chapter Four, provide a broader perspective on how service learning contributed to both the professional and personal development of future educators.

Three female preservice teachers, all elementary education students, were randomly selected from the Spring 2025 course and participated in this case study after providing informed consent. Through course artifacts throughout the semester and the end-of-the-semester interview, participants described how their service-learning experiences shaped their perceptions of effective teaching, strengthened their professional skills, deepened their understanding of community relationships as a teacher, and reinforced teaching as a vocation rooted in service to others and faith. Chapter Five situates these findings within the existing literature, discusses their implications, and offers recommendations for future research.

As a reminder, here are the following research question and sub-questions which guided this qualitative case study and are unpacked below:

1. How does the service-learning experience influence a preservice teacher's vision of teaching after a *School as Community* Course?

- a. How do preservice teachers experience service learning when integrated into a *School as Community* course?
- b. What do preservice teachers describe as the value of engaging in service-learning experiences when becoming a teacher?
- c. What are the affordances of service learning that preservice teachers describe as impacting their visions for teaching?

Interpretations of the Findings

The findings of this case study revealed that structured assignments with self-reflection, intentionally guided in a *School as Community* course while participating in service learning, showed how preservice teachers' personal and professional growth was shaped throughout the course. Overall, the course deepened participants' understanding of themselves as future educators, while the structured reflections and interviews provided insight into how they made sense of their personal beliefs and the skills shaping their professional identities. The service-learning experience shaped participants' vision of teaching through structured reflection within the course, prompting them to analyze their experiences and better understand teaching as community engagement, empathy, and professional responsibility (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Participants also described how being required to participate in a variety of service-learning opportunities in the *Emerald City* community increased their understanding of diverse communities, especially those different from the communities and schools where they grew up. Through service-learning field experiences, they were exposed to students and families from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. These encounters helped the participants recognize the importance of recognizing diversity and of building relationships in teaching practices. By

reflecting on their interactions in assignments and an interview, preservice teachers indicated how they came to appreciate that teaching is not limited to content delivery; instead, it involves building community, being compassionate, and creating a positive learning environment where all students feel valued and supported (Boyle-Baise & Eplers, 2020; Sleeter, 2017). These findings align with the principles of transformative service learning, as participants moved beyond participation in service to engaging in experiences that prompted reflection, perspective shifts, and deeper meaning about their future as educators.

Connecting the Emergent Themes to the Study's Research Questions

As described in Chapter Four, six major themes emerged from the participants' teacher visioning assignment (Appendix B), course goals assignment (Appendix C), field experience reflection (Appendix D), and end-of-year interviews (Appendix E). These six themes are: (1) Strengthening Professional Skills, (2) Role Models in Practice, (3) Building Community as a Teacher, (4) Real-World Outcomes, (5) Greater Awareness of Diversity, and (6) Teaching as Mission.

Taken together, these six themes illustrate how participants made sense of their service-learning experience and how those experiences shaped their early development as educators. Because each theme contributed uniquely to understanding the study's research question and sub-questions, the discussion that follows is organized around the research sub-questions and the overarching research question, with the relevant themes woven into the interpretation of the findings from this case study. Collectively, these six themes illustrate how participants' experiences reflect a transformative service-learning process, in which learning occurred not only through experiential learning but through self-reflection, which reshaped their understanding of teaching and their developing professional identities. Table 5.1 provides a clear

overview of how each theme relates to the sub-questions and the overall research question, along with key findings collected from the data.

Table 5.1 *Summary of Key Findings for the Research Questions and Sub-questions.*

	Themes	Key Findings
SQ1	Theme 1: Strengthening Professional Skills Theme 4: Achieving Real-World Outcomes Theme 5: Fostering a Greater Awareness of Diversity	Preservice teachers viewed service learning, when combined with the course, as a valuable opportunity to strengthen their professional teaching skills. Preservice teachers perceive service learning as a valuable and eye-opening experience, as the real-world outcomes and valuable traits they gained through service learning differ from their initial visions at the start of the course. Service-learning experiences helped foster a deeper awareness among pre-service teachers of classroom diversity, prompting them to reflect on how these dynamics would shape their professional growth as teachers.
SQ2	Theme 2: Role Models into Practice Theme 3: Building Community as a Teacher Theme 4: Achieving Real-World Outcomes	Service learning provided preservice teachers with meaningful opportunities to serve as role models for students while also developing a deeper understanding of their potential impact as future educators. Engaging in service learning can transform preservice teachers' perceptions of teaching by emphasizing the importance of building relationships and fostering community as they transition into their roles as future educators. Preservice teachers perceive service learning as a valuable and eye-opening experience, as the real-world outcomes and valuable traits they gained through service learning differ from their initial visions at the start of the course.
SQ3	Theme 3: Building Community as a Teacher Theme 4: Achieving Real-World Outcomes Theme 5: Fostering a Greater Awareness of Diversity	Engaging in service learning can transform preservice teachers' perceptions of teaching by emphasizing the importance of building relationships and fostering community as they transition into their roles as future educators. Preservice teachers perceive service learning as a valuable and eye-opening experience, as the real-world outcomes and valuable traits they gained through service learning differ from their initial visions at the start of the course. Service-learning experiences helped foster a deeper awareness among pre-service teachers of classroom diversity, prompting them to reflect on how these dynamics would shape their professional growth as teachers.

