

Hope Leadership Academy Professional Learning in Character Education Supports Schools in the Creation of a Caring Community

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to determine whether participation in three years of professional learning in the Hope Leadership Academy (HLA) impacted the school as a caring community. The participants were schools that participated in the HLA and administered the School as a Caring Community Profile-II (SCCP-II) to students and adults in January 2018 and again in May 2020. This study used descriptive statistics, and results indicated an increase in schools as a caring community. Each of the five subsets of the caring community increased, indicating schools may improve as a caring community after participating in the HLA.

Keywords: Leadership, Character Education, School Culture, Climate, Professional Learning

Schools were originally created for two purposes: to help students become smart as well as to help them become good (Lickona & Davidson, 2017). In the United States, a focus has been placed on providing students with an academically challenging curriculum as evidenced by the national education laws No Child Left Behind of 2001 (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). No Child Left Behind required rigorous academic state testing with the end goal of one hundred percent of students proficient in reading and mathematics by the end of the 2014 school year along with stringent accountability measures (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). This educational reform set the standard higher for student learning than previous laws. In 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act replaced No Child Left Behind Act and reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). Every Student Succeeds Act requires all students to be taught to high academic standards with annual statewide assessments that measure individual student's progress toward meeting high academic standards. This law included accountability and positive action measures to ensure a process was in place to improve schools with consistently low graduation rates and academic progress (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). No Child Left Behind Act and Every Student Succeeds Act both focused on students becoming smart.

Every Student Succeeds Act has an additional emphasis on providing a school environment to help students become good. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) (2016), ESSA's foundation is based on the strong connection between a positive school climate where students develop character skills that result in student learning that leads to success. The act encourages and provides funding for states, districts, and schools to improve conditions for all students, enhance peer interaction, provide well-rounded education, incorporate community involvement, and service learning that ties to the curriculum (Grant et al., 2017). Schools receiving funding must use evidence-based interventions that have a positive impact on the students' intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies in addition to academic achievement. ESSA requires an increase in academic achievement and support to develop positive character: the smart and the good.

As part of the accountability portion of ESSA, states are required to use four measures: academic achievement, graduation rates, English Language proficiency, and one indicator of school or student success selected by the state in a plan (Alabama State Department of Education, n.d.; Kostyo et al., 2018). The Alabama State Department of Education chose to use school climate as the state selected indicator. Alabama's ESSA plan, submitted and approved to the state department of education, says, "Alabama plans to address school culture, student behavior, and discipline infractions" (Alabama State Department of Education, 2019, p. 41). One of the strategies listed in Alabama's ESSA plan is to "build a culture for school safety by promoting best practices in schools and local education agencies" (Alabama State Department of Education, 2019).

According to the United States Department of Education Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety (2018), the best way to provide a safe learning environment is through character education and by the creation of a positive school climate. The final report specifically suggested using the PRIMED character education framework by Dr. Marvin Berkowitz. PRIMED is an acronym for: Prioritization, Relationships, Intrinsic Motivation, Modeling, Empowerment, and Developmental Pedagogy (Berkowitz et al., 2016). Similarly, Character.org's Eleven Principles of Character Education provides a framework for effective character education that serve as guideposts for schools to develop positive character and to provide meaningful and challenging academic curriculum. The 11 Principles are: (1) promotes core values, (2) defines "character to include thinking, feeling, and doing," (3) uses a comprehensive approach, (4) creates a caring community, (5) provides students with opportunities

for moral action, (6) offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum, (7) fosters students' self-motivation, (8) unites staff through collaborative learning, (9) fosters shared leadership, (10) engages families and community members as partners, and (11) assesses the school culture and climate (Lickona et al., 2007).

