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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 shaped adolescents' development. A directed content analysis 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 experiencing civic reflection, motivation, and action through their CLF involvement. Findings offer supporting evidence that the development of civic purpose may be associated with burgeoning critical consciousness. Recommendations for future programming, study limitations, and implications are discussed.

Keywords: civic engagement; purpose; adolescence; positive youth development; qualitative methods



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1. Introduction

Adolescents are navigating coming-of-age tasks in the context of a rapidly evolving and often challenging 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). Among the primary barriers faced by adolescents are increasing mental health issues, societal pressures, and environmental concerns. Mental health, in particular, is steadily declining among adolescents [1,2], a trend that has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. Additionally, adolescents are confronted with the stress of societal expectations and the looming threat of environmental degradation, which compound their challenges. Unique interventions that both bolster assets such as resiliency and purpose and offer adolescents tools to overcome such 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 the most crucial step 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 following question: How do participants perceive the influence of the program, including its action-oriented and relational aspects, on their purpose development, critical consciousness, and wellbeing?

1.1. Adolescent Development

The field of psychology has a long history of conceptualizing the teenage years as a dark time in the human lifespan, characterized by “storm and stress” [4] (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 [5]. 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 [6]. Importantly, the central task of positive development during adolescence is cultivating a sense of identity [7].

Identity, or an internal sense of self that evolves and drives beliefs and behaviors, is often considered to be the ultimate answer to the question, “Who am I?” [8]. Research shows that those with 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 [9,10]. Individuals with a strong sense of identity also tend to experience lower anxiety levels than their non-achieved counterparts [11]. Moreover, those with a moral or civic identity are more likely to contribute positively to their communities and the world consistently across their lifespans [12].

Considering the profound influence 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 [13]. During adolescence, one’s internal resources (e.g., self-image, physical health) as well as one’s contextual and societal supports (e.g., relationships with parents and peers, experiential learning opportunities) interact dynamically to shape identity development [6,13]. Research has identified many contributors to identity formation amongst adolescents, but the present manuscript focuses on two key tasks of positive identity formation: purpose development 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 [14].

1.2. Purpose

Scholars define beyond-the-self (BTS) purpose as a “central, self-organizing life aim” [15] (p. 304) that is both meaningful to the self and significantly contributes to the world beyond the self [16]. Purpose has also been described as acting on one’s self-coherent identity to create meaning in the world [17]. As a distinct but connected construct to identity, purpose development also largely begins during adolescence [16]. Similar to identity development, adolescents who endorse beyond-the-self purpose are more likely to succeed academically [16,18] and experience higher educational self-efficacy as compared to their less-purposeful peers [19]. Highly purposeful people are also more likely to be physically and mentally well [20], be grittier [18], and more hopeful about the future [21]. Yet, empirical research identifies that only about 20% of youth endorse high levels of BTS purpose [22]. Purpose development, according to this normative definition, is complex and requires sensitive awareness of one’s own internal experience and motivations as well as of the surrounding social context and structures [23]. Thus, prominent scholars have offered theory regarding the development of purpose as occurring through interaction between individual and contextual characteristics.

Notably, Kashdan and McKnight put forth a theory 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) [15]. And Dweck 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 [17]. In a similar but distinct vein, the empirically supported 4 P's model of purpose development 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 [24]. 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 benefit others [25]. These activities are uniquely situated to bolster purpose development as they can offer an 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 [15,26]. 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, most studies have missed evaluating purpose development within the context of experiential learning programs; a few notable exceptions exist [26,27]. And even fewer have incorporated adolescent civic engagement, which can facilitate the BTS aspect of purpose [14,28].

