

# Exploring Student Perceptions of Community-Based Critical Service-Learning

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## Problem Under Investigation

While working as part of a research team following a group of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers' implementation of a yearlong, community-based, critical service-learning framework that centered student voice (Soslau & Gartland, *in press*), I noticed that our research questions did not explicitly include student voice.

Billig (2017) considers youth voice to be a key component of successful and meaningful service-learning, but notes **“youth voice is not well understood”** (p. 87). So... why not seek to understand it better?

Critical service-learning empowers students to see themselves as agents of social change (Mitchell, 2007), and the students conducting service projects as part of the larger study could be considered both the *doers* of the service and the *beneficiaries*. So... why not include the student perspective?

## Research Questions

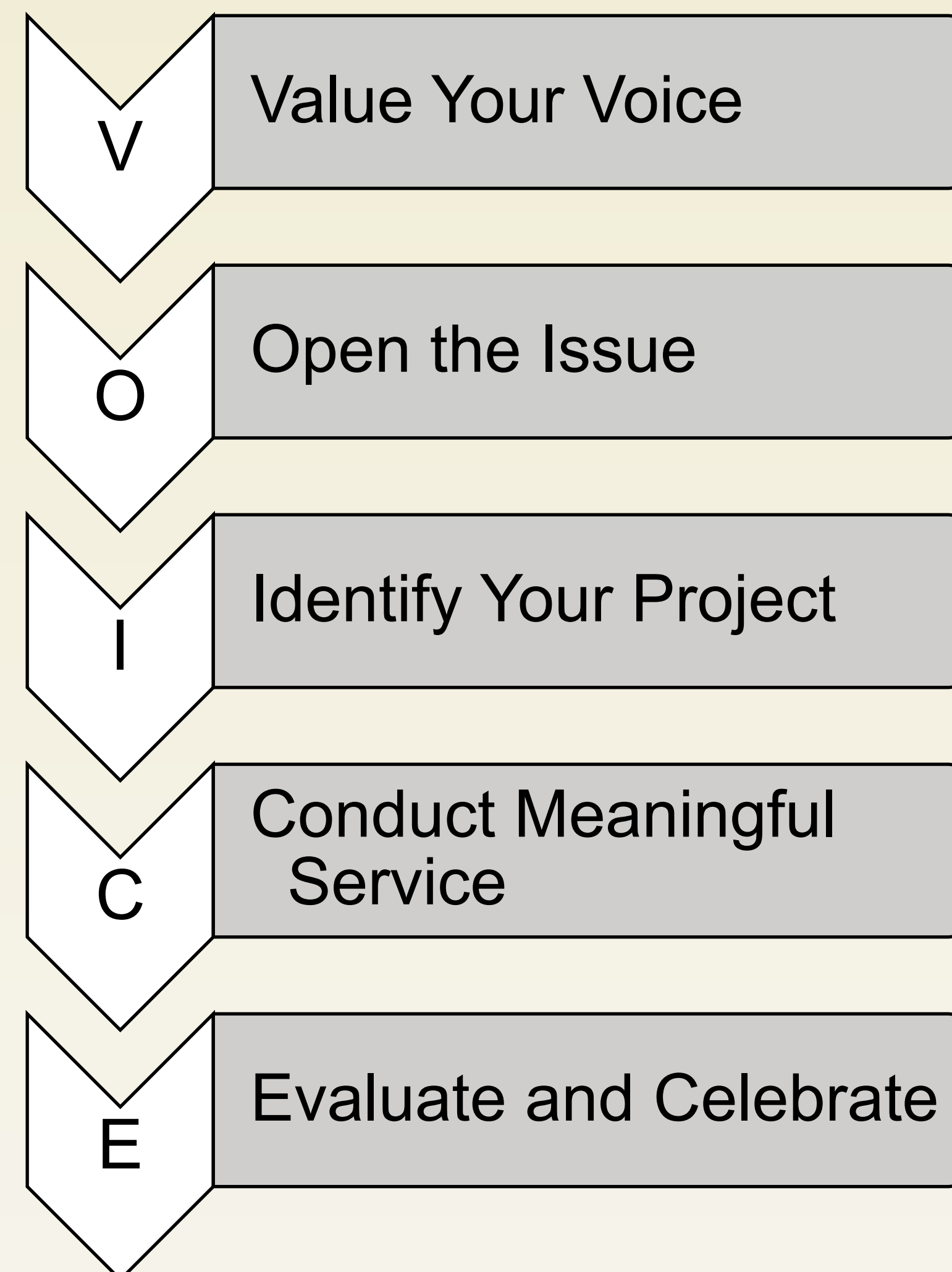
1. **What are students' perceptions of their active participation in community-based service-learning?**
2. **In what ways, if at all, do student perceptions align with researcher and teacher perceptions?**

