

**Transforming Service into Civic Purpose: A Qualitative Study of Adolescent Civic
Engagement and Purpose Development**

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Abstract

As tomorrow's leaders, adolescents are navigating coming-of-age tasks in the context of both the fast-growing promises of technology and the burdens of overwhelming global challenges. The Climate Leaders Fellowship (CLF) is an extracurricular program that supports adolescents interested in environmental sustainability. Program participants are connected with like-minded peers and mentors across the globe who help them develop and implement community-based volunteer projects (CLF, 2022). This study focuses on whether and how participation in CLF impacted adolescents' development. A consensual qualitative approach was utilized to conduct and analyze semi-structured interviews with adolescent CLF participants (N=9, 89% female). Results indicate that engagement in the program is associated with civic purpose development. Specifically, participants reported engaging in: civic reflection, motivation, and action through their CLF involvement. Findings also reveal that participants' development of civic purpose is associated with burgeoning critical consciousness. Recommendations for future programming, study limitations, and implications are discussed.

Keywords: civic engagement, sense of purpose, adolescence, positive youth development, qualitative methods

Introduction

Adolescents are navigating coming-of-age tasks in the context of a rapidly evolving world. As tomorrow's leaders, they inherit both the fast-growing promises of technology (e.g., the opportunity for transnational connection) as well as the burdens of overwhelming global challenges (e.g., climate change). The weight of these circumstances is heavy, as illustrated by the ongoing steady decline in adolescent mental health (Kalb et al., 2019; Curtin, 2020), which has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Racine et al., 2021). Unique interventions that both bolster assets and offer adolescents tools to overcome barriers are needed for young people as they prepare for adulthood. Supporting them in developing positive identities and enduring commitments to civic life may be most needed as they aim to advance our societies toward equity, sustainability, and prosperity for themselves and for us all. This paper includes a qualitative analysis of a globally-diverse sample of adolescents' descriptions of their experiences in an extracurricular program designed to support them in learning about climate change and implementing environmental sustainability projects in their home communities. The study sought to explore the question: How do participants perceive the impact of the program, including its action-oriented and relational aspects, on their sense of purpose, critical consciousness, and wellbeing?

Adolescent Development

The field of psychology has a long history of conceptualizing the teenage years as a dark time in the lifespan, characterized by "storm and stress" (Hall, 1904, p. 73). While adolescence does involve profound physical, psychological, and social transformation, in recent decades scholars have challenged the notion that these are by nature negative experiences (Arnett, 1999). In fact, the field of positive youth development (PYD) is dedicated to highlighting the

opportunity and flourishing that can emerge for all adolescents and considers how to promote these strengths more broadly (Lerner et al., 2005). Importantly, the central task of positive development during adolescence is cultivating a sense of identity (Erikson, 1968).

Identity, or an internal sense of self that drives beliefs and behaviors, is often considered to be the ultimate answer to the question, “*Who am I?*” (Marica, 1980). Research shows that those with a strong, positive, and coherent identities (i.e., achieved identity status) are likely to enjoy higher quality relationships, higher self-esteem, greater positive affect, and generally higher life satisfaction as compared to their counterparts (Berzonsky, 2007; Meeus, 1996). Individuals with a strong sense of identity also tend to experience lower anxiety levels than their non-achieved counterparts (Lillevoll et al., 2013). Moreover, those with a moral or civic identity are more likely to positively contribute to their communities and the world consistently across their lifespans (Hardy & Carlo, 2005).

Considering the profound impacts of identity development on both an individual’s experiences and their likelihood of contributing to the world around them, understanding how to promote positive identity development is a focus of PYD research. Importantly, identity development undergoes extraordinary advancement during adolescence and what occurs during this stage lays the groundwork for one’s identity across their lifespan (Tsang et al., 2012). During adolescence, one’s internal resources (e.g., self image, physical health) as well as their contextual and societal supports (e.g., relationships with parents and peers, experiential learning opportunities) interact dynamically to impact identity development (Lerner et al., 2005; Tsang et al., 2012). Research identifies many contributors to identity formation amongst adolescents but the present manuscript focuses on two key tasks of positive identity formation: sense of purpose and civic engagement. These two constructs are understood as both outcomes and motivators of

positive identity development yet empirical research that brings these developmental assets into conversation remains limited (Malin et al., 2015).

Sense of Purpose. Beyond-the-self (BTS) purpose is a “central, self-organizing life aim” (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009, p. 304) “that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 121). Purpose has also been described as acting on one’s self-coherent identity to create meaning in the world (Dweck, 2017). As a distinct but connected construct to identity, purpose development also largely begins during adolescence (Damon et al., 2003). Similar to identity development, adolescents who endorse beyond-the-self purpose are more likely to succeed academically (e.g., Damon et al., 2003; Hill et al., 2016), and experience higher educational self efficacy as compared to their less purposeful peers (DeWitz et al., 2009). Highly purposeful people are also more likely to be physically and mentally well (Scheier et al., 2006) be grittier (Hill et al., 2016), and more hopeful about the future (Burrow et al., 2010). Yet empirical research identifies that only about 20% of youth endorse high levels of BTS purpose (Damon, 2008). Purpose development is complex and requires sensitive awareness of one’s own internal experience and motivations as well as of the surrounding social context and structures (Moran, 2009). Thus prominent scholars have offered theory regarding the development of purpose as occurring through interaction between individual and contextual characteristics.