The non-profit Hope Institute (2021) located in Birmingham, Alabama, hosts a three-year professional learning experience called the Hope Leadership Academy (HLA). The purpose of HLA is to inspire school teams to build a character-focused school culture in order to develop character in students. Year one of the Hope Leadership Academy consists of six professional learning sessions led by national character education experts. Year two of the HLA includes a book study, three professional learning sessions, one site visit, and a half-day of onsite consulting for each participating school. HLA participants of year three attend a two-day Eleven Principles of Character Education training, a day-long Showcase of Promising Practices, a book study, and a one-day session led by a nationally recognized character education expert. The HLA used both the PRIMED model and 11 Principles of Character Education as foundations of the leadership training.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a school that received three years of professional learning through the Hope Leadership Academy indicated an increase as a caring community. While many positive results have been expected from HLA participation, one of the expected results has been the establishment of a caring community, consistent with both the PRIMED model and the 11 Principles of Effective Character Education. This study analyzed surveys and descriptive statistics to compare changes in perceptions in the school as a caring community between January 2018 and May 2020.

Population

Six schools that participated in the Hope Leadership Academy provided access for students and adults to complete the School as a Caring Community Profile-II (SCCP_II) after the first session in January 2018, and five schools offered the survey in May 2020 after the completion of year three in the HLA. Alabama schools that participated in the HLA administered the SCCP-II to students third grade through twelfth grade, with written parental permission, and to adults, which included teachers, staff, parents, community members. Six schools participated in the survey in January 2018 and five schools in May 2020. There were three schools that participated in the January 2018 and the May 2020 administration of the survey. Three schools only participated in January 2018 and two different schools only participated in May 2020. In January 2018, 133 students and 113 adults from six Alabama schools that represented public, private, elementary, middle and high schools participated in the survey. After three years of professional learning in the HLA, schools had the option to administer the SCCP-II a second time. Five schools administered the survey to 223 students and 244 adults in May 2020.

Research Design and Instrument

The School as a Caring Community Profile-II (SCCP-II) developed by Lickona and Davidson (2003) was designed to determine stakeholder perceptions of the school regarding a caring community. The survey developers recommend administering the survey at the beginning of a character education initiative and at another point later to assess progress (Lickona & Davidson, 2003). There are 42 items with a 5-point Likert format on the survey. Students complete the first 34 items only, while adults complete all 42 items, as items numbered 35-42 refer to perceptions of adults with other adults in the school community.

Items on the questionnaire were broken down into five sub-scales: IA: Perceptions of Student Respect, IB: Perceptions of Student Friendship and Belonging, IC: Perceptions of Students' Shaping of Their Environment, IIA: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Faculty/Staff, and IIB: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Parents. Perceptions of Student Respect, sub-scale IA, contained items 1, 4, 7, 9, 12, 15, 17, 20, and 23 with reversed scores for items 12, 15, and 17. Perceptions of Student Friendship and Belonging, sub-scale IB, contained items 2, 3, 5, 10, 13, 16, 18, 21, and 24 with reversed scores for item 2. Perceptions of Students' Shaping of Their Environment, sub-scale IC, contained items 6, 8, 11, 14, 19, 22, and 25. Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Faculty/Staff, sub-scale IIA, contained items 26, 29, 31, 32, 34, 35, 36, 38, 39, and 40 with reversed scores for item 32. Perceptions of Support and Care by and For Parents, sub-scale IIB, contained items 27, 28, 30, 33, 37, 41, and 42 with reversed scores for item 28.

Authors of SCCP-II computed Alpha range from .73 to .86 for students and from .73 to .88 for adults. Alpha for each sub-scale for the whole sample is as follows: SS_IA, 0.84; SS_IB, .85; SS_IC, .87; SS_IIA, .80; and SS_IIB, .70. Alpha for each sub-scale for students is as follows: SS_IA, 0.75; SS_IB, .81; SS_IC, .86; SS_IIA, .80; and SS_IIB, .70. Alpha for each sub-scale for adults is as follows: SS_IA, 0.88; SS_IB, .88; SS_IC, .88; SS_IIA, .73; and SS_IIB, .73.

The 5-point Likert score ratings is 1 = almost never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = as often as not, 4 = frequently, and 5 = almost always. The higher the number the greater the number of times the behavior occurs in the school community. The lower the number the fewer the number of times the behavior is perceived to occur.

Data Collection

The School as a Caring Community Profile-II (SCCP-II) was put into Qualtrics. Students accessed the 34-question survey on Qualtrics via a web link or a QR code provided by the teacher. Adults used a web link or a QR code for Qualtrics to access the 42-question survey. Web links and QR codes were made available to adults by school newsletters, emails from the principal, and hard copies of the links and QR codes in the front office. Links and QR codes survey participants used were direct links to Qualtrics where the data were collected.