## My Role as a Researcher

I took on the role of participant-researcher from the start of the larger research project. Teachers and students interacted with me as a researcher, but also as an equal participant working to accomplish the goal of implementing successful service-learning projects. I regularly engaged with the classrooms as a student and as a teacher.

## The Framework, The Participants, and a Focal Lesson

Need in Deed's **My VOICE** Framework



Ms. Harris:

- 3<sup>rd</sup> grade mathematics teacher
- Identifies as Black female
- 8 years of experience
- 1<sup>st</sup> year implementing **My VOICE**

Ms. Harris' 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Class:

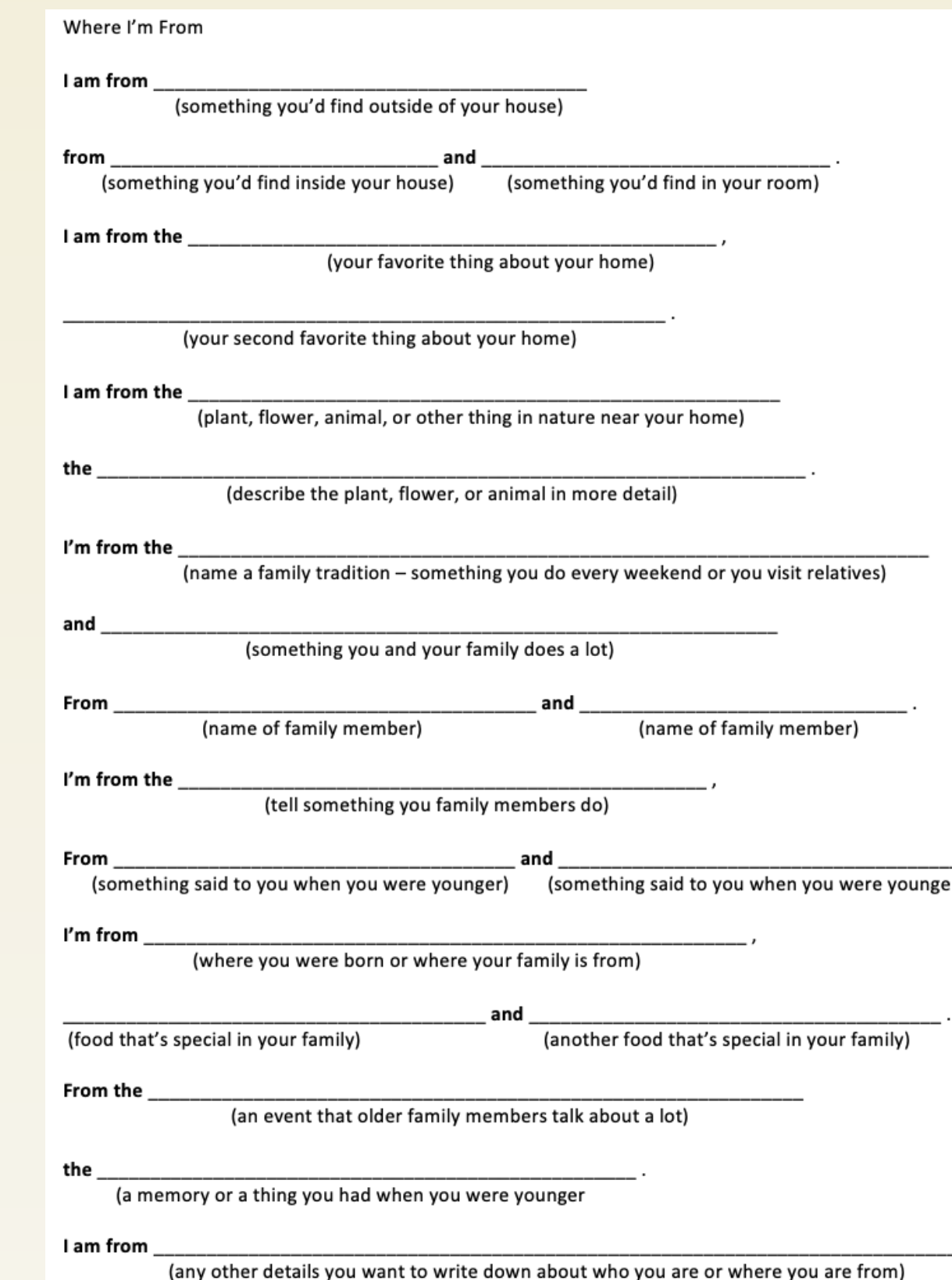
- ~ 20 students (flexible schedules)
- 98% identify as Black or Latinx
- Participated in service-learning

