

# Urban Teen Summit: A Community and School Collaboration for Developing Student Leaders of Color

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the strengths and challenges that emerged from the first 3 years of a high school student leadership development program located in an urban setting. This study was developed as an instrumental case study of one student leadership development program serving urban public high schools in South Central Texas. Feedback was solicited from 10 current and former participants regarding the successes and challenges they encountered within this program. Three themes emerged from these interviews: personal voice, a sense of responsibility, and building community relationships. Discussion is included regarding considerations for secondary administrators about the potential utility of this model in helping develop student leaders of color in urban settings.

## Keywords

leadership, urban leadership programs, leaders in schools, African American and Latinx leaders

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## **Introduction**

When addressing the holistic development of secondary students, school-community relationships are paramount to the success of all stakeholders (Epstein, 2018). When schools find ways to engage their community, students become purveyors of and contributors to community progression (Govan et al., 2015; Khalifa, 2012). Minimally, this will involve student leadership development and solution-based implementation. On a continuum, students can move from self-serving or needs-based leadership, to community-focused, and compassionate leadership (Martinek et al., 2006).

Student leadership allows students the opportunity to not only engage their community, but to discuss, negotiate, and implement viable solutions for community issues. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research that addresses the effectiveness of leadership development for students of color in urban settings.

In many cases, particularly in our high need schools, administrators, teachers, and counselors spend much of their time on discipline prevention, not student leadership development, especially for our African American and Latinx students (Cartledge & Dukes, 2009; Skiba et al., 2009). This highlights the need for additional research in this area. The Urban Teen Summit (UTS) was created to address this area of need. UTS is a student-led, community-based organization that focuses on leadership development in urban communities. This research study examines the impact of the Urban Teen Summit on program participants.

## **Background**

The Urban Teen Summit was created by P.A.M. Media Outreach in 2016 to increase school and community engagement, explore and create dialogue between students and community stakeholders, and build leadership capacity in young students from underserved, underrepresented populations. UTS has employed a multifaceted approach designed to create opportunities for students to meaningfully engage with school and community leaders in discussing viable solutions to the challenges their communities are facing. Currently, there are three high schools participating within the San Antonio and Austin areas of Texas. Since inception in 2016, the Urban Teen Summit has served over 1,000 students and has trained over 120 student leaders to lead these summits.

Student leaders are trained to facilitate conversations on important issues in their community with key stakeholders, including the chief of police, the district attorney, the county sheriff, local business owners, educators (high school and colleges), ministers, community organizers and activists, parents,

and their peers. During the Urban Teen Summit, students lead discussions covering the following topics: Police Relations, Youth Activism in School and Community, Entrepreneurship, Relationship with Church and Civic Organizations, and Peer to Peer Mentoring. The outcome of the summit is a, “Call to Action” that helps build a platform for these students to interact with the community by bringing stakeholders together to find feasible solutions for issues faced in the community. Following this discussion, students are supported in initiating further grassroots initiatives such as community forums, follow-up meetings, and peer-mentoring groups with an aim to continue the empowerment and engagement of youth in discussions and relationship building with community stakeholders.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study follows Epstein’s Theory of School and Community Relations (Epstein, 2008) in order to examine the relationships between students, school, and family. Epstein presents six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Nestled in the theory is the model of overlapping spheres of influence, which illustrates that student success is predicated on the interrelationship between the home, school, and the community (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Fiore, 2016, Khalifa, 2012).

Schools play a critical role in the mediation of learning and values that can be reinforced at home. Epstein (2008) purports that schools can build a strong relationship with parents, which will in turn reinforce learning and academic success. Some practical measures school leaders can play to strengthen this dialectical relationship include: home visits during transition grades, community meetings, parent classes (whether GED, parenting, or technological enhancement classes), and family support programs. These measures can help students realize the importance of school. This process also helps parents feel confident in assisting their child with homework, and effectively creating a partnership in which parents can directly contribute to the school, family, and community partnership.