Notably, Kashdan & McKnight (2009) put theory forth that posits purpose as developing through three central pathways: proactive (i.e., curious and motivated individuals seek opportunities and refinement over time), reactive (i.e., individuals seek clarity following a transformative life event), and social learning (i.e., individuals observe and imitate the behavior of important others). And Dweck (2017) suggests that purpose comes when the satisfaction of

one's basic needs (predictability, competence, and acceptance) leads to self coherence which in turn fosters purpose. In a similar but distinct vein, Liang et al. (2017) offered an empirically supported 4 P's model of purpose development. This model identifies connection with *people* (i.e., important others who support and inspire purpose), developing *propensity* (i.e., identification and strengthening of purpose related strengths and skills), fostering *passion* (i.e., driving interest in purposeful activities) and thinking *prosocially* (i.e., aspirations to contribute via purpose engagement) as key building blocks in purpose development. Importantly, these scholars agree that purpose develops iteratively and transactionally, meaning it involves repeated, deepening experiences and it reacts as needed to the context in which one is living.

Considering the importance of environment in purpose development, one essential context of its development occurs via experiential learning, or opportunities for hands-on engagement in activities that often align with participants' passions, facilitate social connection, cultivate skills, and positively impact others (Association for Experiential Learning, 2017). These activities are uniquely situated to bolster purpose development as they can offer opportunity for engagement with the proactive and social learning pathways to purpose by meeting the basic needs of participants and connecting them to 4 P's resources (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Klein et al., 2019). In summation, purpose likely emerges when individuals are developmentally primed to seek it and are met with adequate contextual support to foster it. Yet, despite the importance of contextual factors and experiences, few studies have evaluated purpose development within the context of experiential learning programs (notable expectations include: Bronk & Mangan, 2016; Klein et al., 2019). And even fewer have incorporated adolescent civic engagement, which can facilitate the BTS aspect of sense of purpose (Bauml et al., 2023; Malin et al., 2015).

Civic Engagement. Broadly, civic engagement involves taking action on one's own or with others with the intention of positively impacting community, society, or a matter of public concern (American Psychological Association, 2009). These actions can take many forms but largely can be categorized as volunteer efforts or political action (Ballard et al., 2019). For example, cleaning up one's community, voting, staging a peaceful protest, and raising money for a local food bank all qualify as civic engagement. Civic engagement is critical to community and society positive development (Youniss & Levine, 2009). And adolescent civic engagement is associated with higher educational attainment and income in adulthood as well as fewer risky health behaviors and fewer depressive symptoms in adulthood (Ballard et al., 2019). In other words, civic engagement shares many positive outcomes with positive youth development. In fact, theorists position civic engagement as both an outcome of and contributor to positive youth development. Specifically, Lerner et al. (2014) explain that positive development is optimized when the strengths of an adolescent are aligned with their contextual resources (e.g., family, school, community) and in turn thriving youth positively contributing to these contexts (i.e., they are civically engaged). Here, positive civic engagement is characterized by virtues of "honesty, fairness, transparency, permeability, and social justice" (Lerner et al., 2014, p. 73). Despite the mutually beneficial nature of adolescent civic engagement, countries around the globe have reported concerns regarding the low rates of enduring and impactful adolescent civic engagement in their societies (e.g., Cicognani et al., 2008). Scholars have called for an increase in programming that offers and accompanies youth through opportunities to contribute positively to their communities (Hershberg et al., 2015).

Finally, while upholding the importance of adolescent civic engagement, some critique it as a weak predictor of lifelong commitment to civic activities. Thus Malin and colleagues (2015)

proposed the construct of civic purpose (i.e., “a sustained intention to contribute to the world beyond the self through civic or political action”, p. 109). This construct brings together purpose and civic engagement by highlighting an iterative process of motivation, intention, and action to contribute to the world beyond oneself. Further, Malin et al., (2015) report findings that adolescents with high levels of civic purpose identified volunteerism, invitations from adult mentors, and initiative as central to their development of civic purpose. Importantly, critical consciousness, (i.e., the process through which people awaken to their social conditions and take action to change them) is developed through similar cycles of awareness, intention, and action (Diemer et al., 2006, 2016; Freire, 2000). While nascent empirical research supports the proposition that guided civic action can lead to civic purpose amongst youth (Bauml et al., 2023), this research remains limited and understudied in adolescent samples.