1.3. Civic Engagement

Broadly, civic engagement involves taking action on one's own or with others with the intention of positively contributing to their community, society, or a matter of public concern [29]. These actions can take many forms but largely can be categorized as volunteer efforts or political action [30]. 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's positive development [31]. 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 [30]. 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 a contributor to positive youth development. Specifically, Lerner and colleagues 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, the thriving youths positively contribute to these contexts (i.e., they are civically engaged) [32]. Here, positive civic engagement is characterized by the virtues of "honesty, fairness, transparency, permeability, and social justice" [32] (p. 73). Despite the mutually beneficial nature of adolescent civic engagement, countries around the globe have reported concerns regarding the low rates of enduring adolescent civic engagement in their societies [33]. Scholars have called for an increase in programming that offers and accompanies youths through opportunities to contribute positively to their communities [34].

Finally, while upholding the importance of adolescent civic engagement, it has also been critiqued as a weak predictor of lifelong commitment to civic activities [14]. Thus, Malin and colleagues proposed the construct of civic purpose—"a sustained intention to contribute to the world beyond the self through civic or political action" [14] (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, adolescents with high levels of civic purpose identified volunteerism, invitations from adult mentors, and initiative as central to their development of civic purpose [14]. 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 [35–37]. While nascent empirical research supports the proposition that guided civic action can lead to civic purpose amongst youth [28], this research remains limited and understudied in adolescent samples.

1.4. Current Study

The Climate Leaders Fellowship (CLF) is an extracurricular program that provides support to adolescents interested in designing and implementing volunteer projects in their own communities. The goal of the CLF is to promote youth leadership in developing programs that combat climate change and promote 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 their 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 examine the influences of CLF and RP programming (i.e., travel programs) on identity and purpose cultivation among participants. 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 influence of the program on participants' 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 as the central program attributes that facilitated these changes.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Procedures

A qualitative approach was used in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Climate Fellows' experiences and program effects. The data presented in this study were obtained via in-depth [38], semi-structured interviews [39]. 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 as well as the influence of the program on their current and future self. The interview protocol is included in Appendix B of this manuscript. The interviews lasted 30–40 min 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.

Twenty-two of seventy-five students who participated in the Fall 2021 or Spring 2022 CLF program were nominated by program leadership as individuals who excelled in the program and were subsequently invited via email to voluntarily participate in an interview regarding their CLF experiences. As is precedent in qualitative research with adolescents, less than 50% of those invited to interview responded. The nine students who responded and then completed the interview make up the current participant sample.

While, as always, a larger sample size would have been preferable, fortunately, researchers did identify nascent evidence that sufficient data and theoretical saturation were reached (i.e., further sampling would not yield meaningful new information [40,41]). This evidence included later interviewees largely repeating and reinforcing what was expressed in earlier data, as well as analysis revealing stable and well-exemplified themes and categories [41]. 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.

2.2. Participants

Nine former CLF participants (8 females, 1 male, $M_{age} = 15.7$ 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 [42]. Of note, females are overrepresented in both the CLF program and this study, which may be partially explained by the overarching trend of higher female participation in high school volunteer programs [43].

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

2.3. Reflexivity

The positionality and previous experiences of researchers have the potential to influence the analysis of results. Recognizing this, our team engaged in reflexivity practices throughout the data collection, analysis process, and manuscript writing [44]. Initially, each team member individually wrote a detailed reflection on how their personal identities and experiences might relate to the data set. These reflections included aspects such as cultural background, academic training, and previous research experiences. For example, one team member reflected on how having an internship and volunteer experiences shaped her understanding of youth purpose, which could potentially color her interpretation of the participants' engaging in volunteer programs which had a large influence on her identity and in turn, may influence how she understands the participants' experiences.

After compiling these reflections, the team collectively shared and discussed them at the beginning of the project. This discussion aimed to identify and acknowledge potential biases and preconceptions each member brought to the study. It was a crucial step in creating a shared understanding of how our diverse backgrounds could influence our perspectives on the data.

Throughout the research process, we revisited our positionality statements both collectively and individually. This ongoing practice of reflexivity was not a one-time event but a

continuous effort to maintain awareness of our biases. It involved regular team meetings where we critically examined our interpretations of the data in light of our acknowledged positionalities, actively challenging each other's perspectives when necessary.