Many students are beginning to employ a flipped classroom pedagogical model, which allows students to learn via videos and online platforms, and reserve classroom time for practice and knowledge construction (Song & Kapur, 2017). While this delivery can work, teachers and parents must have a command of the technology used, and students need to make meaningful associations and practically apply the instructional materials (Unruh et al., 2016; Zavattaro et al., 2018). During the COVID-19 global pandemic, many P-12 and schools opted to have all instruction virtual. This forced parents to become instant intermediaries between the home and the school. Teachers

provided parental support by offering synchronous and asynchronous instructional options and were available in the event that clarification is needed. This instructional relationship and support helped parents become more adept in supporting their students as they navigate assignments at home. Maxwell (1998) mentions that people take part in what they help create. Getting the community involved in the varying activities of school progression (creation of curriculum, policy, procedures, instructional initiatives) will build the rapport and climate that will benefit all those involved.

In order for schools to succeed, all stakeholders must play their assigned roles (Fiore, 2016). Collaborating and connecting families with community groups such as Communities in Schools, Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brother Big Sister, churches, local chapters of fraternities, and sororities can strengthen the community to school ties, while providing families with the necessary resources to succeed.

In order for teachers to support school and community engagement, they must be willing to adjust to the cultural ethos of their community's demographic. Teachers need to be well versed in their understanding of instructional strategies and multiple modalities that guarantee success in the classroom, as well as the cultural mores and folkways of the broader community in which they serve (Epstein, 2001, 2018). It is incumbent upon school leadership to make sure teachers are culturally competent, with an instructional repertoire that includes Culturally Relevant and sustaining Pedagogy and intercultural communication and exchange that supersedes the race of the principal (Brown & Beckett, 2007). Ladson-Billings (2014) affirms how cultural identity and culturally sustaining pedagogy improves student achievement. In an effort to address deficit perspectives, Ford (2011) also discuss how teachers have to be intentional about dismantling systems that negatively affect the learning process of students of color, especially as it relates to advanced academics (i.e., GT, AP students). For instance, African Americans respond better to education that is culturally enriched (Brown & Beckett, 2007). When teachers understand and pedagogically adapt to the socio-cultural differences of their students as well as designing, implementing, and evaluating relevant instruction, student achievement will increase. This is why SOS is intentional in recruiting and training dynamic teachers who can be cultural interpreters through their students' experiential learning process.

## **Literature Review**

Building leadership capacity in students can be beneficial for students as well as their communities. According to Parkhill et al. (2018), students develop

their well-being, personal leadership style, group and individual identity through the empowerment of leadership development. Rosch et al. (2017) illustrate how leadership development programs can build motivation, confidence, and a sense of community membership and responsibility. Specifically, they identify how intersections of gender, race, and previous training have an impact on leadership self-efficacy.

Historically, the marginalization of students of color in urban settings has been well-documented (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Students have been treated inequitably on the basis of race, ethnicity, age, gender, social class, and language (Ford, 2011) or marginalized by structural racism and poverty (Algava, 2016). Societal biases also create inequities of opportunities for students of color (Anyon, 1997; Lee & Burkam, 2002). African American culture is often dismissed (Ladson-Billings, 2009), and English as a Second Language (ESL) students are often held back academically for reasons other than cognition or aptitude (Delpit, 1988). Students of color are denied access to Advanced Placement classes (Ford, 2011) and are socially isolated (Fuentes & Liou, 2008). Ford (2011) argues that even when students of color are identified as gifted, they are often ignored, which leads to persistent underachievement and underrepresentation in classes that could mitigate and close the opportunity gaps. Students who wear the “scarlet letter” of being poor, African American, LatinX, or ESL, are often left in a maze, trying to negotiate high school while avoiding the bigotry of low expectations. Inequitable practices, “. . . limit students’ access to knowledge, resources, and a comprehensive and fair educational experience” (Avendano et al., 2018, p. 67).

School leaders, if they so choose, are uniquely well positioned to influence the leadership development of students ethically, transformatively, and collaboratively (Lavery & Hine, 2013). Nieto (2007) calls for superintendents, principals, and other stakeholders to develop culturally responsive practices in the classrooms, while at the same time challenge inequities in their schools and communities. Ladson-Billings (2009) argues that schools should move away from deficit teaching and thinking toward more of a culturally relevant pedagogy that includes Black and Brown students. Paris (2012) argues for a culturally sustaining pedagogy, “to ensure the valuing and maintenance of our multiethnic and multilingual society” (p. 93), particularly within the confines of schools. Paris (2012) further contends that in order to create a sustainable cultural pedagogy, schools need to champion cultural pluralism while embracing community practices and local histories in meaningful ways.