Current Study

The Climate Leaders Fellowship (CLF) is an extracurricular program that provides support to adolescents interested in climate change and environmental sustainability. Program participants (i.e., Climate Fellows) are connected virtually with like-minded peers across the globe as well as program facilitators who support them in developing and carrying out community-based volunteer projects (CLF, 2022). The CLF was piloted in the 2021-2022 school year (with distinct Fall and Spring sessions) by an established and renowned teen adventure travel and community service organization called Rustic Pathways (RP). RP partnered with the Stanford University Deliberative Democracy Lab in creating CLF, with RP taking the lead in program implementation (i.e., facilitating events and providing mentorship for CLF participants). CLF partially grew out of the adversity created by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the significant limitations on travel, RP adapted its programming to enable participating teens to

continue engaging in community service, while making connections around the globe— all without having to leave their own communities.

The present exploratory study is part of a larger mixed methods effort to evaluate both CLF and typical RP programming (i.e., travel programs). Research questions for the larger project included: (1) How do participants perceive and experience the programs' content and relationships with mentors, collaborators, and other participants? (2) What is the impact of the program on participants' sense of purpose, critical consciousness, school engagement, and wellbeing? (3) What is the contribution of relational/mentoring and curricular aspects of the program on participants' capacity to benefit from this program and to develop and sustain purpose and engagement in school? This present manuscript is specifically focused on qualitatively exploring civic engagement, purpose, and critical consciousness outcomes as well central program attributes that facilitated these changes.

Methods

Procedures

A qualitative approach was used in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Climate Fellows' experiences and program impacts. The data presented in this study were obtained via in-depth (Seidman, 1991), semi-structured interviews (Johnson, 2002). The interviews were conducted one-on-one with participants and either a Doctoral-level white, female-identifying research assistant (RA) or a Masters-level white and Asian biracial, female-identifying RA. Climate Fellows participated in the interviews in July 2022, which fell either two (i.e., Spring 2022 participants) or six (i.e., Fall 2021 participants) months after the completion of their fellowship. The interview questions centered on understanding the basics of their participation, the impact of the program on their current self, and the impact of the program

on their future self. Sample questions from the interview protocol include: “How did you become involved with CLF?”; “What specific aspects of CLF have contributed to your growth?”; “Has CLF given you a clearer sense of what you want to do in the future?” The interviews lasted 30-40 minutes in length and were all conducted via videoconference. The interviews were audio recorded, and then transcribed using the Zoom-provided transcriptions which were then carefully reviewed and corrected by trained RAs.

22 of 75 students who participated in the Fall 2021 or Spring 2022 CLF program were invited via email to voluntarily participate in an interview regarding their CLF experiences. The nine students who responded and subsequently completed the interview make up the current participant sample. Prior to completing the interview, parental written consent and participant written assent were obtained via a questionnaire on Qualtrics that also queried participants on their demographic information. At the start of the interview, participant verbal assent was obtained again, including permission to audio record the interview. All participants were given code names that they used in their demographic questionnaire and interviews, and are referred to by pseudonyms in this manuscript. This study and its procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the PI’s university prior to study onset.

Participants

Nine former CLF participants (8 females, 1 male, $M_{\text{age}} = 15.7$ years) agreed to participate in interviews. All participants had completed the CLF program in either the Fall of 2021 or the Spring of 2022. Participants’ national origins varied and included the United States, Malaysia, Canada, Dominican Republic, and Japan. See Table 1 for specific demographic information, including participants’ sex, age, race/ethnicity, country of origin, and self-identified subjective social class (Adler & Stewart, 2007). Of note, females are overrepresented in this study, which

may be partially explained by the overarching trend of higher female participation in high school volunteer programs (Planty & Regnier, 2003).

Table 1

Demographics Table

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Country of Origin	Subjective Social Status
Aria	Female	15	Asian American	USA	Middle Class
Eleanor	Female	15	White/American	USA	Upper Class
Jana	Female	15	Asian/Malaysian	Malaysia	Middle Class
Sophia	Female	15	Asian/White	Canada	Upper-Middle Class
Tia	Female	15	Asian/Indian	USA	Middle Class
Hannah	Female	16	Asian/Malaysian	Malaysia	Middle Class
Luis	Male	16	Latino	Dominican Republic	Upper Class
Lydia	Female	17	White/American	USA	Upper-Middle Class
Naomi	Female	17	Asian/Japanese	Japan	Upper-Middle Class

Reflexivity

The positionality and previous experiences of researchers has the potential to influence the analysis of results. To account for this, all of the researchers engaged in reflexivity practices throughout the data collection, analysis process, and writing of the present manuscript (Darawsheh, 2014). Each researcher on the team reflected in writing on how their identities and experiences relate to the data set and then shared aloud with the team at the onset of the project. Team members returned to their positionality collectively and individually throughout the research process. All team members acknowledged that they have nuanced experience researching purpose as well as a passion for studies on youth purpose based on personal experiences. For example, one of the team members reflected on having an internship and engaging in volunteer programs which had a large impact on her identity and in turn, may

influence how she understands the participants' experiences. Overall, we acknowledge that our identities, interests, and experiences may inform the study results, and therefore we engaged in reflexivity to improve our awareness of these biases in order to limit their impact on our analysis.

