Education-Community Initiative: Motivations for Implementing a Civil Leadership Program at an Elementary School

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Abstract

The National Institute of Civil Discourse and the Prison Policy Initiative have reported a number of uncivil interactions in the United States, some resulting in over 36,000 youth detained in the juvenile justice system as of 2022, with 15,800 offenses stemming from person-to-person interactions (Boatright, 2022; Prison Policy Initiative, 2022). Lack of civility, especially among children without skills to resolve conflict in socially appropriate ways, presents serious challenges in communities and to K–12 educators who are responsible for addressing issues that arise in schools. The current study examines through a cultural lens community and school leaders' motivations in implementing a civil leadership program at the elementary school level and the effect of the intervention in ameliorating uncivil student interactions.

The state of educational systems in the United States necessitates a rising responsibility for positive learning environments that is too expansive to be addressed by school leadership alone. U.S. Census Bureau data confirms rapid shifts in the country's demographic makeup (Vespa et al., 2020). In 2020, children of color became the majority of children in the country (Children's Defense Fund, 2021). Amid such shifts, K–12 schools have become environments of cultural change for both students and leaders. Interactions between community organization leaders and area residents (especially those deemed marginalized and disenfranchised in their locations) offer one potential way to cojoin with education leaders in deepening connections with students and families. Other paths, including community-based service-learning projects, have also been found to promote personal and academic growth gains in college students (Keen & Hall, 2009).

Education-community collaborations can mitigate uncivil interactions between K–12 students and can broaden resolutions for such, as shown in the collective impact framework (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Mendez, 2021). Feelings of disenfranchisement may arise when students attempt to maintain their uniqueness while finding their way amid dissimilar peers and changing environments (Benner & Graham, 2013; Monkman & Proweller, 2016). In the southeastern states, where traditions of racism and widespread discrimination have reemerged with renewed intensity (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021; Wilkinson & Bingham, 2016), residents may depend on school and community organizations to guide students toward increased self-regulation. Multisector education-community intervention programs that teach students self-efficacy, leadership, and scholarship also address challenges associated with modifying behaviors taught or observed in the home (or community), student perceptions of trustworthiness, and peer interactions between dissimilar groups (Witherspoon et al., 2016; Yeager et al., 2017). These challenges inevitably contribute to the way students rationalize and interpret acceptable aspects of socializing (Griffith & Larson, 2016) and are seldom addressed in elementary school programs. Little research has been conducted to understand the aims of school leaders who seek to address these challenges with elementary school interventions.

Studies depict students, even those of preschool age, as victims of racial bias, racial profiling, and unequal disciplinary treatment—all of which create hardships in terms of students' psychological development, trust in institutions, and perceptions of future achievement (Carter et al., 2017; Dutil, 2020; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Ingraham et al., 2016; Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Moreover, when drug raids in southern schools are initiated by school leaders, students' increased perceptions of racial inequality and institutional racism spurn positive change (Alexander, 2020, p. 97). Some education and community leaders who seek to aid students in circumventing these hardships meet with success by executing interventions to enhance student leadership and civil communication skills.

This exploratory case study aimed to examine the motivating factors and collaborative processes used by leaders in a large school district (Globe School District) and nonprofit community

organization (Human Care Council [HCC]) to implement a civil leadership program (VLP) in an elementary school. The study also sought to determine whether culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) was present during delivery of the program. Leaders of the education-community initiative collaborated to address the growing needs of their ethnically diverse community, unfavorable state report cards, and poor student discipline. Study findings indicate that trust was a major factor in the approval and sustenance of VLP. Further, CRP was found to be an underlying component of VLP's design and delivery.

Theoretical Background

This study combined the conceptual frameworks of Allport (1954/1979) and Ladson-Billings (1995) with the notion of civil leadership as defined by Ewald (2001). In tandem, theory of prejudice (Allport, 1954/1979), CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and civil leadership (Ewald, 2001) form a basis for the construct of K–12 civil leadership. I examined these three frameworks respectively to (a) understand the psychology of prejudice and what prompts uncivil behaviors in humans, (b) explore ways to alleviate uncivil behaviors in education settings, and (c) create a path to self-regulation through civil behaviors.

Allport (1954/1979) explained that prejudice is an inherent human trait that can be positively or negatively centered toward an object (inclusive of human beings) or idea. The theory of prejudice suggests that humans, including children, may be both victims and bearers of prejudicial sentiments. These sentiments can be reduced with interventions informed by contact theory, which supports facilitating indirect and direct contact among dissimilar group members in student instruction. Indirect methods involve the study of individuals external to one's culture (e.g., reading books, watching films, and listening to stories), while direct methods include in-person or personal collaborations (e.g., group meetings and writing letters), usually in common-goal settings.

Ladson-Billings's (1995) CRP advises education leaders and educators to deliver subject matter through the lens of culture—an effort that has become even more important in post-pandemic delivery (Clark, 2021). Originally framed to instruct educators, identifying as White, in the most effective means of teaching African American children, CRP challenges stigmas placed on children of color through traditional institutional lenses. In alignment with the efforts of critical race theorists seeking equitable changes in the U.S. legal system—a system in which laws often defy perspicuity through verbiage found to oppress people of color and economically disadvantaged groups (Bell, 1995)—CRP offers benefits to education stakeholders willing to embrace positive social change.

Three domains are essential to the delivery of CRP. Whereas the first domain stresses that students strive for academic success, the second and third domains encourage the development of cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness in students. Similar to disability critical race theory (Migliarini & Annamma, 2020), CRP refutes the idea that students in a hegemonized society require remediation and instead argues that systems and processes must be changed to fit the needs of students (Ladson-Billings, 2014, 2021).