	Theme 6: Teaching as a Mission	Preservice teachers described how the college’s mission of “serving as Christ” shaped their understanding of teaching, leading them to view the profession not only as a career but also as a personal mission of service for Christ.
RQ	Theme 1: Strengthening Professional Skills Theme 2: Role Models into Practice Theme 3: Building Community as a Teacher Theme 4: Achieving Real-World Outcomes Theme 5: Fostering a Greater Awareness of Diversity Theme 6: Teaching as a Mission	Preservice teachers viewed service learning, when combined with the course, as a valuable opportunity to strengthen their professional skills in teaching. Service learning provided preservice teachers with meaningful opportunities to serve as role models for students while also developing a deeper understanding of their potential impact as future educators. Engaging in service learning can transform preservice teachers’ perceptions of teaching by emphasizing the importance of building relationships and fostering community as they transition into their roles as future educators. Preservice teachers perceive service learning as a valuable and eye-opening experience, as the real-world outcomes and valuable traits they gained through service learning differ from their initial visions at the start of the course. Service-learning experiences helped foster a more profound awareness among pre-service teachers of classroom diversity, prompting them to reflect on how these dynamics would shape their professional growth as teachers. Preservice teachers described how the college’s mission of “serving as Christ” shaped their understanding of teaching, leading them to view the profession not only as a career but also as a personal mission of service for Christ.

Research Sub-question 1: How do preservice teachers experience service learning when integrated into a *School as Community* course?

The findings indicate that preservice teachers experienced service learning as a foundational aspect of their professional formation rather than merely a degree requirement. The integration of service-learning placements, structured assignments, and self-reflection in the *School as Community* course enabled participants to connect their new knowledge of teaching to authentic school and community contexts. This aligns with the existing literature, which emphasizes early practice-based learning as central to the development of professional identity in teacher education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Three themes were particularly influential in

shaping participants' experiences during their service-learning requirement while enrolled in the *School as Community* course.

Strengthening Professional Skills

First, *Strengthening Professional Skills* emerged as a key outcome of service learning for participants. Service learning provided a foundation for pre-service teachers to transition from viewing themselves as college students to emerging professional educators, as this course is taken early in their major. Across their experiences, participants consistently described service learning as a way to better understand and apply professional expectations for their future careers, findings that align with previous studies on service learning (Kaye, 2004; Wiggins and McTighe, 2005; Wilson, 2011). Using course-based reflections and structured assignments within the *School as Community* course played an important role in helping participants view their field experience requirement as more than just volunteer hours. The structured reflection prompts within the course required participants to slow down and think intentionally about what they were learning within in their service-learning hours. During this process, they began making meaningful connections to their learning experiences and education. Rather than simply describing what happened in their placements, they were challenged to consider how their upbringing, prior school experiences, and personal perspectives could shape their view of education. The research supports that these relational and interpersonal skills are central to strong teaching practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Warren, 2012), but it was the reflective process provided in the *School as Community* course that helped the candidates grow in their professional skills.

Achieving Real-World Outcomes

The second theme, *Achieving Real-World Outcomes*, highlighted how service learning allowed participants to experience service learning beyond being just a mere requirement for their degree/major. Service learning also provided preservice teachers with firsthand exposure to some of the complex realities of working in schools and their communities, realities that are not always understood or experienced in coursework. As reflected in the literature, participants described gaining practical insight into the diverse needs of children and families and into how educators navigate real-world challenges with skills such as compassion, flexibility, and purpose (Anderson et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2017). These experiences brought some course concepts to life, enabling pre-service teachers to make real-life connections that strengthened their motivation and development as educators.

Greater Awareness of Diversity

Third, fostering a *Greater Awareness of Diversity* was achieved through various service-learning opportunities that provided participants with learning experiences that extended beyond their own childhood upbringings. Service-learning experiences embedded in the *School as Community* course deepened preservice teachers' awareness of and appreciation for diversity. For all the participants, the field placements represented their first substantial interactions with people whose backgrounds and lived experiences differed from their own. Engaging with diverse students, families, and community partners helped broaden their perspectives and build empathy, an outcome highlighted in previous service-learning research essential for preparing educators (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This expanded awareness played a significant role in shaping participants' early understandings of how to begin to meet the needs of all learners.

Taken together, this study showed that preservice teachers experience authentic learning in the *School as Community* course as a multidimensional learning process (Braithwaite & Porfilio, 2004). Learning occurred not only through course readings and assignments but also through real-life relational interactions, service-learning placements, and structured reflection that integrated theory and practice. This approach allowed participants to construct meaning through active engagement with community contexts, deepening both their pedagogy understanding and their professional identity

This intentional model for integrating a course aligned with field-experience expectations not only enriched their academic preparation but also supported their development as educators. (Dewey, 1938; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011). Rather than viewing service hours as merely a requirement for a grade, participants experienced them as an opportunity for professional growth. Structured reflection further strengthened this idea by encouraging examination of their service-learning experiences, assumptions, and teacher visioning. Through this process, participants began to see teaching as more than delivering instruction, but as community-centered, relational work, grounded in both care and responsibility.

As expected, this model also supported Kolb's experiential learning theory, which holds that authentic learning is achieved through doing, which in this case is the required service-learning hours (Kolb, 1984). Participants engaged in service and reflected on their experiences to connect with educational theory and how it will influence their future classrooms. Collectively, the findings suggest that integrating structured service-learning into coursework offers a model for teacher preparation programs to engage preservice teachers thoughtfully in their future school communities. In addition, the model of having students complete their service-learning hours

within the *School as Community* course, reflects transformative service learning, as preservice teachers engaged in authentic experiences and, through self-reflection, developed new perspectives about teaching, learning, and their roles within diverse communities.

Research Sub-question 2: What do preservice teachers describe as the value of engaging in service-learning experiences when becoming a teacher?