Teachers as change agents can assist, explore, and facilitate equitable practices in schools (Jacobs et al., 2014; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Nieto, 2007). Educators can lead beyond the classroom by accepting responsibility to facilitate change, making learning encounters relevant and equitable, and

integrating culturally responsive pedagogy within instruction (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto, 2007). Teachers are often aware of who the informal student leaders are in their classrooms, and as Ford (2011) points out, leaders are not always the talkative students or the ones whose grades are the highest.

Foster and Tillman (2009) admonish school administrators to consider the perspectives of African American school leaders who understand the history and present-day circumstances that contribute to academic engagement and achievement for students of color. Foster and Tillman (2009) further argue that students benefit from interacting with leaders from within the community. Furthermore, Liles et al. (2017) point out that community service can be useful in developing civic behavior, opening doors for possible scholarship opportunities, and empowering students of color to become community-minded leaders.

### *A Call to Action*

Gooden and Dantley (2012) argue that educational leaders must courageously address the issue of race, particularly with the changing demographics of schools in the United States. Too often, educators claim they do not see color. Unfortunately, this claim is not substantiated by the data. As Lewin, (2012) points out, discipline for African American students is far more harsh than for students of any other race. In one case study, Lewin (2012) found that while only 19% of the student body was African American, this student group accounted for 35% of school suspensions and 39% of school expulsions. Further, African American males were three and a half times more likely to be suspended than White students. Within Lewin's (2012) study, 70% of school-related arrests or referrals involved African American and Latinx students, "and while [B]lack and [H]ispanic students make up 44% of the students in the survey, they were only 26% of the students in gifted and talented programs" (Lewin, 2012, p. A11).

Providing and expanding leadership opportunities for students of color may decrease the numbers of students receiving disciplinary actions in schools, particularly for African American and Hispanic students (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). Given the numbers of students in trouble in schools, it is incumbent upon school districts to seriously interrogate these inequities and to create strategies to proactively reach and teach students of color leadership skills. Gooden and Dantley (2012) argued that, "the moral axis of the field of educational leadership is founded on the empirical premise that throughout the institution of education are discrepancies, inequities, and a host of fundamental discriminatory practices that must be challenged and transformed" (p. 237).

Student leadership training can also help build a sense of belonging, and help build community in urban settings. This is particularly significant for students of color as they are able to give a voice to those systematically marginalized or minoritized by their lived experiences (Bertrand, 2018).

A review of the literature revealed relatively few programs focused on creating opportunities for developing leadership goals, outcomes, and purposes for African American and Latinx students in urban schools. Much of the research conducted in this area is related to recess or physical activity leadership based programs (Martin & Chen, 2017; Massey et al., 2018); Another study identifies support for students from foster care (Lenz-Rashid, 2018); Other researchers have focused on developing urban leadership through agricultural programs (Lewis, 2012; Mouser et al., 2019); and several studies were found which focus on developing social skills to prevent violent behavior (Volosin et al., 2012). Unfortunately, many of these initiatives approach students of color from a deficit based lens. Students are identified by negative terms such as *disadvantaged* (Martin & Chen, 2017), *low-income*, (Massey et al., 2018), and *under-resourced* (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008) and are identified as being in need of deficit reduction programs (Massey et al., 2018).

## Methods

In order to gain an understanding of the impact of the Urban Teen Summit on its participants, a qualitative, single-site case study research design was employed (Merriam, 2015). The design of the case study is instrumental (Stake, 1998), bringing about insight and lessons learned from the strengths and challenges emerging from the first 3 years of the implementation of the Urban Teen Summit. Case studies are analyses of people, projects, policies, or events and are especially useful in providing a holistic context of what is occurring (Thomas, 2016). Stake (1998) highlights the values of instrumental cases in the selection of a priori selected site, as it is expected that the data gathered will serve as a tool to provide knowledge and resources for organizational improvement. This investigation focuses on the experiences of the students who participated in the Urban Teen Summit. Case studies that focus on participant experiences provide opportunities to understand the impact of research on the individuals for whom the intervention was created (Thomas, 2016).