Civil leadership (Ewald, 2001) defines the advantages of dissimilar faculty and student groups espousing positive civil behaviors in higher education environments. *Civility* is the display of positive interactions between dissimilar and similar groups, while *leadership* refers to individuals' abilities to manage themselves in familiar and unfamiliar working environments. Variations in belief systems, cultural differences, and socioeconomic division have been linked to displays of uncivil human behavior (Witherspoon et al., 2016; Yablon, 2017).

For decades, critical race theorists have examined the largest structure of human social accord—laws—and they have accused the legal system of failing to provide equal democracy to people of color (Bell, 1995). Today, a review of systems and processes reveals societal systems devoid of civic understanding and inexplicable chasms among advocates in education (Schwartz, 2021). Traits of K–12 civil leadership share facets of civic education, civic engagement, and the social and emotional learning concept of self-efficacy in social and emotional learning (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2011; Hedtke et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2014), except these latter programs often seek to improve students' sense of political responsibility and democratic awareness. K–12 civil leadership differs by emphasizing sustained education-community collaborations in which leaders strive to anticipate uncivil behaviors, understand incivility, and guide positive social interactions among K–12 students (Sancho, 2019). K–12 civil leadership specifically encourages education-community collaborators to make cross-cultural, civil, and social interactions the focal point

for students, thereby heightening the potential for sustaining positive change in the community.

K–12 Civil Leadership

K–12 civil leadership serves as a potential recipe for reducing uncivil behaviors in educational and communal settings. Leaders in education and community organizations can follow the recipe by adopting these guiding principles: (a) understand that prejudice is inherent to humans and can be modified, (b) source research-based strategies and programs that promote civil interactions pertinent for community demographics, and (c) collaborate with partners (education or community) to deliver strategies or programs directly to students. Collective impact frameworks require substantial funding to achieve sustainability, and K–12 civil leadership promotes leveraging the resources of multisector organizations in tandem with those of education entities toward this goal.

When interventions are implemented into school systems, stakeholders will traditionally complete a contractual memorandum of agreement (MOA) to formalize their working relationship. Highly effective programs may be robust (e.g., well-funded, participant rich, inclusive of data tracking, community support) in operation and delivery (Smolkowski et al., 2016). However, educational institutions in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities or smaller regions are often unable to afford robust implementation. K–12 civil leadership focuses on heightening education-community bonds to improve student interactions through shared effort rather than through an isolated purchase-and-execute approach.

The underlying foundation of K–12 civil leadership is cultural relevance, which may be absent in other programs that seek to improve student interactions. K–12 civil leadership diverges from the democratic and political foci of civic education and civil discourse and promotes student development in the areas of leadership, civility, and cultural understanding. Research has demonstrated that schools have a reduced dependency on state assistance, fewer disciplinary infractions, and higher school retention rates when students actively engage in supportive relationships, learn in bias-free classrooms, and discuss cultural understanding (Carter et al., 2017). Students who feel closely connected to their racial identities and communities are more likely to graduate, act as social change agents, and gain necessary psychological skills to realize positive, sustainable change in their lives (Buckley, 2018).

Collaborative Education-Community Partnerships That Spark Social Change in Youth

Positive social change has occurred in schools where education and community organization leaders have formed partnerships to empower students. Educational institutions have a legal obligation to provide an academic education to students, and school leaders are responsible for the methods by which academic material is delivered. Occasionally, school leaders impart nonacademic curricula to students (i.e., curricula that promote morale, cultural intelligence, and emotional health) for the purposes of remediation or well-roundedness. Students engaged in such supplementary programs may examine their personal behaviors, become submerged in their communities as service leaders, or take interest in the cultural and ethnic differences of their peers (Bertrand et al., 2017; Kremer et al., 2015).

Other programs that seek to improve student interactions employ a variety of effective collaborative strategies. For instance, education-community programs have been found to support racially and ethnically diverse students (e.g., African American and Malaysian students) by delivering culturally familiar content through activities focused on empowerment and leadership instruction (Watson et al., 2015; Zeldin et al., 2016). Some programs have featured play and conflict resolution training to moderate the social interactions of elementary and middle school students (Massey et al., 2018), while others have encouraged the development of civic-mindedness in ethnic-minority students. Strategies have ranged from video and community engagement to multifaceted service-learning projects with historically Black colleges and universities and organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters (McFarlane-Alvarez & MacDonald, 2020).

Comparatively, collaborative programs that lack cultural relevance may cause feelings of alienation in community members. Students enrolled in a collaborative building project with university students and business leaders reported a renewed desire stemming from the instruction to protect and strengthen their communities (Derr et al., 2016), yet students also described feeling a disconnect from the final outcomes of the project and were deemed less likely to see themselves as integral community change agents. Students who recognize the connection between their cultural identities, environment, and role in their communities are more likely to invest

in projects that sustain revitalization, especially in the southeastern United States (Goodman & Hooks, 2016).

In this study of VLP, district, school, and community organization leaders made it clear that an intervention was needed to redirect student behaviors, yet trust was the initiating component of the program's implementation. Redirecting student behavior was a secondary component. Trust is essential to realizing positive social change, and the need for such change was so profound in one school district that superintendents helped establish a "parent training program" to specifically raise "trust and engagement" (Poynton et al., 2018). VLP education-community leaders were committed to reducing reports of student disciplinary infractions, improving community conditions, and bringing opportunities to students in Title I schools. Therefore, to deter violence among adolescents and a growing presence of gang activity in the surrounding area, HCC leaders created a leadership curriculum with instruction in practices of leadership, guidance on maintaining appropriate social interactions, and opportunities to communicate with positive community exemplars (e.g., university representatives, health advocates, and community entrepreneurs) of similar and dissimilar backgrounds.