The findings indicated that preservice teachers valued the opportunity to build community and relationships as educators and to engage in real-world learning through service-learning. Throughout the various placements, preservice teachers experienced authentic encounters with students and community members that required them to apply educational skills and pedagogical practices beyond the traditional classroom setting. In response to the sub-question, this study's findings indicate that pre-service teachers perceive service learning as positive for both their professional growth and their developing sense of purpose as educators. Participants emphasized that service learning provided them with opportunities to build meaningful relationships, engage authentically within the community, and apply foundational pedagogical concepts in real-world contexts. Two themes emerged from the study that influence how preservice teachers communicate the significance of their experiences as they prepare for their future as teachers.

Building Community as a Teacher

The first theme that emerged was *Building Community as Teacher*, in which preservice teachers described the value of service learning primarily in terms of its relational impact. They recognized that teaching is inherently rooted in community, working with a variety of people, which requires trust, empathy, and a sustained partnership with students, families, and community members (Anderson et al., 2015). Service-learning placements allowed them to

experience these relational interactions firsthand, reinforcing that effective teaching extends beyond delivering instruction to cultivate a supportive and collaborative environment (Boyle-Baise & Eplers, 2020; Root et al., 2022). As revealed in the research, participants reported that these interactions helped them better understand the importance of being present, engaged, and responsive, qualities they identified as essential for building community as teachers, as they envisioned their future careers.

Achieving Real-World Outcomes

The second theme was *Achieving Real-World Outcomes*, in which preservice teachers valued the real-world outcomes that service learning afforded their education. Participants consistently stated that working in authentic settings exposed them to practical challenges and responsibilities they could not experience solely through coursework or textbook readings. These experiences required them to apply pedagogical knowledge to interact with diverse populations, collaborate professionally, and reflect critically on their emerging teaching identities (Anderson et al., 2015; Jacoby, 2014). The reflective components embedded in their coursework and their placements further strengthened their readiness for the classroom. As supported by Gay and Kirkland (2003), self-reflection is a pivotal component in teacher education programs, particularly for bridging the gap between pedagogical theory and instructional practice when preservice teachers are unable to see the practice in real life (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

Overall, the study demonstrated that preservice teachers value service-learning experiences because they offer relational, experiential, and reflective learning opportunities that deepen their understanding of teaching as a community-centered, purpose-driven profession when embedded within a course designed to lead the preservice teachers (Dewey, 1938; Eyler & Giles, 1999). By building community and achieving real-world outcomes, service learning was

perceived by preservice teachers as an important part of their development, helping them grow not only in skills but also in their personal commitment to their role as educators. In this way, service learning extended beyond experiential learning and aligned with transformative service learning, as participants described growth not only in what they could do, but in how they understood teaching as a relational and purpose-driven profession.

Research Sub-question 3: What are the affordances of service learning that preservice teachers describe as impacting their visions for teaching?

The study demonstrated that service learning shapes preservice teachers' vision of their future roles as educators. Participants described service learning as a motivation to strengthen their professional values, deepen their understanding of community-building within the classroom and beyond, and recognize the broader social and relational impact of education. Through their experiences, they began to see teaching not only as instructional delivery but as a commitment to serving, leading, and investing in the communities they will one day support.

Role Models in Practice

The first theme that emerged was *Role Models in Practice*, in which pre-service teachers noted that observing and working in their service-learning placements gave them opportunities to serve as role models. Their influence as role models extended beyond students to include the broader community and even to one another, modeling professionalism. They learned lessons in patience, flexibility, and generosity, all valuable qualities that preservice teachers began to incorporate into their developing research-informed visions of teaching (Anderson et al., 2014; Warren, 2012). Service learning allowed participants to model these behaviors in practice, helping them become the kind of teachers they aspired to be. In this way, service learning afforded pre-service teachers the opportunity to observe teaching in authentic contexts and to

begin internalizing those practices through meaningful reflection (Jacoby, 2014; Hammerness, 2001).

Building Community as a Teacher

Building Community as a Teacher was an essential and second theme that participants continually emphasized, as service learning helped them understand that building community in the classroom is essential to effective teaching. Through purposeful interactions with students, families, and community members, preservice teachers learned that teaching involves building trust, empathy, and shared responsibility among their students, parents, and colleagues (Root et al., 2022; Anderson et al., 2015). These experiences reshaped their visions of teaching to be more community-centered, aligning with research that highlights how service learning deepens educators' commitment to collaborative engagement and meaningful partnerships (Warren, 2012).

Through service-learning placements, preservice teachers encountered students and families in authentic community contexts, broadening their understanding of education beyond classroom walls. Rather than viewing teaching as just the delivery of content, participants began to conceptualize it as a collaborative and reciprocal process within community partnerships. This shift aligns with research indicating that service learning creates a deeper commitment to community engagement and shared responsibilities between schools and the communities they serve (Warren, 2012).

As participants reflected on their experiences, their vision of teaching was rooted in connection, presence, and partnership. They recognized that effective instruction includes building trusting relationships with students. This perspective aligns with previous findings suggesting that preservice teachers who engage in community-based experiences are more likely

to envision classrooms in which relationships form the foundation of learning and student success (Choquette et al., 2024).

Achieving Real-World Outcomes

A third affordance service learning provided is that it helped them envision instruction grounded in *achieving real-world outcomes*. Service-learning environments provided teachers with firsthand experiences that helped them connect educational theory to authentic practice, which aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. Participants described how engaging in real-world tasks in a classroom setting cannot always be learned in books and academically. These opportunities reinforced the realities of teaching and strengthened their confidence in their future role as professional educators (Anderson et al., 2015). These experiences shaped their visions of teaching by rooting their expectations in authentic, real-life encounters rather than solely in the classroom-based preparation courses (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Fostering a Greater Awareness of Diversity

The fourth theme, *Fostering a Greater Awareness of Diversity*, emerged as exposure to diverse students, families, and community contexts helped shape preservice teachers' visions for meeting the needs of all learners. All three participants entered the program with limited experience beyond their own cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds. Through service learning, participants developed greater awareness of student differences and community contexts, broadening their perspectives and enhancing their understanding of how to differentiate instruction and support diverse learners more effectively (Glover et al., 2021).