## Participants

Students that participated in the Urban Teen Summit were nominated by school personnel and selected based on their leadership potential. Students

**Table 1.** Urban Teen Summit Participant Information.

Respondent	Cohort #	Ethnicity	Gender	High school
R1	2.3	African American	Female	S1
R2	1.2	African American	Male	S1
R3	3	African American	Female	S1
R4	3	African American	Male	S1
R5	1	African American	Male	S1
R6	2	African American	Female	S2
R7	2	African American	Male	S2
R8	3	Hispanic	Female	S3
R9	3	Hispanic	Female	S3
R10	3	African American/Hispanic	Male	S1

selected to participate in the 9-week leadership training were from the 11th and 12th grade levels, with varying positions in the academic and social stratification. The researchers were interested in hearing directly from participants in the Urban Teen Summit. In order to ensure a variety of perspectives, care was taken to ensure that interview participants were drawn from multiple high schools, including participants from Cohort 1, Cohort 2, and Cohort 3, who represented a mixture of male and female participants, and reflected the racial make up among participants in the Urban Teen Summit. The sample can therefore accurately be called a criterion sample (Maxwell, 2013). The 10 students who were interviewed represent three high schools in South Central Texas. The age of the students at the time of the interview ranged from 18 to 21. There were seven African American participants and three Hispanic participants. Five of the participants were male and five were female. (See Table 1).

Participants were interviewed from the three urban High Schools that had a minimum of 2 years participation in the model. Below is information on the participating campuses.

### *Compilation and Disaggregated Data of Schools and Programs*

Below is a compilation of the schools studied, along with campus demographics, performance reports, and distinction designation. In 2015 to 2016, the state of Texas graded schools on whether they did or did not meet standard in three of the four indexes: Student Achievement, Student Progress, Closing Performance Gaps, and Postsecondary Readiness. Campuses must meet targets on three indexes: Index 1 *or* Index 2 *and* Index 3 *and* Index 4



(Texas Education Agency, 2015). Schools can also earn Distinction Designations in the following areas: Academic achievement in Reading/ELA; Academic Achievement in Mathematics; Academic Achievement in Science; Academic Achievement in Social Studies; Top 25 Percent Student Progress; Top 25 Percent Closing Performance Gaps; and Postsecondary Readiness. Additionally, comparisons will be made in campus size, grade span, percent economically disadvantaged, the percent of English Language Learners (ELLs), mobility rates and graduation rates. Finally, comparisons will be made with data from the Office of Civil Rights in regards to discipline data, specifically for African American and Latinx/Hispanic students within each school.

*School I (S1).* School 1 is a 9 to 12 public high school located in the eastern part of the city with an enrollment of 993 students in the 2015 to 2016 school year. The school was rated Met Standard on the standardized testing rating, with no Distinction Designations earned (Texas Education Agency, 2015). School 1 has 91.9% students listed as Economically Disadvantaged, 9.6% ELLs, a mobility rate of 32.4%, and a graduation rate of 20% (Texas Education Agency, 2015).

According to the Office of Civil Rights Data Collection (OCR, 2015), in the 2015 to 2016 school year, School 1 had 1,049 students, 41.8% of whom were Black or African American and 53.9% were Hispanic or Latino. There were 94 in-school suspensions. Of the 94 in-school suspensions, 59.6% were African American students and 40.4% were Hispanic students. There were 219 out-of-school suspensions. Of the 219 out-of-school suspensions, 49.8% were African American and 42.9% were Hispanic. There were no expulsions, and 72 referrals to law enforcement. African Americans accounted for 41.7%, and Hispanic students made up 52.8% of referrals to law enforcement.

*School II (S2).* School 2 is an early college high school, where students have the opportunity to obtain a diploma and an associate degree. School 2 Met Standard on student achievement, student progress, closing performance gaps, and postsecondary readiness, and earned two distinctions in Top 25 Percent Student Progress, and Top 25 Percent Closing Performance Gaps. During the 2015 to 2016 school year, the high school campus had 840 students in grades 9 to 12, with 84.0% economically disadvantaged, 17.4% ELLs, and 24.1% mobility rate. The graduation rate is 80% (Texas Education Agency, 2015).