Method

Participants

This exploratory case study comprised observations, interviews, and reports conducted with five leaders representing three participant groups (district, school, and community organization personnel). Participants were recruited based on their availability, direct affiliation, and level of accountability in the initial implementation of the VLP at the elementary school site. Smaller participant sizes may be expected in case studies that require specific information, rather than generalizations, to address research questions (Yin, 2018). In this study, the participant pool proved slim though diverse in its delivery of critical perspectives. Specifically, I interviewed the district strategic partnership director, two school administrators (principal and assistant principal), and two external community organization leaders (program designer and program facilitator) with direct ties to the program's initialization. Having retired prior to the study, the district superintendent (an original member of the group responsible for approving VLP) was unavailable to participate.

VLP served as a pilot program in a Title I, high-poverty, southeastern U.S. elementary school. Approximately 100 fourth- and fifth-grade boys (predominantly African American and Latino) were enrolled in VLP classes. VLP had been running for a total of 3 years by the time of this study and had expanded to two other elementary schools within the district. One of these schools piloted the program with fourth- and fifth-grade girls (predominantly African American and multiracial).

Participant Roles

Each participant brought unique information to the research and was essential to adequately addressing three research questions. I devised the first research question (RQ1) to examine the rationale for and challenges associated with initiating and sustaining a leadership program at the elementary school level. The second research question (RQ2) asked about the extent to which CRP may have existed in the design and delivery of the program. The third research question (RQ3) explored participants' observations of change or growth in student participation as it related to CRP and civil leadership (as outlined in VLP guidelines). Over time, additional school personnel participated in classroom facilitation and became a part of the observed settings.

Sampling Rationale

Purposive (purposeful) sampling is a nonprobability sampling technique that allows researchers to select participants who can offer relevant, information-rich data to address research problems (Patton, 2015; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). An important criterion of the present study was that participants needed to be directly involved with implementing VLP in the school system or classroom environment. For this reason, the two sampling strategies I used to identify participants were criterion and opportunistic sampling. Criterion-based sampling allows researchers to study groups that meet predetermined criteria, while opportunistic sampling permits the observation or interview of participants who could not have been defined or planned prior to the beginning of the study (Patton, 2015).

The research questions informed the pool of potential participants. Whereas district and school personnel were responsible for approving implementation of VLP, community organization participants were knowledgeable about the origins of the curriculum, classroom facilitation techniques, and community partner

involvement. Using opportunistic sampling, I included unexpected participants (those who were required by school leaders to assist in the delivery of VLP) in my observations. Derived from a pool of 15 candidates, the participants I ultimately invited were those involved in major and minor organizational processes (e.g., leveraging funds, counseling students, creating newsletter content).

Two participants executed a MOA to approve VLP implementation, one established funding rules, two negotiated funding, two facilitated the delivery of VLP to students, and four engaged with community partners to secure speakers and advocates for students (see Table 1). These roles gave each participant a unique perspective that aligned with the research questions.

Table 1. Roles and Responsibilities of Participants in Sampling Selection

Role or responsibility	District level	School administration		Community organization	
	Strategic director	*Lead principal*	*Assistant principal*	*Designer and facilitator*	*Curriculum facilitator*
Initial meeting attendee or presenter	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Executed MOA	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Approved VLP in initial school	No	Yes	No	No	No
Determined funding pool for VLP	Yes	No	No	No	No
Negotiated strategy to fund VLP	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Developed school schedule for VLP	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Developed curriculum objectives	No	No	No	Yes	No
Designed curriculum lesson content	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Facilitated lesson content	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Monitored content facilitation	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Accountability: recorded changes in student behavior in VLP	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Accountability: updated district on VLP progress and activities	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Initiated and maintained community partner collaboration	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Fostered rapport with parents and gave feedback on student activity	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note. A memorandum of agreement (MOA) is a written agreement (essentially a contract) between entities to work together on a specific project to meet a defined set of criteria.

Procedures Toward Data Collection

To understand school leaders chose to implement a leadership program at the elementary school level, it was necessary for me to visit the individuals directly engaged with the approval process and the methods used to sustain operations. The district employed a director of accountability who was specifically responsible for handling research study guidelines and requests. I provided the director with pertinent details of the study design (e.g., purpose, methods, data collection) in a district-provided research inquiry document. I committed to issuing a summary correspondence of findings and recommendations following the conclusion of the study. The school board approved the study as presented.

Following written approval from the school district, I finalized an application with the university institutional review board (IRB). Due to the sensitive nature of ethical boundaries in studies that involve children, a vulnerable population, I concentrated on examining the rationales, motivations, and instructional operations of the adults directly involved in the initiation and execution of VLP. The IRB granted approval without exception to participants, methodology, or other ethical barriers.

The director of accountability informed administrators that the study had been approved by the district's board of directors. Subsequently, the school administrators used their authority to grant me access to the premises. I met with administrators to explain the study and to review parameters for data collection, including criteria for participant recruitment, methods of data collection (e.g., image capture, interviews, observations), and my commitment to rendering a final summary document to participants. School administrators approved the study, and I received contact details for both the original and current facilitators of the program. In an effort to further secure participant safety and transparency, I forwarded consent forms explaining the purpose of the study, interview processes, privacy and confidentiality details, IRB verbiage concerning participant rights to review, and intended scheduling (per participant availability) to each participant via courier mail and email.

Due to an approaching winter holiday, there were delays in gaining access to the premises for observations and interviews with school leaders and facilitators. However, these delays permitted me to increase my number of visits to the school and to meet with administrators or facilitators when

possible. Likewise, increased visitation to the school permitted additional collection of observational data, images, and artifacts openly shared by participants. At the close of the study, participants received incentives ($10 gift cards) and a summary document of findings and recommendations.

Data Collection

Data collection techniques included one-on-one interviews with participants, observations, and artifact capture. This wide range of data gave me insight into participants' verbal and nonverbal cues, facilitators' disposition during class content delivery, and the extent to which other staff members aided in VLP delivery in the school setting. Further, the collaborative efforts of the participant groups were evidenced through artifacts I captured during observations as well as those I was directly provided by participants.