Service learning, intentionally embedded within the structure and objectives of a course, provided preservice teachers meaningful opportunities to develop empathy for students and

deepen their understanding of diverse learners (Mergler et al., 2017; Resch & Schrittmesser, 2010; Anderson et al., 2015; Root et al., 2022). Rather than viewing the hours as just a field experience requirement, the service-learning component was purposefully aligned with course readings, discussions, and structured reflection assignments within the *School as Community* course. This intentional design created the opportunity and time for participants to reflect on what they were learning and apply it to their vision of teaching.

Teaching as a Mission

Building upon this reflective growth, the final theme that emerged in response to this research sub-question was *Teaching as a Mission*. Service learning influenced how preservice teachers conceptualized the deeper purpose of teaching. Participants expressed that service-learning experiences reinforced the idea that teaching is not merely a job, but a mission rooted in service, compassion, and service to others, and grounded in their faith. Preservice teachers described how their faith in “serving as Christ” shaped their understanding of teaching, while research suggests that service-learning can deepen students’ sense of vocation and moral purpose (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Through their service-learning experiences throughout the semester, participants came to view education not merely as a professional career but as a personal vocation rooted in their faith and service to others. As a result, participants described their visions for teaching as imbued with meaning, purpose, and moral responsibility (Biesta, 2020). Their reflections revealed a greater transformative potential for service learning in shaping teachers who view their work as mission driven.

Taken together, these findings show that service learning offers preservice teachers multiple affordances that shape and strengthen their visions of teaching. Through role modeling, community engagement, real-world practice, exposure to diversity, and mission-oriented

reflection, service learning enables preservice teachers to form a more grounded, relational, and purposeful understanding of what it means to become an educator (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Jacoby, 2014; Warren, 2012).

At the same time, these experiences were not without challenges. Preservice teachers mainly encountered discomfort as they navigated unfamiliar community contexts, worked with students who had different home lives than their own, and built their confidence. Some of them were uncertain about their role, questioning whether they were adequately prepared to serve as educators in their service-learning hours. Time constraints, transportation, and balancing college life were also sources of tension for participants.

It was within these struggles that the deepest learning occurred. The experience of discomfort followed by self-reflection is a key component of transformative service learning, as it is through these moments that preservice teachers begin to question assumptions, expand perspectives, and develop a more ground understanding of their future roles in education. Discomfort prompted more critical reflection, and uncertainty required courage and adaptability. Exposure to inequity fostered empathy and a more open-minded approach toward the students they will encounter in their future classrooms. These challenges provided preservice teachers with the opportunity to become more resilient and reflective, envisioning themselves as educators.

Overall Research Question: How does the service-learning experience influence a preservice teacher's vision of teaching after a *School as Community* Course?

The case study provided strong evidence that the service-learning experience, when integrated with a *School as Community* course, reshaped and deepened preservice teachers'

visions of teaching in positive ways, as revealed in the findings and identified across the six themes. Participants consistently described service learning as a valuable and transformative component of their preparation, as discussed in the sections above and in response to the sub-questions.

Strengthening Professional Skills

The first theme, *Strengthening Professional Skills*, emerged from participants' responses to the research question. The service-learning experience extended beyond the traditional classroom, providing authentic, community-based engagement with students, families, and local organizations within the school, giving students the opportunity to engage in such experiences (Brail, 2016; Kolbe, 1984). Within the integrated structure, preservice teachers began to see the connection between theory and practice, giving them opportunities to connect course concepts with meaningful application, as research by Gyler and Eilers (1994), drawing on Deweyan influences, confirmed. “At the heart of service learning is learning itself” (Gyler & Eilers, 1994).

Role Models in Action

As described above, the theme *Role Models in Action* was evident through hands-on involvement in community settings in *Emerald City*, which afforded preservice teachers' early opportunities to serve as mentors and role models. These experiences allowed participants to recognize the influence they could have on their students' lives, thereby enhancing their awareness of their future impact as educators. All participants described a shift in their initial understanding of teaching from the basics and theory to one grounded in mentorship, relationships, and responsibility for others (Choquette et al., 2024).

Building Community as a Teacher

One of the central themes, *Building Community as a Teacher*, served as a building block for the service-learning experiences, which had an impact on preservice teachers' developing understanding of building relationships within the community of teaching (Morton, 1995). Participants noted they knew the importance of building relationships and fostering a sense of community, but this concept was further developed during the *School as Community* course. They realized that real-world experiences, such as the variety of their service-learning hours, help build their understanding of how relationships are essential to effective teaching (Bringle et al., 2006). This gave the participants a broader view of the profession and applied academic content.

Achieving Real-World Outcomes

Service learning also prompted preservice teachers to examine and expand their initial vision of the teaching profession, as described in the study's framework. Through teacher visioning, the theme of *Achieving Real-World Outcomes* emerged as another benefit of service-learning opportunities when guided in a course. The authenticity of the service-learning hours required them to draw upon and further develop their own personal qualities, such as empathy, patience, adaptability, and cultural awareness (Brail, 2016; Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Participants described these experiences as “eye-opening,” noting that the encounters helped them change early assumptions about education and teaching, as defined by Duffy (2002) as “a sense of becoming” their identities as beginning educators. The reflection built into the *School as Community* course gave them the opportunity to change their beliefs and expectations, enabling them to grow dispositionally as future educators.

Fostering a Greater Awareness of Diversity

Additionally, service-learning participation focused on *fostering greater awareness of Diversity*. Working with students from diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and learning backgrounds beyond their own provided participants with a better understanding of how these experiences would shape their future instructional practices (Donninson & Itter, 2010). These opportunities supported the research by strengthening participants' commitment and understanding of classroom diversity and of how to embrace it as an enriching dimension of teaching rather than a challenge (Felten & Clayton, 2011).