According to OCR (2015) data, School 2 had a student population that was 40.3% African American and 56.4% Hispanic. There were 48 in-school-suspensions, with African American students accounting for 66.7% of these

suspensions, and Hispanics accounting for 29.2%. Additionally, there were 110 out-of-school suspensions with African American students accounting for 63.6% of these suspensions, and Hispanic students accounting for 32.7%. School 2 had 27 expulsions with 44.4% of these being African American students, and 48.1% being Hispanic students. Ninety-six students (58.3% African American and 33.3% Hispanic) received referrals to law enforcement (OCR, 2015).

*School III (S3).* School 3 is a public high school with an enrollment of 1,309 students. School 3 serves students in grades 9 to 12 with 89.1% listed as economically disadvantaged, 12.7% ELLs, and a mobility rate of 20.9% (Texas Education Agency, 2015). The campus Met Standards on student achievement, student progress, closing performance gaps, and postsecondary readiness. The campus also received a distinction designation in Academic Achievement in Social Studies. The graduation rate was 81.6% (Texas Education Agency, 2015). Furthermore, OCR (2015) data shows School 3's enrollment at 1.5% African American and 97.7% Hispanic. There were 175 in-school suspensions. 1.1% of these in school suspensions were of African American students, and 98.9% were Hispanic. There were 86 out-of school suspensions, 7% of which were of African American students, and 93% were Hispanic. There were 59 expulsions, 3.4% of the expulsions were African American, and 96.6% of the students expelled were Hispanic. Finally, there were 0 referrals to law enforcement on this campus.

### *Data Collection and Data Analysis*

Semi-structured interview questions were developed by the researchers to guide conversations with each of the 10 respondents. Interviews were conducted individually and each interview lasted between 15 to 25 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent data analysis. Responses were organized first according to the answers to each of the questions, then analyzed for recurrent themes within each question. Subsequently, responses were categorized according to themes found within the entire interview manuscripts. Researchers chose to use the long table method of qualitative data analysis in which exemplars from the printed transcripts were cut out and placed next to similar responses to identify common themes. This coding was conducted by two professors of educational administration. This portion of the research followed a grounded theory model (Glasser & Strauss, 2000). As the researchers attempted to apply meaning to the research findings, it was the participants' own responses that determined the representation of themes and exemplars that emerged.

## Findings

Responses were organized into themes. Consistent with the grounded theory approach to data analysis, the emerging themes were noted and used to develop a model of participant perspectives. The Central Research question of this study asked: What impact did participating in the Urban Teen Summit have on your life? Five themes emerged in response to this question as noted below.

- (1) It changed the way I view myself;
- (2) It changed the way others see me;
- (3) It had an impact on my relationships with peers;
- (4) It deepened my connection with my community; and
- (5) It helped strengthen my voice.

Each of these themes will be examined in turn.

### *It Changed the Way I View Myself*

A majority of the respondents spoke about how participating in the Urban Teen Summit impacted the way they each viewed themselves, particularly in their emerging identity as leaders (R1, R2, R3, R5, R7, R8, R9). Clearly, participating in the Urban Teen Summit had an impact on building leadership self-efficacy among these participants.

As one respondent put it:

It helped me. I've always liked to be a leader, not follow anybody. I'm not a rebel, but I don't like to follow. It did help me be a better leader and make me feel confident in future leadership roles that I will play. (R8)

R5 agreed saying, "I needed to become a better leader. It (participating in the Urban Teen Summit) showed me how to talk. . . how to have self-confidence, and just being able to communicate well with others."

Another respondent reflected on the leadership opportunities she received through the Urban Teen Summit and how that helped her grow as a leader:

So, I was the head of marketing. I would put it out there, 'come to the urban teen summit.' Making posts, what not. And I feel like me being the head of the marketing team helped me get a sense of leadership, get a sense of consistency. Okay you've got to put the word out so people can come out. That just really helped me. (R1)

For some of the respondents, the change in sense of self was truly dramatic. This was perhaps most clearly evident in R3 who stated:

I was BAD (emphasis by respondent) in middle school. . .like, fighting. . .I was always in trouble. . .or, like, I barely went to class, I would barely come to school. Like when I got to high school, it (participating in the Urban Teen Summit) changed me. . .It felt amazing 'cause, like,. . .I didn't know I was going to be chosen to be one of the leaders, but, a lot of kids, after that, a lot of kids looked up to me and come to me and tell me, like, tell me I'm their role model and stuff and they want to be like me. (R3)