In conclusion, while we recognize that our identities, interests, and experiences inevitably inform the study results, our consistent and rigorous reflexivity practices were instrumental in managing their influence. By actively engaging in these practices, we aimed to limit the impact of our biases and strive for an authentic representation of the participants' perspectives in our analysis. Interestingly, rather than creating tension, our reflexivity practice enhanced the richness and nuance of our understanding of the data, deepening our analysis and broadening our perspectives.

2.4. Data Analysis

The team of three trained research assistants (RAs) entered the formal analysis stage with plans to utilize a consensual qualitative research (CQR) approach [45]. CQR seemed to be an appropriate methodology as the 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 [45]. Additionally, a semi-structured and open-ended interview protocol was employed in alignment with CQR data collection best practices [45]. However, as the RA team initiated analysis by independently immersing themselves in (i.e., reading and re-reading) and open-coding the data, they quickly recognized that the themes arising from the data were aligned with established theories on purpose development and critical consciousness and therefore pivoted to employ a directed content analysis approach [45,46]. Because the initial steps of CQR and directed content analysis overlap, the team agreed it was methodologically sound to switch to a directed content analysis approach [45,46]. Moreover, given the opportunity to extend existing theory via directed content analysis' usage of deductive and theoretically driven codes, while simultaneously acknowledging our lack of pure objectivity as researchers, this methodology switch was seen as the best way to contribute to the existing literature [46].

Thus, the RA team open-coded the first three interviews, which was informed by the three stages of the Critical Consciousness framework [47] and the 4 P's of purpose development framework [24]. During this initial process, the RA team utilized the data from the first three interviews to develop the initial codebook, which included the code names, theory-informed definitions, and example quotes [46]. This codebook was expanded as RAs read more interviews. And to ensure trustworthiness in the process, the team met weekly to review each independently coded interview and reach a consensus on codes [48]. Of note, some inductively derived codes were added as analysis continued (e.g., "content of individual's project", "description of a challenge") in an effort to offer a richer description of the data. Deductive codes were also 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").

Once all of the interviews had been coded, in an effort to combat bias, the data was discussed with an independent researcher whose comments were then considered and translated into appropriate revisions by the original coding team [46]. After this review, the RA team worked together to cross analyze the transcripts by comparing applied codes across transcripts and drawing connections between them. Frequently and consistently, appearing codes were then grouped into more refined themes. After recursive consideration of the whole dataset, frequent and consistent (i.e., present in all or nearly all transcripts) themes were the context of civic action (codes in this theme included CLF as context for civic action, content of individual project, new connections or social support), bolstered civic motivation (codes in this theme included CLF shaping purpose, experience of self-efficacy, prosocial intentions), and influence of civic reflection (codes in this theme included new knowledge/awareness of the world, description of program).

3. Results

Interviewed Climate Fellows all reported beneficial outcomes as a result of their participation in CLF. Across the interviews, participants highlighted similar influential experiences of the program. The highest frequency themes coded in the data 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 program attributes that facilitated these outcomes, are discussed in greater detail.

3.1. Taking Action

A central component of CLF participation is to plan and execute a climate change-focused, community-based volunteer project. Jana explained that “[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”. This action-oriented requirement ensures that all participants actively engage in civic action through their individual projects. Each participant’s project is described, in their own words, in Table A1 (see Appendix A). 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).

Given globally low rates of adolescent civic action [33], consideration of how Climate Fellows were able to follow through with completing their projects is warranted. Participants highlighted the program structure and peer accountability offered by CLF as being central to their ability to take action and complete their volunteer projects. For example, Aria shared that “[CLF] was kind of like, okay, I have until 30 May to figure everything out and actually complete it. 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 they held one another accountable for continuing to take civic action. For example, Naomi reflected the following:

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: “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 the following:

I got a lot of friends and teachers that were able to help me push up the boxes [of donated food] 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 named extrinsic support from the CLF program structure and important people who believed in their capabilities, within and outside of the CLF program, as central to their success in taking civic action [24].