Data from the student survey and from the adult survey were downloaded from Qualtrics into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including number, mean, and standard deviations, provided the data analysis.

Data Analysis

The researchers used descriptive statistics to rank the five sub-scales from SCCP-II from the highest sub-scale to the lowest sub-scale from the January 2018 and the May 2020 surveys. The number of participants that responded to each variable, calculations of the means, and standard deviations for students in January 2018 are listed in Table 1. There were 133 students who participated in the January 2018 survey. The number of students who answered the survey items for each variable ranged from 126 to 133 which means that all students did not answer all survey items. If a student did not answer all survey items pertaining to a variable, then that student's rating would not be included in the calculation of the mean. Means (*M*) ranged from 3.10 to 4.26 out of 5.00. Standard deviations (*SD*) ranged from .73 to 1.02.

Table 1
Student Survey January 2018: Variable Means

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
SS_IIB: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Parents	133	4.26	0.88
SS_IIA: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Faculty/Staff	132	3.81	1.02
SS_IB: Perceptions of Student Friendship and Belonging	124	3.33	0.73
SS_IA: Perceptions of Student Respect	126	3.28	0.74
SS_IC: Perceptions of Students' Shaping of their Environment	127	3.10	0.89

The number of student participants that responded to each variable, calculations of the means, and standard deviations in May 2020 are in Table 2. There were 223 students who participated in the survey in May 2020. The number of students who answered the survey items for each variable ranged from 211 to 217 which means that all students did not answer all survey items. If a student did not answer all survey items pertaining to a variable, then that student's rating would not be included in the calculation of the mean. Means (*M*) ranged from 3.70 to 4.68 out of 5.00. Standard deviations (*SD*) ranged from .48 to .89.

Table 2
Student Survey May 2020: Variable Means

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
SS_IIB: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Parents	217	4.68	0.48
SS_IIA: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Faculty/Staff	216	4.49	0.71

SS_IA: Perceptions of Student Respect	214	3.87	0.67
SS_IB: Perceptions of Student Friendship and Belonging	211	3.80	0.73
SS_IC: Perceptions of Students' Shaping of their Environment	214	3.70	0.89

The student survey sub-scale with the highest score in January 2018 was IIB: Perceptions of Support and Care by and For Parents ($M = 4.26, SD = .88$) which asked how students, teachers, and parents treat adults in the building. The student questionnaire sub-scale with the highest score in May 2020 was IIB: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Parents ($M = 4.68, SD = .48$).

The lowest scoring sub-scale on the student questionnaire in January 2018 was IC: Perceptions of Students' Shaping of their Environment ($M = 3.10, SD = .89$) which asked if students felt that they had an opportunity to have input into the school environment. The lowest scoring sub-scale on the student questionnaire in May 2020 was IC: Perceptions of Students' Shaping of their Environment ($M = 3.70, SD = .89$).

The sub-scale with the greatest change in mean for students between January 2018 score ($M = 3.81, SD = 1.02$) and May 2020 ($M = 4.49, SD = .71$) was IIA: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Faculty/Staff. Sub-scale IIA solicited responses from participants about how teachers and other adults in the building take care of students.

The number of adult participants that responded to each variable, calculations of the means, and standard deviations in January 2018 are listed in Table 3. There were 131 adults who participated in the survey in January 2018. The number of adults who answered the survey items for each variable ranged from 129 to 131, indicating all adults did not answer all survey items. If an adult did not answer all survey items pertaining to a variable, then that adult's rating would not be included in the calculation of the mean. Means (M) ranged from 3.10 to 4.20 out of 5.00. Standard deviations (SD) ranged from .71 to 1.08.