Data Analysis

A consensual qualitative research (CQR) approach was utilized in the present study. CQR is an appropriate methodology as our sample falls in the recommended range of 8-15 participants and our study goals included gaining a deeper understanding of individuals' firsthand experiences with the CLF program (Hill et al., 2005). A semi-structured and open-ended interview protocol was employed in alignment with CQR data collection best practices (Hill et al., 2005). After data had been collected, a team of three trained research assistants (RAs) came together and worked collaboratively throughout the formal analysis stage (Hill et al., 2005). The RA team first read and tabulated interview data independently and then met weekly to reach consensus in transforming tabulated data into domains (i.e., topics utilized to cluster and segment the data; Hill et al., 2005). Some codes, including some based in the 4 P's of purpose development (e.g., "new connections and social support", "prosocial intentions"; Liang et al., 2017) and in the three stages of Critical Consciousness (e.g., "CLF as context for critical action", "new knowledge/awareness of the world"; Diemer et al., 2015) were deductively incorporated into the codebook as interview protocols were guided by these frameworks. Using a domain start list in this manner is consistent with past CQR practices (Hill et al., 2005). Inductively derived codes were added as analysis continued (e.g., "content of individual's project", "description of a challenge"). Additionally, deductive codes were adjusted as needed to best fit the data. For example, the critical consciousness codes were changed to civic development codes as it became

clear that critical consciousness development was not universally experienced by all participants (e.g., “CLF as context for *critical* action” became “CLF as context for *civic* action”).

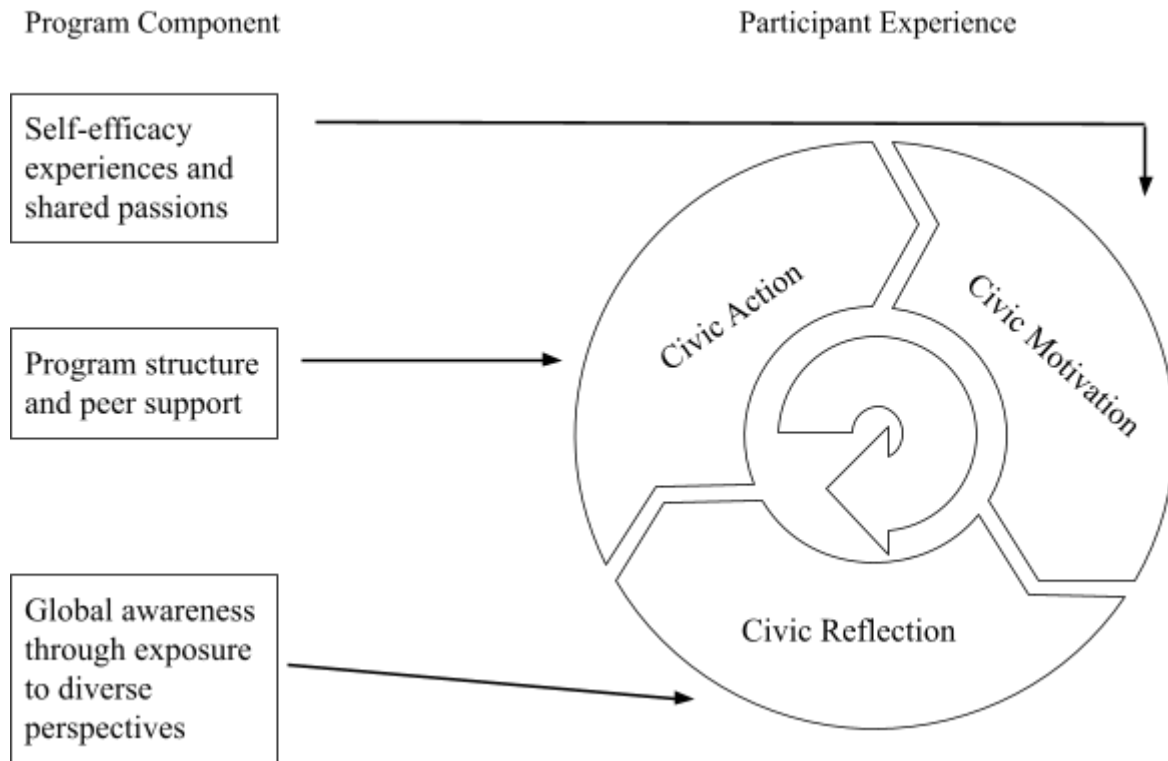
In order to maintain consensus regarding the coding creation and application process as well as to identify and challenge any impacts of bias or incongruencies in coding, the team continued weekly meetings until all interviews had been coded. Once this process was complete, the data was discussed with an independent researcher whose comments were then considered and translated into appropriate revisions by the original coding team. After this review, the RA team worked together to group codes into more refined themes via cross analysis of transcripts. The most prominent or general (i.e., present in all or nearly all transcripts) themes were: civic action (codes in this theme included: CLF as context for civic action, content of individual project, new connections or social support), civic motivation (codes in this theme included: CLF shaping purpose, experience of self efficacy, prosocial intentions), and civic reflection (codes in this theme included: new knowledge/awareness of the world, description of program).