Interviews. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), case studies may have few participants; therefore, interview protocols for qualitative case studies should be designed to extract extensive, information-rich details from participants. The interview guide I developed aligned the three research questions, conceptual framework, and interview questions in a tabular format. I conducted a field test of the interview questions by mirroring the participant groups with similar professionals, including a national curriculum designer, a director of a community-centered nonprofit and former university professor, and a single parent of three with a background in law enforcement and psychology. I created open-ended interview questions pertinent to each group of participants. Following the field test, some questions required modification to cement alignment to the research questions. I scheduled interviews according to participant availability; these ranged from 35 to 50 minutes each.

Observations and Artifacts. After district and school administrators approved the study parameters, I devised observation and artifact protocols to begin documenting my visits to the district and school sites. The protocols were examined and approved by the IRB. Observations allowed me to examine participant behaviors both separately and as a collective. I observed facilitators delivering VLP content in the classroom; these sessions ranged from 20 to 90 minutes each. In total, I visited district and school premises 10 times over a 3-month period. Additionally, I traveled to two offsite locations—in one instance to conduct an interview at the

participant's request and in the other instance to observe a presentation about VLP provided to community residents.

Holistically and sometimes unexpectedly, I was privy to other observations, such as the capture of yearbook pictures for the VLP group (which included the HCC facilitator), school staff interactions in the VLP classroom, facilitator and school administrator exchanges, and administrators directing other classes, which denoted a comparison to their interactions with the VLP group.

Study artifacts vary in form and are useful in validating participants' recollections in interviews or other unsubstantiated details (Patton, 2015). The artifact protocol I developed helped me organize the array of artifacts I secured; I used artifacts to cross-reference dates, to examine event occurrences and other aspects of participants' interview responses, and to understand the expectations and cultural references that were communicated to students through visual means. These artifacts included (but were not limited to) the following items: VLP lesson plans, school board minutes, social media documentation (e.g., VLP trips, guest speakers, attendees of cultural events), state education data, school report cards, brochures, images of district strategic models, images of murals representing the surrounding community, and VLP correspondence to parents (e.g., initial invitation letter, expectations, field trip forms).

Analysis

Content analysis is the evaluation of collected data as text. For this study, interviews were transcribed from audio recordings into text and then evaluated. I triangulated data from multiple sources (observations, interviews, and artifacts) to define patterns, which were the defining factors for emergent themes. Themes emerged through initial coding, simultaneous coding, and emergent coding, as defined by Saldaña (2016).

Results

Expected and unexpected findings emerged from the collaboration between Globe School District and HCC. Participants reported that the benefits of the partnership outweighed the challenges of initiation and implementation. Three major themes contributed to program implementation and sustainability: (a) VLP implementation and operation processes were consistently reported (in alignment with a leadership hierarchy), (b) the education-community collaboration fostered sustainability of the program, and (c) VLP facilitation and activities aligned with civil leadership and CRP. These three themes were composed of subthemes, including trust as a precursor to implementation, students' need for positive exposure and mentoring, advantages and challenges of implementation, and the emergence of CRP through curriculum content delivery (see Table 2).

Table 2. Organization of Themes and Subthemes

Research questions	Major themes	Subthemes
What were the motivating factors and rationales for implementing and sustaining a civil leadership program in an elementary school?	Implementation processes of VLP were consistently reported as a measure of hierarchy. Rationales for sustaining VLP were sought and determined.	Trust was a precursor to implementation. Students needed positive exposure and mentoring. Advantages were enhanced public image and positive changes in student behavior. Challenges were district funding time constraints, discipline, and a change in personnel.
How was CRP apparent in the development and delivery of VLP?	CRP emerged through VLP content delivery.	Each CRP domain was represented in VLP content delivery.
What observations of change in student behavior aligned with CRP and civil leadership?	VLP facilitation and activities aligned with CRP and civil leadership.	Students demonstrated self-regulation and civil leadership.

Consistency in VLP Implementation

Commonly, district or school leaders seek out intervention programs to address challenges or to satisfy a particular need. Participants in this study, however, when asked to "describe the program implementation process," consistently replied that community organization (HCC) leaders approached school district leaders to propose the implementation of VLP in one of their schools. District and school leaders were not actively seeking intervention programs at the time. HCC leaders offered VLP as a pilot program for the first year, free of charge. The district superintendent, district strategic partnership director, HCC curriculum developer, and school principal were present at the conception meeting. These education-community collaborators reached a consensus to execute a MOA for VLP implementation. District leaders expected school administrators and HCC leaders to maintain the organization and operation of VLP. Participants mentioned operational procedures however none mentioned preview processes in which VLP objectives were evaluated prior to implementation to determine their alignment with district goals or strategic plans.

School administrators maintained the leadership hierarchy throughout the implementation process (see Figure 1). A participant explained that while the principal would "maintain financial viability for the program (after the initial free pilot)," the assistant principal would ensure that "buy in" was achieved at the faculty and staff level. The assistant principal offered the following statement to this effect:

> Administrators, school counselors, and teachers have an option to select four students per class … and I also work with our school counselor to see are there any students who she feels would benefit from the program. … So, once the teachers submit their names to me, then I kind of go over the list. And then from there, parents have to give permission.

School administrators placed their trust in faculty to help streamline VLP implementation. The assistant principal explained, "Who knows the students better than the teachers, beyond the parents? We rely on teacher recommendations [to select students for the program]." Additionally, the school counselor selected the most appropriate students to invite for participation.

School administrators and HCC leaders engaged in further negotiations to finalize scheduling, administrator expectations, and strategies to present a collaborative front to students' families through verbal and written communication.

Trust Among Collaborators: A Precursor to VLP Implementation. Participants reported initial program implementation processes consistently. In lieu of using standardized practices to align the district and program goals, leaders' trust for one another served as the primary initiator for VLP in the district. Each participant stated that they relied on or trusted a higher-level leader that presented VLP to them as a viable program.