3.2. 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 from around the world. These reflective processes allowed them to deepen and broaden their global awareness and in turn 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 influence 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 . . . 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 [what’s happening with] plastic packaging”.

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 follows:

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. Eleanor shared that “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, “[I realized that] fast fashion is also something that’s important for people that are low income. . . it’s not just something that can just automatically be gotten rid of, because you also have to think about. . . 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”. 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 that “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 participants’ civic reflection and sparked intrinsic, purposeful interest or passion [24].

3.3. 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 to make long-term contributions. For some participants, the experi-

ence of gaining new climate-related knowledge informed their civic motivation. Tia, who researched fast fashion for her project, stated

I want to be able to start projects. . .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 their propensity or intrinsic strength [24] for climate change work and felt motivated to pursue related goals. Jana reflected that "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 long-term 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".

While the program did not motivate every participant to continue pursuing climate change-related endeavors, it did bolster other prosocial motivations. 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 that "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 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. . .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 sparks of interest were amplified into purpose-related motivations through their participation in CLF.

4. Discussion

The present findings extend existing purpose development theory by offering further support for the importance of experiential learning in promoting civic engagement and purpose development. Participants describe how CLF provided a supportive and timely intervention that facilitated their ability to channel their existing interests into concrete actions and bolstered their motivation to pursue civic purposes. Specifically, participants engaged in prosocial civic action, supported by the collaborative environment of globally diverse peers and mentors. These relational and prosocial experiences encouraged meaningful reflection on their passions and reinforced their confidence in their own propensities [24]. The connections between CLF program components and participant outcomes that were revealed through data analysis are represented in Figure 1. This highlights how the program elements can play a role in supporting participants' agency, thus contributing to their observed outcomes.

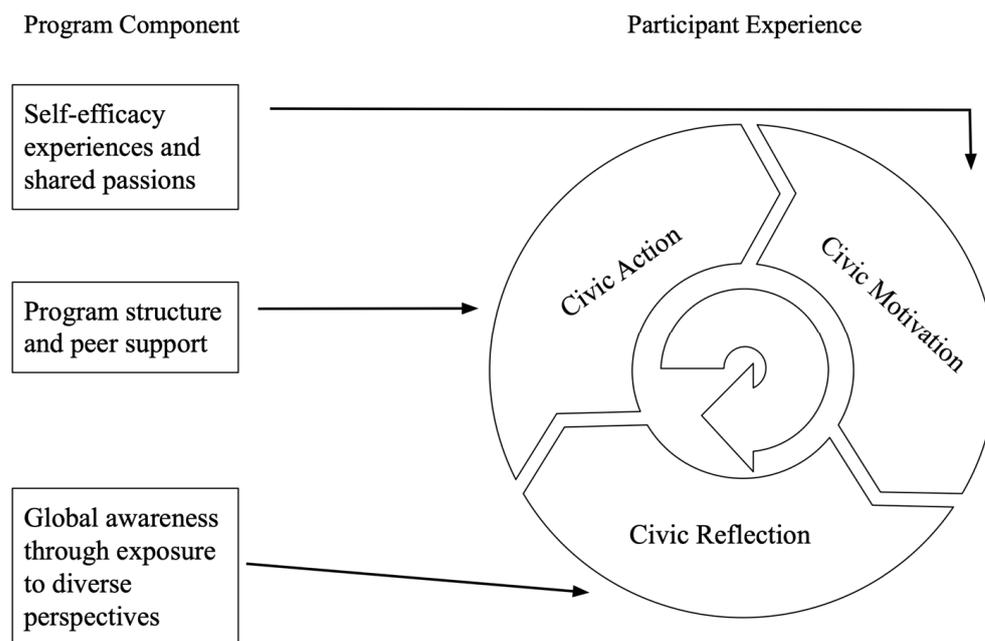


Figure 1. Unique CLF components and related participant outcomes.