Teaching as a Mission

A final theme that emerged within the study was *Teaching as a Mission*. With participants enrolled in a faith-based college, whose mission is to “serve as Christ,” the preservice teachers also saw how this develops their vision of teaching. Service-learning contexts provided avenues for these preservice teachers to connect the college's mission with their personal mission to serve like Christ in their teaching profession. Participants described teaching as both a career and personal calling in their faith life, characterized by compassion, humility, and commitment to serving the whole child (Kuh & Gonyea, 2006). Through this alignment between their religious beliefs and their lived experiences, participants viewed their teaching as a vocation grounded in purpose and service to others.

Based on the themes identified in the data, service learning was most impactful when integrated into the *School as Community* course. The alignment of the course with the hours created a structured, reflective environment that gave participants the opportunity to make deeper connections between their community engagement and their professional teaching development. For preservice teacher participants, service learning was more than an additional requirement for

completing their degree. Participants perceived it as a powerful learning experience that helped them develop their personal and professional lives. Through the integrated approach, participants demonstrated that service learning, when intentionally structured and supported through self-reflection, operates as a transformative experience that shapes preservice teachers' visions of teaching in meaningful ways.

Implications

Previous research focused on the development and implementation of service-learning programs and their impact on learning outcomes for preservice teachers (Atkins & Sax, 1998; Furco, 1996). Findings from this study reveal that it also has a positive effect on each student, providing them with the skills needed to be an effective teacher. This is particularly true when service-learning hours are aligned with purposeful reflective practices, such as a guided course (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Bringle et al., 2006).

Implications for Pre-service Teachers

Findings from this study suggest that structured service-learning experiences play an important role in shaping preservice teachers' emerging professional identities as they progress through their teacher education programs (Choquette et al., 2024). Participants moved beyond viewing teaching as the delivery of content to understanding teaching as a more relational, reflective, and service-oriented career. Through authentic engagement in community-based learning, preservice teachers developed a broader understanding of teaching, enhancing their classroom success.

As a result, preservice teachers began to see themselves as mentors, advocates, and engaged community members rather than solely as classroom teachers (Lake et al., 2015). These experiences supported the development of their professional dispositions. Participants

demonstrated a growing awareness of the impact educators have beyond the classroom, particularly when working with students and families from varied backgrounds.

These findings highlight the importance of early, intentional exposure to authentic teaching and service-learning experiences within teacher education programs, particularly when paired with guided, structured reflection (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Eyler & Giles, 1999). When preservice teachers are presented with opportunities to be in real classrooms and community contexts at the beginning of their preparation, they begin to form professional identities grounded in real-world experiences rather than abstract scenarios. Such an intentional design signals that teaching is not a technical skill set to be mastered, but a relational and community-embedded practice.

Purposeful reflection enabled preservice teachers to connect theory to practice while they examined their beliefs about teaching and their motivations for entering the profession. Through structured prompts, written reflections, and dialogue within the *School as Community* course, preservice teachers connected educational theory to practice and developed their beliefs about teaching and motivations for entering the profession. Structured reflection embedded in a course created space for preservice teachers to wrestle with tensions, uncertainties, and fears, and to articulate growth in both confidence and a clear purpose. Collectively, service-learning experiences supported preservice teachers' personal and professional growth and fostered a deeper commitment to teaching as a career rooted in service and community engagement (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Honig et al., 2001). These findings further support the role of transformative service learning in teacher education programs, as preservice teachers not only gained experience but also developed a deeper awareness of their beliefs, values, and responsibilities as future educators.

Implications for Practice in Education Programs

From a practical standpoint, the study's findings suggest that teacher preparation programs should move beyond simply requiring preservice teachers to complete a set number of service-learning hours. Instead, programs should be intentional in designing service-learning experiences embedded within coursework and guided by a professor who assigns reflection opportunities. Providing preservice teachers with a variety of reflective assignments throughout the course encourages them to connect theory and practice and to begin developing their own personal and professional practices for future classroom application (Wilson, 2011). These assignments are truly reflective because they intentionally move candidates beyond surface-level and guide them toward deeper analysis and meaning making lived experiences. Reflective assignments prompt preservice teachers to examine their assumptions and evaluate the impact of their actions on learners and the broader classroom community.

An intentionally designed integration of reflective assignments within a course can help preservice teachers connect their learning to service-learning opportunities during student teaching and in the classroom. When service-learning is intentionally integrated across a teacher preparation program, preservice teachers are more likely to apply insights from community-based experiences to instructional decision-making and to relationship-building with students and families (Bringle et al., 2006; Lake et al., 2015). This continuity reinforces the relevance of service-learning beyond individual courses and promotes sustained professional growth throughout their teacher preparation program.

In addition to providing practical value, the findings highlight the importance of teacher education programs establishing and maintaining reciprocal partnerships with community organizations and local schools. Program-level collaboration with community partners ensures

that service-learning experiences are meaningful, culturally responsive, and mutually beneficial for both parties (Bringle et al., 2006). These partnerships provide preservice teachers with opportunities to engage in the community while allowing teacher preparation programs to respond to real community needs (Bringle et al., 2006; Butin, 2010). By investing in long-term partnerships, teacher education programs can enhance the quality and relevance of service-learning as a core component of teacher preparation (Bringle et al., 2006).

Implications for Theory

This study contributes to the existing literature supporting experiential learning and teacher visioning frameworks grounded in reflective practice within teacher education. The findings reinforced that learning is most impactful when authentic experiences are paired with structured reflection, aligning with Dewey's (1938) philosophy of education, Dale's (1969) *Cone of Experience*, and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. Participants' reflections illustrate how service-learning, when integrated with intentional reflection, provides authentic experiences that deepen professional understanding and extend beyond the traditional classroom.