At the district level, the strategic partnership director referred to trust in the leadership hierarchy this way:

> My superintendent was bringing me something that she thought would be good for us to consider. … This is probably not the best determiner but they [HCC] are a group with a lot of history that has backed, advocated, and lobbied for healthy community relations.

The strategic partnership director recollected that upstanding HCC "board members" from prior years strengthened support for VLP implementation.

Comparably, the school principal (and authority on the implementation process at the school level) stated:

> It [VLP] was brought to me by the strategic partnership director, from my district office. … Our superintendent, decided that this would be a good partnership for us to consider having, … so, I made the decision after an initial meeting with the strategic partnership director and the HCC program manager that … we would pilot the program.

Need for Exposure. When asked to "describe the reasons for implementing the civil leadership program in the district or school," multiple participants identified students' need for exposure, mentoring, and new experiences to promote self-regulation, due to external factors (e.g., socioeconomic, environmental, cultural). Whereas participants were unaligned in their descriptions of the initial motivations for VLP, they each reported that the goals printed in promotional materials seemed beneficial for their students; actual benefits became clearer after implementation.

Figure 1. VLP Hierarchy of Leadership Implementation
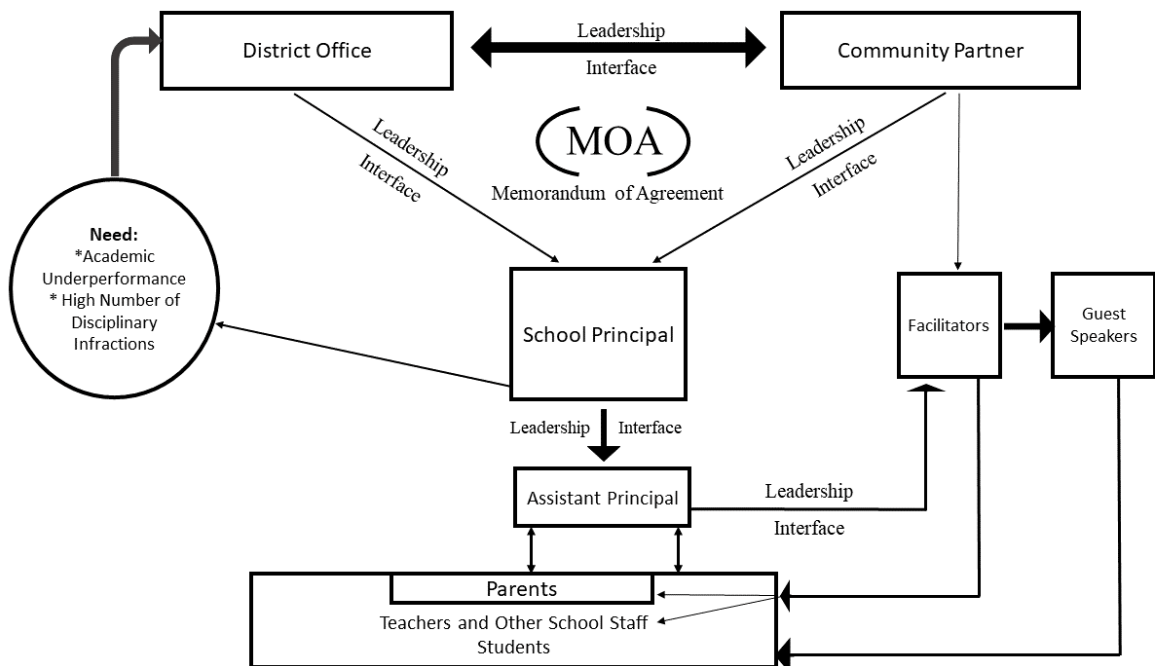
Note. Flowchart of education-community leadership hierarchy in school program implementation. Adapted from "Stakeholder Experiences and Operations in Implementing an Elementary Civil Leadership Program" by R. Sancho.

At the time VLP was implemented, state data depicted the selected school to have falling student attendance rates, student infractions of weapons carry, high rates of student discipline issues, failing academic test scores, failing report card scores, and a surrounding radius of low-income communities. Although some of these challenges were mentioned briefly by the school principal, other participants refrained from offering any of these challenges as motivating factors for VLP implementation at the elementary school level.

Instead, participants from the district, school, and HCC offered the following consensus about motivating factors for implementation, respectively: (a) "We are giving them what we could call a set of middle-class values that they might not have been exposed to or had access to otherwise," (b) "HCC facilitators expose them to things that these children just would not have the opportunity to do otherwise," and (c) "VLP is exposing kids to things that they just may not see on a daily basis."

Need for Mentoring. Participants were asked to describe "a specific need [they] wanted to see addressed with the students." District and school administrators reported that they envisioned

VLP as a vehicle for mentoring students. HCC informational materials maintained that VLP would grant instruction to students in the areas of leadership development, arts, and civility, yet a mentoring component was absent. The strategic partnership director responded, "Mentoring would be the biggest piece, because the way the program was described to me was to give students an opportunity to make connections." One school administrator lauded the collaboration between the school and HCC, stating that "VLP … was more of a concerted effort to create a mentoring program."

Interview responses, program documents, social media, and observations of in-class facilitation indicated that community business leaders and university students visited VLP classes as guests. Few guests visited more than one time during the third year of the program, however those who interacted with students were of similar and dissimilar racial and ethnic backgrounds (to the students). HCC facilitators helped to establish connections between community partners and school administrators to foster sustainable relationships for future student interactions.

Rationales for Sustainability

Participants provided similar rationales for sustaining VLP as an in-school program over a 3-year period. Each participant commented on students' behavioral growth and the changes they saw in some individual students who moved from heavy gang affiliation to reduced disciplinary infractions. The advantages and challenges of implementing VLP were transparent and documented through participant interviews, observations, and written artifacts (e.g., school board meeting minutes, brochures, budgets); these data were found to be sufficiently balanced in supporting participants' claims of continued approval of VLP in the school system.