4.1. 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 state, however, that the CLF offered them essential scaffolding and support to turn that motivation into action. This action on its own was influential as civic engagement is, in and of itself, purpose engagement as respondents noted that their civic engagement constituted positive and self-efficacy building experiences [24]. 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 [49]. And scaffolded opportunities for civic engagement have been identified as essential, but not sufficient, for civic development for all youth [14].

The study's findings suggest theoretical implications for the role of experiential learning in promoting civic engagement and purpose development. Drawing on Lerner et al.'s [6] framework of positive youth development and Malin et al.'s [14] concept of civic purpose, our results underscore the potential of structured, experiential learning programs like CLF in fostering adolescents' civic engagement and facilitating the development of a sustained purpose. This supports the notion that experiential learning can be a vital component in guiding adolescents towards a more purposeful engagement in civic activities.

Importantly, adolescents are drawn to civic engagement for a variety of reasons (e.g., looking attractive to colleges), and therefore, participants' original motivation may have been more transactional and thus not necessarily driven by purpose. But the present data indicate that CLF engagement became something more connected to purpose development. Namely, participants described identifying their propensities and passions (e.g., "I've been starting to be more concerned about my community"; "Climate change is my thing") as well as developing long-term motivation to continue engaging civically/prosocially across their lives (e.g., "I want to study [climate change] further"; "[moving forward I want to] help organize people and their voices"). In this way, CLF participants shed light on a possible pathway from civic-related self-efficacy to future civic purpose. Indeed, past research suggests that even those who engaged in involuntary (i.e., mandated) volunteering are more likely to endorse that they would volunteer again following the experience [50]. In other words, no matter the original motivation, the act of volunteering

may set in motion a prolonged desire to engage in volunteerism. Moreover, participants reveal that CLF offers meaningful peer and mentor connections as well as opportunities to broaden participants' perspectives 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 (i.e., purpose). This practice is essential for adolescents to develop identities that are congruent with their daily actions via purpose formation. Thus, civic purpose may be the link between adolescent civic engagement and the subsequent positive outcomes during adulthood [19,30,35]. Future longitudinal research is necessary to consider these possible pathways.

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 [26], positive relationships with mentors and peers have been identified as contributing to purpose [24], and a broader awareness of one's place within their context is also associated with purpose development [23]. 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 influences on adolescent positive development can occur.

4.2. 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 that "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 that "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 influential programming, like CLF, may catalyze this developmental process by offering just-in-time engagement opportunities to developmentally primed adolescents. This iterative process of motivation, action, and reflection in civic contexts not only cultivates civic purpose but also plays a critical role in shaping adolescents' identities. Through civic engagement, adolescents construct a sense of self that is intertwined with community wellbeing and social responsibility.

These findings align well with Kolb's theory of experiential learning. Specifically, Kolb 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 [51]. This dialectic tension is paralleled in Freire's discussion of "praxis" or continuous and iterative reflection and action on the world in order to transform it [37] (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 [51]. 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. Developing a civic purpose during adolescence has far-reaching implications. It prepares young individuals for lifelong engagement in societal issues, fosters empathy and social awareness, and equips them with the skills to navigate and contribute positively to an increasingly complex world. Importantly, their responses also offer evidence of nascent critical consciousness development.

4.3. 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 [52]. 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 [37]. And research has identified critical consciousness as a developmental asset, in particular for youth who experience marginalization [36]. Participants in the present study showed burgeoning signs of critical consciousness development (e.g., Tia's reflections on the disproportionate effects 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 effect on marginalized populations [53].