This growth in self appears to pervade beyond high school. As one of the respondents put it:

I feel as though, like, when I came in, I already had a solid head. . .but I will say it has opened. . . my eyes to more. It definitely put me in a position where I was like, Okay. . .that's different. That's not what I was trained to look for. So being part of (the) Summit and be(ing) able to go through that and see it, and being in this situation, I got to college and it was like, Okay, I've seen that before now, so, in a sense, it has broadened my understanding. (R2)

### *It Changed the Way Others See Me*

Six of the respondents spoke about how participating in the Urban Teen Summit changed the way they were viewed by others. (R1, R2, R3, R5, R6, R7). For example, some of the respondents felt that adults within the school saw them differently. As one of the respondents put it, "With the leadership, the, um, teachers and principals of our school, it just made them trust us more" (R6). Another respondent agreed, saying,

Like with the teachers noticing what we were doing, like I said, it became more trustworthy. With Coach Carter (it) made her relationship better with some of the students like. . .me, for instance, getting in trouble, we just grew closer and I say more respect. (R7)

Many of the participants also spoke about being viewed differently by students. As one of the respondents put it:

I didn't have a problem being the bad guy in the sense of telling people to shut up, be quiet. . .some of these people would look at me different because. . . they didn't see me in my leadership position. They just (saw) me as a regular student who (was) just trying to get by like everyone else. And when they see

me in leadership, I'm a different person. So them seeing (me) in that light for the first time, it was. . .it was kind of a strain on our communication 'cause now they're not seeing me as R2, they're seeing me as, "Oh, this is the group leader." (R2)

### *It Had an Impact on My Relationships with Peers*

Interactions with peers changed as a result of participating in the Urban Teen Summit for six of the respondents (R2, R3, R4, R5, R8, R9). For one of the respondents, that change meant reaching out to people with whom he had not previously connected. As he put it:

It's easy to say that kids are still disengaged when you're looking at disengaged kids, but you're not thinking about that person who was anti-social. Now, because of the Summit, me and him speak on a regular basis. Every time we see each other. (R2)

One of the female respondents agreed, saying:

I had to sometimes deal with people I didn't always like, and I had to lead that team. I had to humble myself. . .be one on one with them, relate, and really try to fix things. . .and even put my pride down as well. (R8)

Another respondent talked about taking on a greater mentoring role after the Urban Teen Summit. As he put it, "I actually. . .like, became a mentor to two more kids that day" (R5).

Many of the respondents spoke about building lasting friendships thanks to the Urban Teen Summit. As one participant put it:

I think that as (a) class one thing we did. . .together was. . .we respected all our opinions, respected all our rights to have our opinions, we also knew we didn't have to like each other's opinions, it's just we had the understanding and everything went a lot smoother. 'Cause at least we know outside of this. . . we're still friends, we still associate. (R2)

Another respondent added:

That girl that sat by me (at the Urban Teen Summit), we got closer. It's funny, back in middle school. . . I was very very mean. And so I made her cry a couple of times because I was very mean. So then in high school, she thought that, "Wow, you really did change, it's not just something you said." Now we are closer together, because we have to stand by each other. (R8)

For at least one respondent, being involved in other people's lives made an immeasurable difference to that individual.

Ok, well, a month ago my friend tried to commit suicide. And, so, she came to me about it and I like talked to her about it and gave her some advice and she (pause), I prevented it and she said I really helped her a lot. (R3).

### *It Deepened My Connection with My Community*

The Urban Teen Summit brought together local business owners, community leaders, and representatives from local government to meet with teens from urban high schools. This had a strong impact on many of the high school participants (R1, R2, R4, R6, R7, R8, R10). As one of the participants stated, "I felt proud to be a part of something that was so big and full of people who want to make an impact on the community like I do" (R1).