Table 3
Adult Survey January 2018: Variable Means

Variable	N	M	SD
SS_IIA: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Faculty/Staff	129	4.20	0.71
SS_IIB: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Parents	131	4.16	0.71
SS_IB: Perceptions of Student Friendship and Belonging	131	3.61	0.91
SS_IA: Perceptions of Student Respect	131	3.53	1.00
SS_IC: Perceptions of Students' Shaping of their Environment	131	3.11	1.08

The number of adult participants who responded to each variable, calculations of the means, and standard deviations in May 2020 are listed in Table 4. There were 244 adults who

participated in the survey in May 2020. The number of adults who answered the survey items for each variable ranged from 240 to 237 which means that all adults did not answer all survey items. If an adult did not answer all survey items pertaining to a variable, then that adult's rating would not be included in the calculation of the mean. Means (M) ranged from 3.82 to 4.61 out of 5.00. Standard deviations (SD) ranged from .49 to .87.

Table 4
Adult Survey May 2020: Variable Means

Variable	N	M	SD
SS_IIA: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Faculty/Staff	237	4.61	0.54
SS_IIB: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Parents	239	4.52	0.49
SS_I_A: Perceptions of Student Respect	238	4.04	0.71
SS_IB: Perceptions of Student Friendship and Belonging	240	3.99	0.77
SS_IC: Perceptions of Students' Shaping of their Environment	237	3.82	0.87

The adult survey sub-scale with the highest score in January 2018 was IIB: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Parents ($M = 4.20$, $SD = .71$) which asked how students, teachers, and parents treat adults in the building. The adult survey sub-scale with the highest score in May 2020 was IIB: Perceptions of Support and Care by and for Parents ($M = 4.61$, $SD = .54$).

The lowest scoring sub-scale on the survey answered by adults in January 2018 was IC: Perceptions of Students' Shaping of their Environment ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.08$), which asked adults whether students had an opportunity to have input into the school environment. The lowest scoring sub-scale on the survey answered by adults in May 2020 was IC: Perceptions of Students' Shaping of their Environment ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .87$).

The sub-scale with the greatest change in mean answered by adults for between January 2018 score ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.08$) and May 2020 ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .87$) was IC: Perceptions of Students' Shaping of their Environment. Sub-scale IC solicited responses from adult participants whether students had an opportunity to have input and shape the school environment.

Sub-scale IC: Perceptions of Students' Shaping of Their Environment scored lowest in January 2018 for students ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .89$) and adults ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.08$). In May 2020, sub-scale IC was still the lowest sub-scale, yet had the second greatest change for students with an increase of .60 in the mean and the greatest change in the mean of .71 for adults.

As the findings indicate, results showed an increase in schools as a caring community after participation in HLA. Interestingly, the greatest amount of change for students was in Support and Care by and for Faculty/Staff, followed closely by Students' Shaping of their Environment. For Adults the greatest change was in Students' Shaping of their Environment. While all areas of the caring community showed increases, the student teacher relationship and student voice were the strongest. Each of the five subsets of the caring community increased based on both student and adult data, indicating schools may improve as a caring community after participating in the HLA.

The schools may see extensive gains in student - teacher relationships, which have been generally associated with overall school improvement.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations include that all participants in HLA did not administer the survey. Since school students and adults self-reported, the researchers trusted that participants reported honest reactions. The study was delimited to the HLA participants who administered the survey. The researchers determined to include all schools that provided data after the January 2018 session and after the 3-year participation, rather than including matched pairs only, an additional delimitation.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

The data collected indicated increased perceptions of a caring school community over time consistent with professional learning related to character development and school culture. This indicates schools could benefit schools from engaging in professional learning about character development and making character education a school priority.

Further qualitative and quantitative research would provide additional information on how school cultures changed. Information is needed to determine what schools did to increase student input into shaping the school environment as sub-scale IC was the lowest sub-scale in January 2018 yet increased significantly for both students and adults by May 2020. Additional studies could conduct student focus groups on students' impact on a school environment to determine ways to include students into the decision-making process. A quantitative study on the academic achievement, discipline referrals, attendance rates, in-school and out-of-school suspensions over the three years schools participated in the HLA could offer insight to themes when schools create a culture of character.

Summary

Results indicated an increase in schools as a caring community. Each of the five subsets of the caring community increased in both the student and adult surveys, indicating schools may improve as caring communities after participating in HLA. Schools may find multiple ways to establish a caring community. However, schools who participated in HLA created caring communities; thus, HLA can be a path toward these ends.

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