These early signs of critical consciousness development in CLF participants are important as they highlight how a promotive program might 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 [36,54]. 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 purpose development. The development of critical consciousness in adolescents is critical. It not only empowers them to recognize and challenge societal injustices but also cultivates a sense of agency and responsibility, essential qualities for the future leaders of our societies. 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.

4.4. 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 BTS 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, while this study intentionally utilized an exemplar method, focusing on participants who were actively engaged in the program and therefore received a more robust dosage of the program's offerings, it is important to note that this approach may have influenced the findings. Such a methodological choice meant that only a subset of participants, specifically those who were relatively more involved in the program, were considered. Additionally, these participants then self-selected to participate in interviews. These factors could limit the generalizability of the results, as they do not account for the experiences of those who participated less actively. To address this, future studies could explore a more diverse range of participant experiences, including those who may have had less engagement with the program, to gain a sense of what the impact of the program is even at minimal dosage levels. Future studies could explore a more diverse range of participant experiences, including those who may have had less engagement with the program. The study's generalizability is also limited due to its focus on a single program, but the insights gained may be relevant to other contexts where similar dynamics of civic engagement and identity development are at play. The study therefore contributes to a broader understanding of how youth civic engagement programs can influence adolescent development. The sample size ($n = 9$) is modest, but sufficient for qualitative analysis, and is within the range of qualitative studies on purpose [55,56]. Moreover, researchers reached sufficient data saturation. 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.

5. Conclusions

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 [16]. Given these circumstances, experiential learning opportunities for adolescents may be more important than ever before. The present study sought to explore how an extracurricular program may support adolescent civic engagement and subsequent development of purpose and critical consciousness. Results suggest that the CLF program offers connection, experience, and reflection in a manner that promotes 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 connecting youth service and passion to purpose and civic development.

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Appendix A

Table A1. 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".

Table A1. Cont.

Participant	Project Description
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"

Appendix B. Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Today is [DATE]. I am here with [STUDENT'S CODE NAME]. Thank you so much for participating in today's interview! My name is [NAME], and I'm a [POSITION] at [UNIVERSITY]. I want to ask you some questions to understand how you felt about your experience with the Climate Leaders Fellowship. I also want to ask about your current thoughts about yourself and your future, as well as the role that purpose plays in your life.

Interviewer: Do you have any questions before we get started? [PARTICIPANT ANSWERS] Great. Do I have permission to audio record this interview? [PARTICIPANT ANSWERS] Okay. Remember that you can stop the interview at any point or interrupt me with any questions you might have.

Interviewer: First, I wanted to ask you your gender pronouns? Mine are [Share your gender pronouns]. Great, thank you.

Rapport Building

- I'd love to start with just getting a general sense of who you are. Could you share with me how old you are, what grade you're in, how you like to spend your time?

Basics of CLF Participation

- What has been your involvement with the Climate Leaders Fellowship?
 - Probes: How did you become involved with CLF? (e.g., parent signed you up? Or you signed yourself up? How long was your involvement?)
- If you had to describe the CLF experience to someone who had never heard of it before, what would you say?
 - Probe: Would you recommend they participate in CLF? Why or why not?

Impacts on Current Self

- How has your CLF experiences impacted you?

- Probes: What specific aspects of CLF have contributed to your growth? And what about you, specifically, changed?
 - Major challenges or successes? How did you handle those?
 - Try to be as specific as possible/include examples
- Impacts on Future Self
- Purpose is defined as a future dream or long-term goal about what you want to do and who you want to be. Do you have a sense of what that might be for you?
 - Why do you want to do that or be that?
 - Has CLF given you a clearer sense of what you want to do in the future?
 - Probes: If so, please describe this impact.
 - Try to be as specific as possible/include examples
 - Has CLF impacted your values and/or the contributions you hope to make to the world?
 - Probe: What matters most to you in your life?; does that align with your CLF experience? Has it been impacted by your CLF experience?
 - Try to be as specific as possible/include examples
 - Think about an ideal future version of yourself. What will you be like? How will CLF have contributed to who you will be?

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