Results

Interviewed Climate Fellows all reported positive gains as a result of their participation in CLF. Across the interviews, participants highlighted similar impactful experiences of the program. These included: feeling effective in taking civic *action* toward making positive change in their communities, more expansive *reflection* about the world and climate change, and deepened *motivation* to continue engaging in prosocial endeavors. These themes, as well as the key attributes of the program that facilitated these outcomes (including structure and support to scaffold project completion, exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences, and promotion of self efficacy via mastery experiences, and shared passions), are discussed in greater detail as well as depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Unique CLF Components and Related Participant Outcomes



Taking Action

A central component of CLF participation is to plan and execute a climate change-focused, community-based volunteer project. Jana explained, “[CLF is] basically a program where students all over the world, they come together virtually and they hold this project in their own local communities related to climate change.” Through this requirement, all participants engaged in civic action via their individual volunteer projects. Each participant’s project is described, in their own words, in Table 2. Of note, most projects also included researching climate change/their specific project of focus, and informational campaigns (e.g., making flyers, Instagram posts about climate change).

Table 2

Participant Climate Projects

Participant	Project Description
Aria	“We set up like a bottle drive for the entire school...we just created a school club out of it and do like monthly bottle drives but like a different club would host them each month to get the charity benefits.”
Eleanor	“I surveyed people in my [boarding school] dorm about their plastic usage...I found that, basically, the only source of plastic wastage in the dining hall...was [from] people going back to their dorms...[with] takeout plates. And so...[I created] a chore system...where people can bring plates back to their dorm and then...somebody on chores will bring it back to the...dining hall where then they can be washed and reused.”
Jana	“[We had] an educational and fundraising campaign...focused mainly on the food waste in our school...So we organized events like...a donation drive...and we'll send them to orphanages and...to charities...We also invited a guest speaker...she [an environmental council leader in a local university] also elaborated more on climate change, and how waste disposal issues play a part in climate change.”
Sophia	“[We collaborated] with food banks so we could help people that are dealing with the impacts of COVID, but also higher prices for food due to climate related weather disasters. So we ran the food drive for about 2 weeks at my school...we raised over 700 pounds of food..”
Tia	“I made a website on [the detrimental environmental and socioeconomic impacts of fast fashion] and...just [tried] creating something...that would allow people to understand, ‘oh it's not just that fast fashion’s bad, but here's why it's bad and here are other resources that you can use.”
Hannah	“We tried to donate whatever we could by doing the 3 R’s...we donated to an orphanage...we also printed pamphlets that just say let's stop climate change like for example...we can reduce air pollution.”
Luis	“We used [bodegas and colmados in low income areas] as a keystone area where we placed trash cans and we just communicated with other people that frequented there, we picked up trash...we used this really important part of the community where a lot of trash is produced...as a way to communicate with the community about how they could recycle.”
Lydia	“I brought a bunch of statistics [to my apartment building superintendent] about recycling...and so we got a bunch of recycling bins, and I put them in the garbage room on each floor and now we have 46 floors with working recycling systems.”
Naomi	“[We had] a week long gaming/fundraising event, where we presented about the impacts that we are facing as Japanese residents of typhoons and natural disasters”

Participants highlighted the program structure and peer accountability offered by CLF as central to their ability to take action and complete their volunteer projects. For example, Aria shared:

The most fun part was actually acting on it, because like you just say that...you're going to do something, but you never end up doing it, so this was kind of like, okay, I have like until May 30th to figure everything out and actually complete it. Um so because of the timeframe, it really pushes you to actually do it, rather than just think about it.

Sophia shared that the opportunity to engage in civic action was a central driver of her motivation to join CLF. She says, “[What] drew me was that you're really doing hands on work. You're making your own project, it's not so much that you're just talking about issues. But you get to be part of the solution, and do something yourself.” The CLF program structure was found to be appealing and motivating.

Participants also explained how making connections with other Climate Fellows was supportive in completing their projects, and held one another accountable for continuing to take civic action. For example, Naomi reflected:

We all had a shared vision of raising awareness and yet having different projects that we did in our local communities...those firsthand experiences are different from things that you read off online, so just having that discussion, even if it was online, it just felt really raw and I really enjoyed that.

Similarly, Tia described how the CLF community specifically, was supportive:

Every week, we would come together and you'd meet multiple people across multiple different countries, so...it isn't just other American children that are talking to you. It's from people from like India, people from Singapore etc. So it's

a ton of people coming together, talking about their specific societies and environments and you would kind of discuss how far your project has gotten, but also bounce ideas off of each other.