Advantages of Collaborative Engagement. Participants reported advantages of implementing VLP that mirrored their unique perspectives in the leadership hierarchy. Some benefits were cross-relational, whereas others were specific to participants' individual responsibilities. For instance, participants provided various responses to the question "What have been the advantages of implementing VLP in the district (or school)?" All noted student growth as a benefit of VLP. District leaders measured success in terms of an increased level of community recognition and declines in disciplinary infractions, while school leaders placed greater value on improved student interactions (with similar and dissimilar individuals) and visible differences in student leadership capacities. HCC leaders were concerned with a holistic account of student success (i.e., academic, behavioral, and self-regulation) and shared district leaders' focus on community awareness of VLP.

Student Growth and Public Image. The strategic district director reported that a major advantage of VLP was the heightened public awareness of the district due to positive changes in student behavior. District leaders performed site visits to monitor VLP students' progress, and the education-community collective shared accountability responsibility. Additionally, the strategic director shared feedback from school leaders with other district representatives, especially when community residents displayed excitement about VLP on social media and in neighborhood recreation areas. The strategic director commented, "It is a promotional kind of effect that we [school district] get for being connected to this program as it advances and grows."

The most recognized example of student growth reported by participants was a student gang member who made significant changes in his behavior, academics, and appearance (i.e., hair maintenance, appropriate uniform), despite verbal refusals to do so when he began the program. The HCC facilitator discovered that a rival gang member was also in the VLP class. Immediately, the HCC facilitator collaborated with school administrators to lessen tensions between the two boys while retaining both students in the program. Reform and self-regulation became so prominent within the more defiant student that he was honored at the final school board meeting for the year. VLP and the student's achievements were aired on the local news and on social media and became a moderately viral story.

The Positive Effect of Uniforms. Participants reported that required uniforms assisted to improve student interactions and self-image. Administrators stated that the uniforms made students feel a sense of "brotherhood," a commitment to behaving civilly, pride in their appearance, and a restored desire to attend school. Students were required to wear white button-down shirts (long-sleeved or short-sleeved), khaki slacks, and a bow tie to each weekly meeting or outing. The assistant principal explained that, at first, "kids laughed at the VLP students because all the other kids were wearing regular clothes." After nonuniformed students began to "hear about all the great VLP activities" and "politicians coming in to visit," they also wanted to join the program. School leaders began to see uniforms as a positive model for nonuniformed students as well. The principal expressed, "There is something for them in it, that engages them . . . that camaraderie."

One HCC facilitator modeled the unspoken code of civility and friendship by wearing the uniform required for students. Likewise, community members shared positive messages in social media forums about instruction they received on Parent Night from an HCC facilitator. On more than one occasion, parents were taught the same lessons their children received during the school day. Participants recognized and documented the rise of community support for the school due to VLP implementation, and they communicated favorable changes in student behaviors as they observed the positive collaborations between district, school, and community leaders.

Challenges of Collaborative Engagement. Participants offered varied responses to the question, "What have been some challenges of implementing VLP in the district (or school)?" They reported minimal to moderate challenges in the areas of financial constraints, allotted time

for program activities, student behavior, and a change in personnel (which some participants felt threatened collaborative trust).

District- and School-Level Funding. The strategic partnership director noted that although funding was a common challenge in implementing most school programs, VLP implementation lacked funding issues for the following reasons: (a) HCC provided the program free of charge for Year 1, and (b) the district was unable to offer any funding from standard funding sources in Years 2 and 3. Therefore, (c) school and HCC leaders negotiated a funding structure to address the lack of financial support from the district. According to the strategic partnership director, "Principals at both schools felt this [continuing VLP] was an important thing to do, and so they used some of their financial pots of money to be able to fund it." School administrators also expressed that funding was not a challenge: "We write it into our Title I plans, and they [VLP school leaders at an additional school] used some of their Title I monies." An HCC facilitator mentioned that a potential funding issue with the cost of the program was present in the third year and that negotiations were underway with school administrators to meet the best interests of students.

Capacity and Time Constraints. HCC facilitators and school administrators professed that time constraints and an inability to offer the program to more students during the school day sometimes affected the quality of content delivery. During the first year, to resolve the challenge of developing a rapport with students in the limited time available, the HCC designer expanded aspects of the program to include brief academic and performance check-ins with students and their teachers. The HCC designer explained, "It became more than just coming to this program for 45 minutes and sitting in a session." Contrastingly, during the third year, participants revealed that school administrators reduced VLP class sessions from 45 minutes to 35 minutes. The reduction in class time meant that activities had to be shortened and spread across multiple classes to reach completion. In some ways, prolonging activities across multiple classes caused students to lose focus.

Even with the assistance of a school staff member who was appointed by school administrators to aid the HCC facilitator, balancing a 35-minute class period and effective class organization appeared to be difficult. In one class, students had enough time to complete vision boards they began in a prior session; however, they were unable to present their vision boards until the following session. School administrators concurred that they would want to see "more time [for program activities] … 2 hours or something like that," if it were possible during the school day.

Regulating Student Discipline. School and HCC leaders collaborated to balance the maintenance of a healthy learning environment with appropriate student discipline. The HCC curriculum designer stated that during the design phase for VLP, she anticipated student behavior to be a potential challenge due to "limited staffing" and a poor base of parental support for most students. Further, HCC facilitators expressed that discipline perceived as too harsh could result in a loss of student participants. One HCC facilitator expressed that "20 boys" could be "very excitable," nevertheless, it was "important to quickly address any instances of misbehavior." Participants noticed that the students were more "excitable" in the first few months of implementation than in the latter months, once expectations and routines were more apparent and practiced.