In particular, several of the respondents noted the importance of bringing in leaders from the local community. As one respondent stated:

I think they should keep bringing, bringing in relevant people. And what I mean by relevant is that it's different when you bring in someone who, who wasn't raised on this side of town, who hasn't spent any time on this side of town, who hasn't had any business on this side of town, you know, who doesn't know the community. So when we bring in faces and names that we know, so, for example, we bring in Chapman's Chicken, the owner, that is like, "Oh, I see his name every single day." This man, he walks on this side of town, sees these kids every single day. And I think it's. . .subconsciously, in. . .in the forefront, it's, it's a great thing for a young person, any background to see like Ok, people from my own neighborhood are doing something and it's doing something positive for my neighborhood. (R2)

One respondent talked about the importance of discussing difficult community issues together. He stated:

We were talking about school shootings, the church shootings and stuff. Yeah, a lot of that (was) going on at the time. And so, that, with that, like it brought us closer to, like I say, to the community. . .it made them more aware of what was going on and our surroundings. (R7)

Another respondent reflected on the impact of the Urban Teen Summit. He stated:

I got more together with my urban teen summit people, we would come together in our meetings and discuss what we should do to make our community

better. . . 'cause it's been crazy on the streets, how these kids are nowadays. . . We just want it to be safe and have a good education. I feel confident that our community can change. We can make it better for the next generation. (R10)

Many of the participants spoke about wanting to give back to their local community. One of the respondents stated, "No, for real, I felt like I was making a change for my community, my school community, and being just like a leader" (R6). Another respondent added:

[Sigh] It's hard to say. . .it's. . .I don't know. . .I'm just in love with the community and working with youth, you know, that's why my. . .my biggest goal of my future, you know, of college and everything, of course, my biggest goal in my future is to open up my own gym, and have it, you know, for the community, especially the youth, to come out and do things positive. (R4)

### *It Helped Strengthen My Voice*

Interestingly, there was one word that was repeated throughout the interviews more than any other—voice. In fact, eight of the respondents spoke about how participating in the Urban Teen Summit strengthened their voice (R1, R3, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10). As one respondent put it:

So I just feel like leadership is really going on the front line, being a voice for others well I feel like, because a lot of people can't really speak up about certain stuff that they go through. So that is a big part of the summit as well—speaking out for people who don't really have that platform. (R1)

Another participant agreed, saying, "Yes. . .yeah. . .(there's) a lot of violence and stuff going on, so it makes me want to stand up and speak out and try to stop everything that's going on" (R3).

Participating in the Urban Teen Summit provided a venue for students to share important concerns with school leaders. One of the respondents shared a particularly impactful story about how bullying has changed based on the presence of the Urban Teen Summit on campus.

Um. . .I'd say the, like, the bullying that would happen around school. . .there was this autistic kid that we did have for a couple of years, and he would always get bullied, like, um, there would be kids that would call him another name, and it wasn't his name, so he'd, like, get really upset, like, you know, get pissed and start like going off on everyone, but it. . .he would only react that way because they would call him another name and he didn't like it and it got to a certain extent where he would just cry in class and the teachers thought that he was just over-exaggerating, when really they didn't know what was happening. The day

of the summit, we had, like, teachers and students and parents go into different classrooms, and we talked to them about problems that were going around, and that was one of them – bullying, so we talked about it, and we got the teachers in on it, and we told them what was happening, in that situation, specifically, and, you know, that. . . something needed to happen. And, so, the principal heard and, so, she was in on it too. (After the Urban Teen Summit), like, . . . more of the teachers (were) in on it, so if there was a student of any kind, like, just upset about. . . uh. . . upset about, like, something happening in their life, they'd actually, like, sit with them and talk to them about it. (R9)

The Urban Teen Summit also provided an opportunity for teens to speak directly with police officers, sheriffs, district attorneys, and other law enforcement personnel. This led to some very important conversations as seen in the excerpt below:

One question we asked the officer. . . was “Why (do) officers use so much force when it’s not needed?” But, sometimes, you know, I understand, I mean, I understand their safety, but it’s some cases where I do say where they take, where it’s too much, where it’s too much force. . . and, you know, it’s unnecessary force. You know, like with the shooting, how they like shoot for, like, for safety? They shoot them like, in the. . . in the main parts of their body. Why not shoot them in the leg? Why not just, you know, just somewhere where they. . . where they can’t get killed? But, officers, you know, sometimes they. . . they use their force, you know, too much where it just kills an innocent person. (R4)

Having a voice to speak up on behalf of others was reiterated by several other participants. As one respondent put it, he felt it was important for teen leaders such as himself to be, “Voicing out for people that couldn’t, like say, that couldn’t speak for (themselves) or were afraid to stand up or just didn’t have the opportunity to do so” (R7). One of the respondents summed this theme up well when he stated, “Understand you’ve got to have a voice to speak for yourself. Some people can’t talk. They’re afraid to talk. Some people are tired of it. They want to speak for themselves and let people know what’s going on” (R10).