More importantly, this study extends these frameworks by demonstrating how service learning can function as a transformative learning process within preservice teacher education. When experiences are paired with intentional, guided self-reflection, preservice teachers move beyond skill development to engage in meaning-making that reshapes their perspectives, beliefs, and developing professional identities (Mezirow, 1991; Kiely, 2005). Participants in this study not only described what they learned, but also how their understanding of teaching evolved through self-reflection, community engagement, and real-world application.

Additionally, this study demonstrates that self-reflection enhances the meaningfulness of service beyond mere fulfillment of program requirements. Rather than viewing service as a

checklist of hours, preservice teachers engaged in reflective practices that helped them critically connect their experiences to educational theory and practice (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Bringle et al., 2020). These findings support the design of teacher education programs that intentionally emphasize reflective experiential learning, highlighting its essential role in fostering the professional growth and effectiveness of preservice teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Service-learning, when completed within a course, aligns with transformative service learning theory, which emphasizes shifts in perspective and identity as central outcomes of learning (Kiely, 2005).

In doing so, this study demonstrates that experiential learning and teacher visioning when intentionally integrated through service-learning contexts, contribute to a transformative service-learning framework that supports pre-service teacher development. This type of approach not only increases professional skill development, but also provides deeper self-reflection, identity formation, and a more purpose-driven understanding of teaching. As a result, this study supports the continued development of teacher education programs that position service learning as a transformative pedagogical approach rather than solely a practice-based requirement.

Recommendations for Future Research

Types and Structures of Service Learning

While this study contributes to research on service-learning opportunities in preservice teacher education programs, several other areas warrant further exploration. First, additional research is needed to examine the different types (e.g., direct, indirect, advocacy) and structures (e.g., course-embedded, add-on, immersion, placement-based, project-based) of service-learning experiences and models implemented across a variety of teacher education programs. Prior research has shown that service-learning experiences vary widely in design, duration, and level

of integration with coursework, which may influence preservice teachers' learning outcomes and professional development (Furco, 1996). Future studies might explore questions such as: How do different service-learning structures shape preservice teachers' professional identity? Which model most effectively supports the development of effective teaching practices? How do the different types of service-learning experiences influence a preservice teacher's knowledge and understanding of the education career?

The field would benefit from diverse methodological approaches to expand this research. Comparative case studies across institutions could show how contextual factors influence the implementation and impact of service-learning experiences. Longitudinal studies following preservice teachers into their first year of teaching to examine whether and how service-learning experiences truly shape their instructional practices, community engagement, and teaching effectiveness over time. Mixed-methods research combining quantitative measures (e.g., validated surveys on teacher dispositions, cultural competency, or civic engagement) with qualitative data (e.g., focus groups, artifact analysis, and narrative inquiry) would provide a more comprehensive understanding of growth and development. Similar studies across programs may reveal meaningful differences in how various service-learning programs support preservice teachers' learning and professional growth (Billig, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Further research should also examine the roles of reflection, intentional design, and faculty guidance across differing service-learning frameworks. Reflection has been identified as an important component of education and service-learning contexts, serving as a bridge between experience and learning (Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984). Examining how reflection and faculty guidance embedded in service-learning models may provide deeper insights into which program

structures most effectively support preservice teacher development (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Eyler, 2002).

Service learning in non-faith-based teacher education programs and institutions

Further research on service-learning experiences should be conducted within nonfaith-based institutions to determine whether similar outcomes related to purpose, mission, and commitment to service emerge in a secular context. Prior research suggests that institutional mission and culture play a meaningful role in shaping students' educational experiences and personal and professional development (Aston & Sax, 1998; Furco, 1999). Because this study was situated within a faith-based institution, additional research is needed to explore how differing institutional missions influence preservice teachers' understandings of service learning and its role in their professional development.

Comparative studies across faith-based and nonfaith-based institutions may provide insight into how contextual factors influence and shape the design and impact of service-learning experiences (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Such research could explore questions including: Do preservice teachers at faith-based institutions voice purpose, calling, or vocation differently than those in secular settings? How does the language used to describe service (e.g., social justice, ministry, civic responsibility, community partnership) influence a candidate's professional identity? Examining service-learning within secular teacher education programs would contribute to a broader understanding of how purpose, reflection, and commitment to service provide to the broader education preparation settings.

Additionally, future research should offer recommendations on the types and structures of reflections that can be embedded in service-learning courses. Comparative studies could examine the impact of written reflections, classroom reflections, and post-reflections on preservice

teacher growth. Researchers might investigate which forms of reflection are most effective in promoting professional identity for effective teachers. By identifying which reflective structures provide the deepest levels of analysis and professional transformation, the field can provide more evidence-informed reflective practices that meaningfully shape preservice teachers' development.

Limitations

Participant Positionality

The participants in this case study shared a relatively homogeneous background, as all three were female elementary education majors and largely came from affluent, similar educational environments, including homeschooling, private, and Catholic school settings. This positionality shaped how they engaged with and made meaning of their experiences, as participants often described initial exposure to diverse communities as impactful and, at times, transformative. Understanding this shared background is essential for interpreting the findings and recognizing how prior experiences shaped participants' engagements and reflections when connecting their learning to their service-learning experiences.

Institutional Context

This study was conducted at a single religiously affiliated college, whose mission emphasizes service, vocation, and community engagement. The institution's faith-based identity may have shaped both the design of the *School as Community* course and participants' interpretations of their service-learning experiences. Concepts such as vocation, compassion, and service to others may have been reinforced through the broader institutional culture and participants' religious backgrounds. Given this distinct context, the findings may not be transferable to secular institutions or teacher education programs with a similar mission. The

environment could have influenced the participants' reflections and the development of teachers' visions, thereby limiting the generalizability of the results to other higher education institutions.