Daysha and Somah:

- Participated in 3 focus groups
- Both identified as Black females
- Engaged with all **My VOICE** lessons and activities

Where I Am From Poem Activity

- V-stage (Early October)
- Referenced by Ms. Harris and students throughout the year

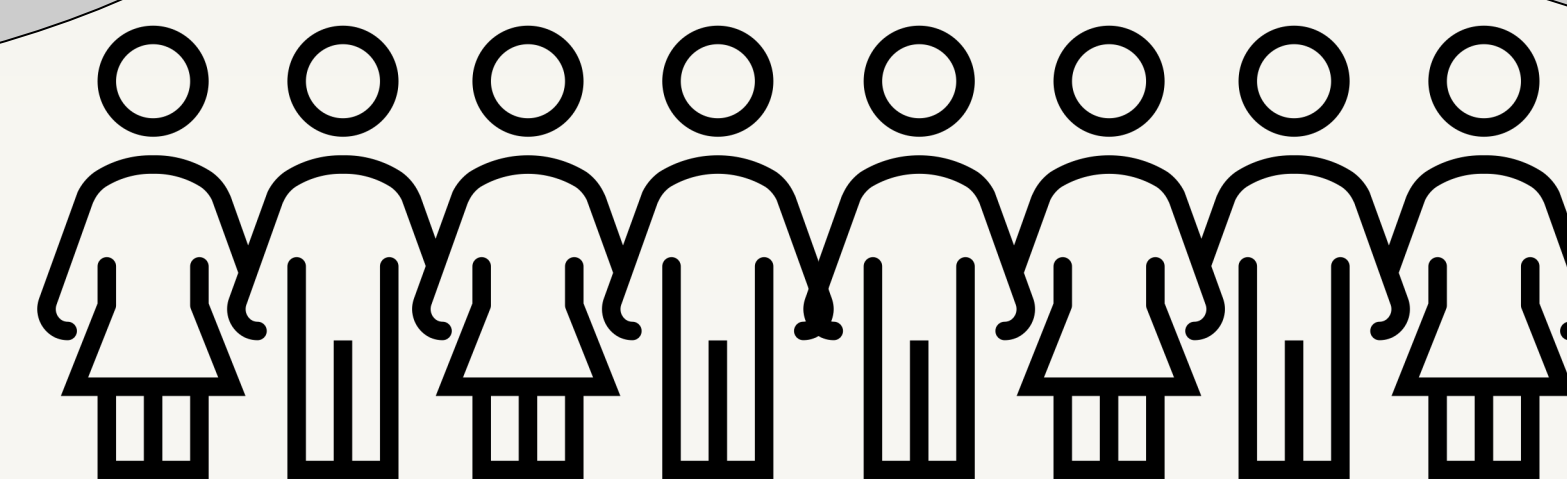


Where I Am From  
I am from \_\_\_\_\_  
(something you'd find outside of your house)  
from \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
(something you'd find inside your house) (something you'd find in your room)  
I am from the \_\_\_\_\_  
(your favorite thing about your home)  
(your second favorite thing about your home)  
I am from the \_\_\_\_\_  
(plant, flower, animal, or other thing in nature near your home)  
the \_\_\_\_\_  
(describe the plant, flower, or animal in more detail)  
I'm from the \_\_\_\_\_  
(name a family tradition – something you do every weekend or you visit relatives)  
and \_\_\_\_\_  
(something you and your family does a lot)  
From \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
(name of family member) (name of family member)  
I'm from the \_\_\_\_\_  
(tell something you family members do)  
From \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
(something said to you when you were younger) (something said to you when you were younger)  
I'm from \_\_\_\_\_  
(where you were born or where your family is from)  
\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
(food that's special in your family) (another food that's special in your family)  
From the \_\_\_\_\_  
(an event that older family members talk about a lot)  
the \_\_\_\_\_  
(a memory or a thing you had when you were younger)  
I am from \_\_\_\_\_  
(any other details you want to write down about who you are or where you are from)