In one VLP class session, I observed the assistant principal, as opposed to a staff member, helping the HCC facilitator modulate student behavior. The HCC curriculum designer communicated the following expectations about behavior challenges:

> The biggest word we had was being accountable. You're not accountable for a lot of things, but what you are accountable for is coming to school, being responsible, and having good behavior … and if you can't tackle this, then … you're not going to make it. It's going to be hard.

VLP curriculum policies provided that students who exhibited poor behavior in VLP classes or core academic classes were prohibited from participating in field experiences or other off-campus trips. Participants reported that over a 3-year period, one student unenrolled before completing the program due to personal scheduling conflicts, and one student was disallowed from attending a field trip due to misbehaving in a core academic class.

New Personnel With Internal Access. Participants considered the arrival of a new HCC facilitator to be a challenge (in Year 3). Although the HCC facilitator was a veteran employee of the community organization, this person had not previously facilitated the VLP curriculum.

District and school leaders explained that they emphatically trusted the first HCC facilitator and praised the cohesion she cultivated between students and community members. "She's really good," the strategic partnership director expressed. Participants reported that the new facilitator worked diligently to maintain the preestablished cohesion by becoming acquainted with school staff and administrators. Recognizing that the prior facilitator had maintained open lines of communication with the district, school staff and administrators, and student families, the new HCC facilitator arranged one-on-one meetings with fourth- and fifth-grade teachers of each VLP student and maintained logs of students' academic progress. Moreover, district investment in VLP was such that officers were aware of the personnel change. One remarked that "hopefully" as a newcomer, the new facilitator could get the program "in working order fairly quickly."

CRP Emerged in Civil Leadership Content Delivery

Several culturally relevant elements were present throughout VLP delivery, in graphic depictions of the district model, and in school settings. The district model was featured in framed posters on district and school walls as a reminder that cultural understanding, diversity, and discipline were essential expectations for students and staff members. Participants' statements during their interviews often reflected CRP, although participants were not necessarily versed in scholarly terminology associated with the three domains of CRP or the theory itself. Specifically, they expressed interest in seeing students improve their academic scores, raising students' cultural awareness (of their own culture and that of at least one other group), and helping students develop a sense of understanding about their roles in the community. These expectations mirrored the domains of CRP. Participants also unknowingly applied facets of contact theory through VLP delivery by facilitating in-person student exchanges with culturally dissimilar individuals and exposing students to cultural texts, media, and other artifacts.

Domain 1: High Academic Expectations. HCC facilitators maintained consistent collaboration with VLP students' core teachers, kept a log of their grades, introduced students to cultural literature, and encouraged students with microaffirmations to celebrate their successes. Field trips to area universities were arranged for students, and activities (e.g., making budgets, researching job descriptions, discussing careers) were integrated into lesson plans to encourage reading, mathematics, and problem solving.

Domain 2: Examining Culture. In addition to culturally relevant class practices, cultural influences were posted throughout the school and in the VLP classroom to encourage students to remember their cultural identities and those of people dissimilar to them (see Figure 2). Others reminded students that their behaviors are impactful (see Figure 3). During a class session, some students had difficulty deciphering the meaning of Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken." The HCC facilitator directed students' attention to a poster on the wall that read: "If you don't make mistakes, you're not working on hard enough problems, and that's a mistake." Additional posters included culturally referenced images and messages meant to encourage cross-cultural connections, such as "Think interdependently" and "Work together." One school administrator referred to efforts to extend cultural ambiance from the school entrance (see Figure 4) into the school, where students and guests could experience a "homelike feel" with calming music and furnishings (e.g., rugs, curtains, and lamps).

Domain 3: Education on Sociocultural Consciousness. HCC facilitators imparted the third domain of CRP in students by encouraging them to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences about stereotypes and community roles. They were also taught how to engage with dissimilar and similar individuals using eye contact, handshakes, even vocal tones, observations, and listening skills. A participant commented on the merit of students interacting with exemplars similar to them: "Successful people that look like you [VLP student] promote a feeling of 'Oh! That's something I can do as well.'" Another participant recounted that students in both groups "bonded" with "two White men" who were guest community leaders for an extended period. "They just saw two men that were committed, consistent, and there for them. Kids don't see color." Students were also exposed to multicultural entrepreneurs, athletes, astronauts, opera singers, university students, financiers, and health care workers from in and around their state. The HCC program designer stated, "I believe cultural biases and racism are learned behaviors … I want them [VLP students] to understand that they should include others in their journey, and it will be better for them."

Figure 2. Encouraging Students to Remember Their Cultural Identities and Those of People Dissimilar to Them

Figure 3. Reminding Students That Their Behaviors Are Impactful

Self-Discipline and Civil Leadership

HCC facilitators used indirect and direct strategies to help students successfully develop leadership and self-regulation skills. The HCC curriculum designer reported that students' low levels of confidence initially served as a barrier to leadership. To ameliorate this issue, HCC facilitators instilled in students that they were capable of success and could overcome challenges. They told personal stories of hardship and triumphs. One HCC facilitator stated, for example, "When I grew up … I was in a single person home." Facilitators taught life skills to solve problems. In the classroom, students learned to wash their shirts by hand (when parents lacked funds for the laundromat), tie their ties, maintain eye contact when speaking to others, give firm handshakes, and repeat a positive, self-affirming mantra at the start of each class. Participants saw improved student interactions as the program progressed,

Figure 4. Extending Cultural Ambiance From the School Entrance Into the School

and students began to demonstrate leadership as they received gradual lessons of empowerment. An HCC facilitator offered one such lesson:

> Who is smarter than a computer? We know letters, shapes, and dimensions—a computer doesn't. You know the hardest language in the world to learn and the longest word in the hardest language in the world to learn! What is it? [Pneumonoultramicroscopic-silicovolcanoconiosis.] What does it mean? [Students declared collectively.] That's right! There is nothing you can't master!