Finally, in addition to the CLF community, many participants noted that their projects enabled them to strengthen and leverage relationships outside of CLF when faced with challenges in implementing their volunteer projects. Sophia voiced:

Moving the food that was really challenging. But, I got a lot of friends and teachers that were able to help me push up the boxes because we had to push them up a hill. It was very difficult, but we managed to do it in the end.

Jana echoed a similar experience, “it was indeed a very successful project, because I had a really good support system from my peers and my teachers and they really supported me throughout the event itself.” In all, participants described taking civic action as enjoyable and empowering and credited these accomplishments to relational support within and outside of the CLF program.

Practicing Reflection

All of the participants discussed engaging in reflection about themselves and their place in the world (i.e., learning to question social structures) either as a motivator for involvement and/or as a result of active participation in the CLF program. Specifically, interview data revealed that participants came in with their own climate and community knowledge, shared that knowledge with others, and in turn learned from the diverse perspectives of their program peers around the world. These reflective processes allowed them to deepen and broaden their global awareness and informed their climate projects. In fact, many participants highlighted their appreciation of becoming connected with peers around the world through CLF.

Some of the participants demonstrated that they had previously reflected on the issue of climate change, in conjunction with other social justice issues, and considered its impacts on their communities. For example, Luis was motivated to participate in CLF because, “in my country there's a lot of wealth inequality and many people live in slums, so I, with two other people that were in the program, thought that we should address that issue.” Naomi also felt she had a space in the CLF to share what she had been noticing in her community, “I got to share what's actually happening in Japan of like fluctuating climates or just typhoons every week in certain seasons or just plastic packaging, a lot of plastic packaging happening in Japan.”

Relatedly, participants appreciated being able to hear diverse perspectives on the various climate issues being discussed. Importantly, other students participating in the program across the globe were the source of increased contextual reflection and global awareness. Sophia described the CLF meetings as:

It's also a great way to open up your perspective and hear from students that are living in different parts of the world. So you really get to see what climate change is like in different parts of the world, and how people think about it as well, and how things are different.

Almost all participants agreed that they developed a greater global awareness and deeper knowledge due to the sharing of perspectives and knowledge between the global participants. Tia described it as a process of sharing and learning that allowed your community and someone else's community to be bettered:

If you lived in, I guess a privileged environment, or in like I guess a developing country, it would be ‘oh this sounds really good’, but someone in another environment that may not be in the same position might be like, ‘well, you haven't

really thought about this part' or someone that might have like a different set of ideas might be like 'oh but, did you think about this part.' So it's like really fleshing out all of the ideas that you can, as well as trying to impact the environment that you live in, but also other environments.

Eleanor similarly shared, "The privilege I have... being a climate leader, just understanding the difference in my community versus how other communities treat it, how can I help my community and then being inspired by those other people how they help." Aria also noted that the CLF meetings, "kind of made me think on like a larger scale" and "it's like you're putting on glasses when you're really like blind."

Participants' reflections and perspectives, both prior knowledge and gained knowledge and awareness from meetings, informed students' climate projects. Tia, in her fast fashion climate project, thought critically about how the climate issue intersects with other social issues, specifically socioeconomic status:

Because, at the end of the day, fast fashion, is also something that's really important for people that are low income or that can't afford clothing and other areas so it's not just something that can just automatically be gotten rid of, because you also have to think about people in your environment, people in your society. So just trying to shift the gears and trying to give alternate thoughts and stuff especially just in your local environment and other environments.

And Luis recognized that for change to occur from his project, he would also have to implement an educative portion in order to best meet the needs of his community:

[We did] a two part project where we would do an education campaign and then an actual operation, we would go and pick up trash and actually teach people...the

importance of recycling and provide them the trash cans and providing them with the ways so that they could speak to their government to the local government or to you know, pick up trash themselves and have ways to get rid of it.

Gaining more awareness also pushed participants to be more motivated to search for more knowledge or heighten their concern and passion beyond the fellowship. This was the case for Hannah. She stated, “ever since I started this climate change fellowship, I’ve been starting to be more concerned about my community and also my country basically.” Both sharing their own perspectives and subsequent exposure to diverse perspectives within the CLF deepened and motivated participants’ civic reflection.

Bolstering Motivation

Participants not only began to question existing social structures, but they also expressed increased motivation (i.e., perceived capacity and commitment) to help their communities and continue to make an impact. For some participants, the experience of gaining new climate-related knowledge informed their civic motivation. Tia, who researched fast fashion for her project, stated,

The idea of fast fashion in general was something that I always found a bit unsettling, but now that I have a lot more information about it, I want to be able to start projects, whether that be within my own school and have a specific sector of like the climate or environmental clubs specifically focusing on this part of the environment, just like clothing and what you're consuming. So I would definitely try to propose that and push that forward in the future, because I would definitely like to continue with that.