Researcher Positionality

This case study was intentionally designed and conducted within the researchers' instructional setting. As the course instructor, I, the researcher, brought prior knowledge of the course structure, objectives, assignments, and institutional mission to the study. Because the study focused specifically on participants enrolled in my own course, the findings are situated in that relational and instructional context. The dual role of instructor and researcher may have influenced the types of questions asked, the interpretation of the data, and the emphasis on the themes.

However, I intentionally engaged in reflexive memoing throughout the research process to promote trustworthiness and increase transparency in the formation of interpretations. By engaging in ongoing written reflections during data collection and analysis, I examined how my own experiences, beliefs, and commitments to service learning may have shaped the framing of questions, interactions with participants, and interpretations of findings. Reflexive memoing created space to acknowledge potential biases and strengthen the credibility of the case study. This approach aligns with the qualitative research practices outlined by Paulus et al. (2014), who emphasize reflexivity as a strategy for increasing rigor and trustworthiness.

Transferability

As a qualitative case study, the purpose of this research is not to generalize findings, but to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of preservice teachers' experiences with service learning. The findings are intended to support transferability, allowing readers to determine how

the context, participants' characteristics, and course design may apply to similar institutional settings.

Conclusion

This case study explored preservice teachers' experiences with service learning in a structured course designed to intentionally integrated self-reflection with community engagement. The findings demonstrate that service learning, when paired with purposeful and guided reflection, supports preservice teachers' professional growth by helping them connect theory to practice, develop essential skills for their future career, deepen their understanding of diverse learners, build community within their own classrooms and their surrounding communities, and develop their mission for their job. Participants not only applied course concepts in authentic settings but also engaged in reflective practices that allowed them to make meaning of those experiences and connect them to their growing beliefs about teaching.

Grounded in experiential learning and teacher visioning, this study highlights the important role of self-reflection in bridging theory to practice. Through service-learning experiences, preservice teachers began to envision themselves as educators, developing greater confidence and awareness of diverse learners and communities. These findings suggest that learning is most impactful when preservice teachers are provided with opportunities to actively engage in real-world contexts while being supported in making sense of those experiences.

Most importantly, this study demonstrates that service learning can function as a transformative learning experience within teacher education programs. When intentionally designed, these experiences prompt preservice teachers to examine their assumptions, reflect on their values, and develop a sense of purpose as future educators. In this way, service learning becomes more than a pedagogical strategy; it serves as a foundation for shaping reflective,

responsive, and purpose-driven teachers. Such experiences contribute to the preparation of educators who are not only equipped with practical skills, but who are also committed to meeting the needs of their students and the communities they serve.

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Appendix A- Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: Service-Learning Opportunities in Preservice Teacher Programs

Introduction:

The Department of Education at Kansas State University values the ethical protection of all human subjects participating in research. This document provides essential information to help you make an informed decision about participating in this study. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to decline or withdraw your consent at any time without consequences to your grade or academic standing. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your decision will be respected without penalty.

Purpose of the Study:

This study explores how service-learning experiences during a *School as Community* course influence a preservice teacher's vision for teaching. By analyzing participants' experiences in their service learning opportunities, this research aims to provide insights into how these experiences develop preservice teachers' vision and understanding of effective teaching.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be involved in the following activities:

- Teacher Visioning Assignment (posted on Canvas)
- Three Self-Reflection Journal Assignments, one at each service-learning checkpoint throughout the semester (posted on Canvas)
- Create a web portfolio for the field experience course EDUC 3313 (final assessment)
- One Semi-structured interview at the end of the semester (approximately 30-40 minutes). All data is intended to be collected during the academic semester, and your participation will take place during the spring semester of 2025.

The in-class assignments are not optional but sharing them to be included in the research is optional.

Risks:

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. Some prompts or discussions may lead to emotional reflection on your personal experiences serving within the community at the various locations throughout the semester. You may choose to pause or withdraw from participation at any time if you feel discomfort. Support resources will be available to you if needed. A participant's grade in the course is not affected positively or negatively if they choose or choose not to participate in the case study.

Benefits:

Additionally, your participation may:

- Enhance your understanding of why service learning hours are essential for teacher education programs.
- Contribute to the development of more effective teacher education programs.
- Advance research on effective implementation of service learning in teacher education programs.

Participant Confidentiality:

- Your privacy will be respected throughout this study.
- All data, including survey data and interview transcripts, will be anonymized by assigning each participant a unique code.
- Your personal information will not be shared with anyone outside the dissertation committee.
- Data will be securely stored on password-protected devices and deleted after one year.
- The study's final report or publication will not include your name or identifying information.

Identifiers might be removed from the identifiable private information, and after such removal, the data could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator without additional informed consent.

Refusal to Sign Consent:

You have the right to decline to participate in this study. Not participating will not affect your grade, academic standing, or relationship with the instructor or institution.

Canceling this Consent:

You may withdraw from this study at any time during the semester without penalty. To do so, contact the researcher, Sarah Ellen Wise, using the information provided below.

Questions About Participation:

If you have any questions about this study, you are encouraged to contact the researcher, Sarah Ellen Wise.

Consent Statement:

I understand that this project is research and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understood this consent form and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described. My signature also acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

Participant Agreement:

Print Participant's Name _____

Participant's Signature: _____

- Date: _____

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Appendix A - Teacher Visioning Assignment

Posted as an assignment on Canvas: Given February 8, 2025

Students are given the choice to use the form via a document typed or a video response/recording to submit on Canvas as an assignment for EDUC 3312/13.