## **Limitations**

This study was designed to collect and analyze feedback from students of color who had participated in a student leadership program in South Texas. According to Atieno (2009), employment of a qualitative research design presents limitations with the generalizability with findings to a wider



populace. While the context and scope of this study necessitated an appropriate research design with which to foster sense-making through the lived experiences of others (Harper, 2007), it is important to note that findings are not generalizable. Our goal is to add empirical evidence to an underrepresented area of literature concerning community engagement and leadership development for students of color.

## Discussion

As educational and community leaders, it is incumbent upon us to make sure our students have equitable opportunities to learn inside and outside the context of the classroom, to ensure optimal career and college readiness. When employers are looking for employees, many times, it is the soft skills (interpersonal communication, connection with thoughts and people, empathy, motivation, team building ability) that give applicants the edge (Gruzdev et al., 2018; Weiss, 2019). Employers are looking for degreed professionals who have the ability to resolve conflict and problem-solve. When schools fail to prepare their graduates with the skills employers are looking for, they are contributing to pay disparities (Fogg & Harrington, 2011). According to Black et al. (2006), men of color are already disproportionately paid when compared to their white counterparts. Leadership initiatives such as Urban Teen Summit may help combat these discriminating factors from compounding in that the findings of this study suggest an increase in confidence, soft-skills, leadership skills, and personal voice. Equipping students with these skills and attributes prior to their entering the private or public sector presents the possibility of them having an advantage over others who lack such skills.

This study focused on the perceptions of students who participated in the Urban Teen Summit. It is evident that having the training of the Urban Teen Summit allows students to learn how to plan, coordinate, collaborate, maintain civility during discussions, problem-solve, present, and lead. It is also evident that participants in the Urban Teen Summit possess leadership potential that is now being recognized by the professionals around them. The skills that participants learned during the Urban Teen Summit will not only affect their success directly, but will also indirectly affect their peers, their school, and their broader community. To many students, Urban Teen Summit gave them a purpose. Whether it was curbing bullying, saving a friend from suicide, or addressing police brutality in the neighborhood, these student leaders accepted the challenge/opportunity of changing their community for generations to come.

## **Recommendations**

The need to develop young leaders of color cannot be overstated. The Urban Teen Summit presents one small but potentially important way that schools can invest in student leadership development. Participants indicate that taking part in the Urban Teen Summit enabled them to change the way they view themselves, change the way others see them, change the way they interact with peers, deepen their connection with the community, and strengthen their own voice.

Being an integral part of the community creates a sense of responsibility to something larger than one's self (Scott & Sharp, 2019). A recommendation for school administrators is to find ways to involve students with their local community. Many schools have service projects. The Urban Teen Summit goes one step further, by creating an opportunity for students to identify problems in their community and discuss solutions with their peers and community leaders.

This research may be of interest to educator preparation programs regarding the training of aspiring teachers and school administrators. Specifically, it is our recommendation that aspiring teachers and leaders receive training in how to create leadership development opportunities for urban youth. We also recommend that school board members and other policy makers prioritize policies and resources that create an investment in leadership development through programs such as the Urban Teen Summit.

Students of color receive a higher number of discipline referrals when compared to their peers. By providing leadership initiatives like the Urban Teen Summit, a campus can increase the social-emotional awareness of its students through first educating students about their voice and then supplying them the information and resources they need to be a more influential part of their community. It is our hope that by fostering opportunities for African American and Latinx students to collaborate with school and community stakeholders, this may change the way that adults view students of color.

## **Conclusion**

It is incumbent upon educators to invest in the leadership development of their students. It is our intent that this research study helps school leaders (i.e., superintendents, principals, counselors, teachers) as well as community partners examine ways they can invest in the leadership development of their students. Having local elected officials, law enforcement leaders, business owners, religious leaders, and university professors interact with urban youth

helps these students to see themselves as leaders, amplifies their voice, and increases their impact on the community. The Urban Teen Summit is one small example of how educators can invest in developing future community leaders from within their own organizations.

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