In a similar vein, many participants discovered a passion for climate change and felt motivated to pursue related goals. Jana reflected, “the more I learn about climate change and...different perspectives of people in this program, it made me clear that okay, this is the right thing for me. I have to— this is my thing. Climate change is my thing.” As far as tangible goals, Jana noted that the program gave her “an insight on what I'm gonna study further.” Hannah came into the program without having “any clue” about climate change, and became very passionate about learning more, even asking teachers in her school to “teach [her] deeply about climate change.”

It is important to note that while the program did not motivate every participant to continue pursuing climate change-related endeavors, it did have a lasting prosocial impact. For several participants, preexisting passions in the program formed the basis of their motivations. Naomi, who has long-term goals to become an entrepreneur, stated,

But as I started thinking about, entrepreneurship and starting my own business, how could the things I'm doing now contribute to that or help me start a more sustainable business that could impact my local community, and in that way... definitely seeing people [in CLF] who are motivated to take action for these causes inspired me.

Similarly, Eleanor discussed her broader, lifelong vision of pursuing a helping career, saying the program made her realize that she “really want[s] to be a person to help.” Specifically, her experience in the program corroborated her desire to “help organize people and their voices to communicate effectively.” Therefore, the program helped both validate and refine other-oriented goals, whether they were related to the climate or not.

Overwhelmingly, participants’ motivation stemmed from increased self-efficacy as a result of the experience of succeeding in their community-based projects. Sophia reported, “I

think I realize now that making a difference locally actually has like a much bigger impact than what you think it does.” This realization led Sophia to start thinking of “different ways I could help my community and school.” When Lydia succeeded in implementing 46 recycling bins in her apartment building despite pushback and challenges, the experience made her realize that “even though I was only 16-17 there's still like so much I can do.” Finally, Eleanor described the critical distinction between engagement in school and making a difference in her community:

Before doing [CLF] I knew that I could make a change, but my changes were more like school presentations or flyers or something and just being able to actually make a change in my community was really impactful and inspiring and it made me really hopeful for the future.

In all, participants’ responses suggest that CLF may serve as a just-in-time intervention, meaning their new sparks of passion were ignited into a more enduring motivation.

Discussion

The present findings add to the burgeoning literature regarding the connections between positive identity, purpose development, and civic engagement. Participants describe how CLF offered timely and supported intervention which empowered them to transform a spark of interest into an enduring commitment to civic engagement as incorporated into their novel senses of purpose. Participants engaged in civic action, meaningful reflection, and experienced bolstered motivation by connecting with like-minded, globally diverse peers and mentors, and strengthening their self efficacy through mastery experiences.

Beyond Civic Engagement

At its core, CLF is a civic engagement program in which all adolescent participants engage in individualized, climate-change-focused, community-based volunteer projects. And all

participants endorsed entering the CLF with preexisting motivation to engage civically. They name however, that the CLF offered them essential scaffolding and support to turn that motivation into action. This action on its own was impactful as respondents noted that their civic engagement constituted positive and self-efficacy building experiences. This is consistent with past research, in that experiencing success, or mastery, in a specific domain (e.g., civic action), can contribute to domain-specific self-efficacy enhancement (Bandura, 2001). And scaffolded opportunities for civic engagement have been identified as essential, but not sufficient, for civic development for all youth (Malin et al., 2015).

Thus, the mechanisms through which civic action may lead to nascent civic purpose must be considered (DeWitz et al., 2009) as purpose may be the link between adolescent civic engagement and the well-documented subsequent positive outcomes during adulthood (Ballard et al., 2019; Hershberg et al., 2015). The CLF participants shed light on their own pathways from civic-related self efficacy to civic purpose. Participants reveal that CLF offers meaningful peer and mentor connections as well as opportunities to broaden one's perspective on global issues and their place in them. These relational connections and perspective-broadening opportunities may have ignited an iterative cycle of deepening civic action, reflection, and motivation. In other words, CLF may offer pathways through which participants can connect their actions with their values, goals, and sense of self. This practice is essential for adolescents to develop identities that are congruent with their daily actions via purpose formation.

These findings, though significant, are in many ways unsurprising given past research on purpose formation. Specifically, experiential learning has previously been identified as a fertile context for purpose development (Klein et al., 2019), positive relationships with mentors and peers have been identified as contributing to purpose (Liang et al., 2017), and a broader

awareness of one's place within their context is also associated with purpose development (Moran, 2009). The present study underscores the theoretical importance of bringing these factors together in pursuit of empowering youth toward civic purpose formation. And in practice, these findings highlight that civic engagement alone may be insufficient in creating lasting, positive change, but by pairing this engagement with reflection, mastery experiences, and relational connection, more robust impacts on adolescent positive development can occur.