The school principal spoke about the correlation between "dressing for success" (student uniforms) and behavior improvements that promoted self-discipline. Students were responsible for arriving in uniforms ready to interact civilly with one another, and they were expected to carry a positive demeanor to other classes and clubs as representatives of VLP. Over time, students were reported to have regulated their behavior and interactions, thus gaining access to field experiences, cultural events, and year-end awards.

Discussion

As depicted in this study, education-community collaborations can harness expertise from distinct, diverse leaders to meet common objectives. K–12 civil leadership rests on the premise that the collaborative efforts of school and community leaders have the capacity to impact neighborhoods positively by reducing societal

ills (e.g., dependence on state accommodations, prison detainment, gang affiliation) that may cause irreparable damage to marginalized K–12 students. When students are exposed to positive exemplars who model prosocial behaviors toward one another, especially during malleable years in their cognitive development, they can replicate these behaviors (Dutil, 2020; Yeager et al., 2017).

Fourth- and fifth-grade VLP students followed the guidance of exemplars and had success engaging with one another and with individuals from dissimilar groups. Two VLP elementary students with gang affiliations became models for their peers and community when they developed camaraderie through self-regulated behavior modification. Other education-community collaboratives along the lines of VLP can also reach such outcomes; these need not be isolated cases. Education and community leaders engaged a key aspect of CRP to achieve success with students: They displayed a concerted, genuine care for them.

Over the years, uniform policy researchers have found no significant improvements in student discipline or academic achievement in schools with uniform policies (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2003; Jones et al., 2020), while others have found that school administrators, educators, and parents perceive uniforms to increase school safety. Likewise, VLP leaders perceived uniforms to strengthen student bonds, camaraderie, and positive behavior. Students observed a facilitator wearing their required uniform to sessions to show the importance of having pride in oneself. Other students began to modify their language in an effort to become potential candidates for VLP in the future. During VLP, zero incidents of weapons carry, and fewer disciplinary infractions occurred, outcomes that may have been aided by mandated uniforms and CRP in VLP delivery.

In this collaborative multigroup effort, education and community leaders established trust with one another and shared in the advantages and challenges of program implementation. This trust outweighed the absence of more practical aspects of typical program implementation, such as an examination of the program's alignment with the district's graphic models of student success, a shared understanding of terminology (i.e., mentoring versus visiting), statistical capture of program outcomes, and prior evidence of program success. To achieve implementation success, district and school leaders obtained "buy in" from faculty, staff, and parents, which they saw as essential to VLP students' success. By Year 3,

VLP was expanded to single-gender girls' classes and two additional schools. Students witnessed the leaders' efforts toward cohesion and behaved in an accountable fashion to achieve camaraderie in their own cohorts. This study reflected on an alliance between educational and community organization leaders who became observable models of civil leadership and self-discipline, in efforts to uplift and inspire students to modify their behaviors.

Limitations

This study had a few limitations. First, it was performed at a single site, thereby limiting transferability. Second, participants were limited to those who personally participated in the development, acceptance, and implementation of VLP. These participants were selected to ensure the accuracy of the information that they could offer, which could in turn inform those interested in duplicating their efforts. This criterion, however, reduced the participant base to exclude interviews with others who worked to maintain the program, such as educators, school counselors, school staff members, parent volunteers, and additional district administrative staff.

Recommendations for Education-Community Collaboratives

Four recommendations emerged from the study findings that could benefit education-community collaboratives. First, stakeholders are strongly encouraged to align program objectives to the education entity's paradigms or models of success. Parris et al. (2018) stressed the importance of matching nonprofit missions or goals to program investments. According to its participants, VLP was implemented due to the shared trust among leadership. However, participants neglected to examine the alignment of VLP objectives with the district's models depicting paradigms of success (which included cultural diversity, academic achievement, respect, and career development). Closer examination of these areas may have helped leaders acquire and maintain affiliations with community partners in the form of career alliances for students rather than brief encounters with visitors. Second, stakeholders must examine and use district and school statistics (federal, state, and school-based) to inform program investment. Such a practice increases educational accountability and lessens public scrutiny (Tanner, 2012). Before the implementation of VLP, state reports showed a high number of disciplinary infractions, an incident of weapons carry, and

unsatisfactory safety ratings for the school environment, yet participants neglected to report these as specific motivations for implementing the program. Additionally, leaders could have shared parents' praise on social media and in exchanges about VLP to register support for implementation in future years. A third recommendation is to ensure that terms are defined, understood, and used consistently between collaborators. District and school leaders believed that VLP was a mentoring program, although facilitators held different notions. Clarifying terminology and expectations can strengthen cohesion and trust in collaborations. Fourth, stakeholders can determine whether the school has other external partners. Prior research may reveal the added benefit of multisector collaborations and reduce the likelihood of overlapping services or support.

Conclusion

Students become generationally responsible for the future of societies. Education-community leaders must strive to eliminate barriers to success and must intentionally direct energy toward aiding marginalized and disenfranchised students gain exposure to positive exemplars. Disruptions to the school-to-prison pipeline are vital for reducing induced trauma, even if examined from the lens of critical race theory. Cultural tensions and race relations are fomenting disquiet in many school and political environments, as evidenced by the widespread discord surrounding social equity and the needs of students based on their varying dimensions of diversity (e.g., race, gender, ability level, vaccination status, socioeconomic status).

Education and community leaders are positioned to guide students by introducing interventions that teach students how to self-regulate behavior, engage in harmonious interactions with individuals who are dissimilar from them, and appreciate their own cultural identity. K–12 civil leadership supports education-community leaders by imparting three principles: (a) understand that prejudice is inherent to humans and can be modified, (b) source research-based strategies and programs that promote civil interactions pertinent for community demographics, and (c) collaborate with multisector partners to achieve sustainable change. The concerted efforts of education-community initiatives are more likely to reveal multidimensional views of student needs and ways to address them. Individually, education-community leaders may become positive exemplars for students to emulate, though collectively, they have a greater chance of helping students realize personal success and ensuring that communities accomplish sustainable collective impact.

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