## Community – From the Focal Lesson, to Service, and Beyond

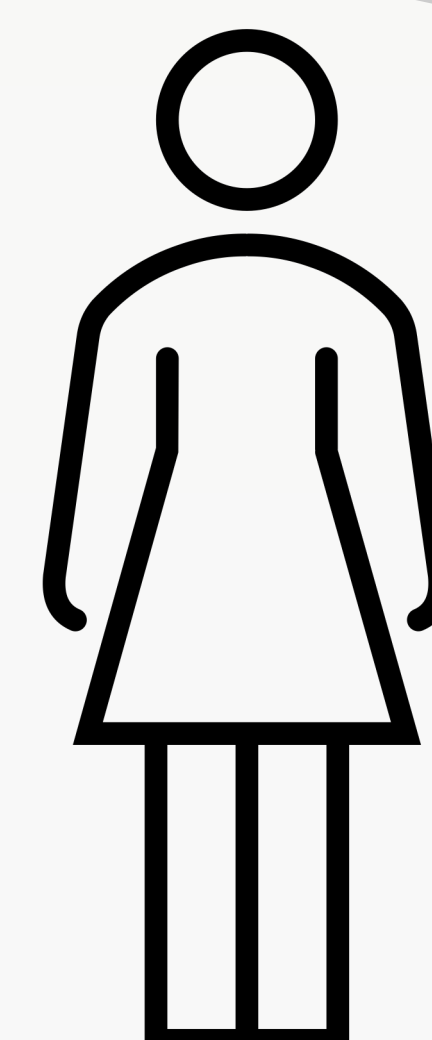
“Like Deanna, She got in a better at...like listening to the teacher, and like paying attention. So, it has helped a lot of people.” (Daysha – April Focus Group)

“I don't really talk about those things with other people, so I just put it down but it...it open...I opened myself, because of the poem” Somah – April Focus Group



Over the course of the year, Ms. Harris and her students consistently referenced the *Where I Am From* Poem Activity as a pivotal moment for the sense of community within the classroom.

“I found out a lot about my kids, and they learned a lot more about me, in a very natural kind of way. Like how they saw their neighborhood. They saw it differently than how I would imagine that they see it.” (Ms. Harris – October Peer Sharing)



“Giving them the space for a voice. It was even the small things they did. When they described their community. When they did the poems. It was beautiful. Daysha, hers, “I see sunflowers.” Giving them voice to describe the community unlike how anyone else would. I would never describe where she lives with a sunflower. But she sees her community through her lens, and that's her voice.” (Ms. Harris – May Interview)

Parts of the Need in Deed framework dedicated to community-building, such as the *Where I Am From* Poem Activity, positively influenced the success of subsequent activities focused on planning and implementing service.

## Conclusions & Significance

### Conclusions:

Fostering community within the class helped students feel comfortable sharing thoughts about issues and actionable steps for service related to those issues.

Connecting – meaningfully – with students' communities continued to strengthen bonds within the class.

### Significance:

Self-reported and observed positive influences of the sense of community on content area classes suggests a far-reaching impact.

### But, There Were Limitations...

This is a specific context with a small number of participants, so the findings are not generalizable.

## References

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- Need in Deed (2017). *My voice: A service-learning framework for teachers*. Philadelphia, PA: Need in Deed (<https://www.needindeed.org/>).
- Soslau, E. & Gartland, S. (in press). “I want them to feel heard. I want their voices to be agents of change”: Exploring a community-engaged partnership focused on critical service-learning. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Elizabeth Soslau, the PI on the larger project, without whom my project would not have been able to take shape.

Also, thank you to the teachers and students who welcomed me into their classroom communities.