Transforming Experience into Identity

It is important to note that, while motivation, reflection, and action are distinct components, participants' described them as occurring concurrently in their experience and thus as mutually reinforcing. For example, because CLF is a voluntary program, all participants entered with some amount of motivation (e.g., Tia shared, "fast fashion in general was something that I always found a bit unsettling"). This in turn led to an opportunity to take civic action, which, when paired with supportive discussion, offered material for reflection and deepened motivation. For example, Naomi expressed, "seeing [program mentors] who are motivated to take action for these causes inspired me." Participant responses offered insight into the development of civic purpose amongst adolescents and suggest that this process is iterative. And, impactful programming, like CLF, may catalyze this developmental process by offering just-in-time engagement opportunities to developmentally primed adolescents.

These findings align well with Kolb's theory of experiential learning. Specifically, Kolb (2014) postulated that learning is a process by which ideas come from and are continuously revised via experience that occurs between person and environment. Kolb articulated that true learning requires both concrete experience and abstract reasoning—one must be an actor and observer (2014). This dialectic tension is paralleled in Freire's (2000) discussion of "praxis", or

continuous and iterative reflection and action on the world in order to transform it (p. 51). When balance is found between these opposing forces, they become mutually reinforcing and deepening. In other words, learning begets learning until holistic development has occurred (Kolb, 2014). In the present study, participants describe deepening cycles of learning, reflection, and motivation that eventually give rise to deeper development in the form of civic purpose. Importantly, their responses also offer evidence of nascent critical consciousness development.

Beginnings of Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness is understood as an important subtype of civic engagement wherein the latter focuses on community wellbeing at large and the former is focused specifically on the liberation of all people (Diemer et al., 2021). Freire identified critical consciousness as a lens through which one can understand their own reality and fight back against the dynamics of power that create systems of oppression and privilege and perpetuate injustice (2000). And research has identified critical consciousness as a developmental asset, in particular for youth who experience marginalization (Diemer et al., 2016). Participants in the present study showed burgeoning signs of critical consciousness development (e.g., Tia's reflections on the disproportionate impacts of fast fashion for individuals of different socioeconomic statuses). This is especially salient given the CLF's focus on climate activism and climate change's disproportionate impact on marginalized populations (Delia & Krasny, 2018).

These early signs of critical consciousness development in CLF participants are important as they highlight how a promotive program can provoke a cascade of positive and deepening development. In fact, scholars highlight the bidirectional relationship between critical action and reflection that aligns well with CLF participants' description of their experiences with deepening civic engagement (Diemer et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2011). These findings are perhaps

additionally uniquely important as they highlight that engaging with critical consciousness during adolescence may be developmentally ideal as it can become connected to one's sense of purpose. In preparing today's youth to take on the formidable global challenges of the 21st century, CLF offers important insights regarding how best to accompany them in laying the foundation for positive change through the development of civic purpose.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present analysis highlights how the CLF engaged participants in civic motivation, action, and reflection. The results suggest that civic engagement can catalyze one's sense of purpose and identity development when met with appropriate contextual support. These results hold tremendous potential for future programming and necessitate further research regarding youth civic engagement programs, including and beyond the CLF. Nevertheless, there are limitations to the present findings that must be noted. Firstly, because this study draws data from only one program, results cannot be generalized. Though, the findings may be transferable to similar programs. Additionally, the sample size (n=9), while sufficient for qualitative analysis, is small and thus further limits generalizability. Ultimately, the researchers' resources for data collection and the size of the CLF program itself narrowed the size of the participant pool. Also, while the study participants are diverse in nationality and ethnicity, female and middle class/higher SES individuals are overrepresented. On one hand, hearing perspectives across cultures strengthens the universality of study findings, but distinct cultural perspectives are limited by the small sample size. While these demographic variations are representative of the CLF program population they still serve as study limitations. Future research would do well to include a larger sample that is more diverse in all demographic areas.

The current study was also cross sectional in nature and participants self-selected to participate in both the program and interviews. Given these attributes, causality cannot be determined. Experimental designs (e.g., with a control group) may bolster the suggested relationship between CLF participation and adolescent development. Longitudinal data, including data collection before/after program completion, and later follow up, would also deepen understanding of how the CLF influences participants' development across time. Similarly, while the qualitative approach produced rich and descriptive data, use of a mixed-method approach in the future may allow for a larger sample size and offer greater clarity. Also, drawing data from other sources (e.g., interviewing program leaders or parents) may offer further insights. Overall, the limitations of this study serve to offer recommendations for future research aimed at building on the current results.

Conclusion

In today's world, adolescents face formidable individual and collective challenges. In many ways, our contemporary pedagogical methods are failing to support their positive identity and civic purpose development (Damon et al., 2003). Given these circumstances, experiential learning opportunities for adolescents may be more important than ever before. The present exploratory study sought to understand how the development of sense of purpose, civic engagement, and critical consciousness may be connected within adolescents. Results suggest that the CLF program offers connection, experience, and reflection in a manner that cultivates civic purpose development right when needed in the adolescent developmental trajectory. In the pursuit of raising purposeful and civically committed individuals, CLF offers important lessons in transforming youth service and passion into lasting change.

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