School as Community (EDUC 3312/13)

Teacher Visioning Activity/Assignment (within the first month of the course - beginning Feb)

To start, draw, doodle, write, list, or use a variety of methods to show how you perceive yourself as a future teacher. In 3-4 years, you will have your own classroom; What kind of teacher do you see yourself being?

Course Goal: The first goal is to expose students to and engage them in a multicultural, diverse experience. Students work with children/ adolescents from different racial, ethnic, low SES, and religious backgrounds and adults with disabilities in the community.

As a reminder, we described service learning as combining community service opportunities with classroom instruction, specifically through the lens of education, while actively engaging in reflection to make connections.

Questions:

1. In what ways have you engaged with students from diverse backgrounds or diverse educational and/or community settings? Can you describe 2-3 specific experiences that shaped your understanding of diversity in education?
2. What are the key aspects of service learning, and what elements do you feel contribute to its impact on individuals engaging in the service and the community receiving the service?
3. If any, describe your past experiences with service learning and/or community service. What types of service have you participated in, and what roles did you take on?
4. In what ways, if any, have service-learning experiences influenced your vision for yourself as a teacher?
5. What challenges, if any, have you encountered in your service learning/community service? Can you identify any challenges you've encountered in service learning? What are they and how did you address those challenges?

6. How do you perceive the impact of your service work on the individuals engaging in the service and the community receiving the service?
7. What outcomes and learnings are you hoping to gain from your upcoming service-learning experience?
8. What impact are you hoping to have during your upcoming service-learning experience?

Appendix B - Course Goals Assignment

Posted on Canvas: Due at the end of January (first month of course)

Goal Statement – Due at the end of January (Canvas)

Goal Statement (no less than 1 page - Word/Doc – APA format)

A significant requirement of this course is to begin/continue developing the skills and competencies of professional educators. Teachers are perpetual learners. The growth process in our profession is never complete, and each new year and a new set of students will teach us diverse lessons. Professional educators must be committed to engaging in professional growth. This is more than just showing up to staff meetings. Professionals seek opportunities to improve on their own initiative, so they can continually grow and improve for the sake of their students. Allow this class and the diverse experiences you will engage in to change you over the semester. You should not end this class as the same person who sat here on Day 1 listening to this charge. You will truly get out of this course and experience the level of thought, reflection, effort, and diligence you put into it.

You will reflect on and select three (3) goals that will be the focus of your work this semester toward becoming a better builder of the community.

- Ask yourself, *how can I become a better Builder of Community?*
- *Why is it important for me to serve my community as an educator?*
- *What knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to learners and their diverse needs must I address before I am ready to be a first-year teacher?*

Remember that community is built at the classroom, school, and community levels. Your goals should focus on our classroom, college, and the community.

Appendix C - Field Experience Final Reflection Assignment

In addition to journals throughout the semester, students complete a website portfolio at the end of the semester that includes a variety of reflections and papers highlighting their service-learning experiences. This portfolio is provided to students at the beginning of the year in their Field Experience Handbook and remains available to them throughout the semester. The portfolio is divided into three sections. The end of the year final reflection is found in Section #3.

Section #3 – Dispositions (minimum two pages and three pages max)

***** This section connects the course, readings, and field experience- *different from the video***

- 1. Written Reflection on course themes related to service, compassion, and your future role as a teacher. - due on Study Day on the website**
 - a. Final Reflection Paper on course themes and field experience related to service, compassion, and your future role as a teacher. (no less than two pages) APA format
 - b. Write at least a two-page reflection paper (no more than four pages) about the class & your field experience and how what you learned this semester caters to your desired future job (grade level/content area).
 - c. How did service learning provide you with the opportunity to become an effective teacher? Why?
 - d. Articulates how you will apply the conceptual framework, “Educators as Builders of Community,” to your classroom beginning on day 1.
 - e. *How will you build community when it’s not for a grade but rather for the betterment of your students, school, and community?*
 - f. **This reflection summarizes this course's pieces: class discussions, course topics, book club, readings, presentations, field experience hours, community service projects, and being a “builders of the community!” It ties the entire semester together in one reflection!**

Appendix D - Post Interview Questions

Post Interview Questions:

Students were interviewed using the following questions at the end of the semester after completing service-learning hours and courses. These interviews will take place during finals week. To protect the preservice teachers' time, each interview will take approximately 40 minutes. Each interview will be recorded and later transcribed for efficiency.

Post Interview Questions:

Teacher Vision:

To start, show or view their answers to this question in the Teacher Vision Assignment completed in February.

Draw, doodle, write, list, or use a variety of methods to show how you perceive yourself as a future teacher. In 3-4 years, you will have your classroom; how are you as a teacher?

After reviewing your answer from February...

1. Has your vision of yourself as an educator changed over the past three months? If so, what influenced this shift? If not, what experiences have reinforced your original vision?

Service-Learning Experience:

As a reminder, we described service learning as **(define)**.

1. What did you hope to take away from the service-learning experience you engage in this semester? Did you achieve this hope/takeaway? Did it change?
2. What challenges, if any, have you encountered in your service learning/community service? Additionally, how did you address those challenges?
3. In what ways have you engaged with students from diverse backgrounds or diverse educational and/or community settings this semester? Can you describe 2-3 specific experiences that shaped your understanding of diversity in education?
4. How do you perceive the impact of your service work on the individuals engaging in the service and the community receiving the service? On the community?

Effective teaching:

1. How might what you take away from your service learning influenced your thinking about teaching?

2. In what ways, if any, have service-learning experiences influenced your development as an educator?
 - a. What outcomes and learnings are you hoping to gain from your upcoming service-learning experience?
3. What impact, if any, did you see on your service-learning experience as a future educator?