



A Focus on Civility with Public School Educators and Students

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Abstract

Public school teachers in Southwest Texas were surveyed regarding important civil behaviors students should practice and prevalent uncivil behaviors they have observed in the classroom. There was consensus across all demographic groups that the most important civil behaviors were the ability to successfully manage conflicts with others and the ability to respond respectfully to the opinions of others. The most prevalent uncivil behavior reported by the teachers was the use of sarcastic remarks to others followed by blaming others for their own negative actions. Focus groups with high school students were held on the same topic. Findings demonstrated similarities and differences between teachers and students and their perceptions of civility.

Keywords: *Teacher motivation, teacher development, distance education, teacher leadership, teacher education*

Statement of Purpose

Our public-school system has the potential to nurture the attitudes, values, and behaviors that promote a democratic and civil society. Schroeder observed that “Americans have long viewed public schools as the primary site of moral and cultural development” (Schroeder, 2017). Today, there are many evidences of the need for civility. In a 2013 survey, 98% of employees surveyed reported that they have experienced uncivil behavior in the workplace (Porath & Pearson, 2015). Classroom teacher Justin Parmenter also noted the decline in civility as evidenced by student behaviors in public schools today (Parmeter, 2018). Political commentators, too, lament the lack of civility in our public discourse today (Levine, 2010). On all fronts in our society, the need for greater civility is demonstrated.

Literature Review

History

Civility has been a common theme throughout our history. Our Founding Father George Washington at age 16 penned 110 rules for civil behavior. Washington's rules included: “Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those present.” and “Speak not injurious words, neither in jest or earnest; scoff at none although they give occasion.” (Washington, 1744, 2008, p. 9).

Two centuries later, John Dewey addressed the importance of civil behaviors in our society. He argued that civility is more than ordinary morality. Rather, Dewey maintained that the

key to civility is to engage one's personal interest and reflection; thereby developing an "inner morality" (Dewey, 1916, 2009). Megan Laverty (2009) more recently explored the philosophical underpinnings of civility in her article, *Civility, Tact, and the Joy of Communication*. She posited that civility has aesthetic-ethical significance. Civility, she suggested, is not simply social niceties, but a profound set of behaviors that facilitates meaningful human interaction and exchange (Laverty, 2009).

Definition

Many researchers have defined civility. Moore (2012) defined civility as the knowledge, attitudes, values, habits, and behaviors that are central to maintaining a healthy, diverse and dynamic society. He also suggested that civility is predicated on the belief that all human beings are of equal moral worth (Moore, 2012).

The National Council for Social Studies also addressed civility in the organization's National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies. Under the Civic Ideals and Practices theme, the NCSS called for an "understanding that civic ideals and practices are critical to full participation in society and that understanding is an essential component of education for citizenship, which is the central purpose of social studies" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2017, para. 10). Wilkins, Caldarella, Crook-Lyon, and Young (2010) referenced the Latin roots of the word, civics (citizen) and civitas (city) to demonstrate the relationship of civility and society. In their study, they defined civility as "behaviors that show respect toward a person in order to maintain social harmony or recognize the humanity of that person" (Wilkins et al., 2010, p.543).

Leskes added that civil discourse should be characterized by exchanges that are robust, honest, frank, and constructive (Leskes, 2013). Borba (2018) maintained that civility is encompassed in social and emotional learning, and she suggested that empathy may be a synonym for civility.

Need for Civility

Many researchers report the need for civility. On the political front, Moore (2012) highlighted President Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address as an example of the importance of civility, "So let us begin anew—remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems that divide us." (p. 147). Levine (2010) cited President Clinton's 1997 inaugural address when he called for "the politics of reconciliation" as recognition of the centrality of civility (p. 147). Levine (2010) called for more studies on the processes and conditions that promote civility.

Leskes (2013) acknowledged that "democracy is messy," and controversial issues have always generated strong feelings. Leskes challenged the academy to commit itself strenuously and immediately to improving civil discourse as a tool for democracy.

Constraints to Promoting Civility

John Dewey (1916/2009), in *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, warned against civility as simply conforming the individual to engage in activities which are socially serviceable, if that service is not understood nor personally valued by the individual. He distinguished between an "inner morality" and "ordinary morality" where inner is

driven by motive and character, and ordinary is motivated by conduct and consequences (Dewey, 1916/2009). In the classroom, there is often a compromise between the two. Dewey stressed, however, that the ultimate goal is to create a learning environment for students where “actions may be governed by the student’s own interest and where neither routine habit nor the following of dictated directions nor capricious improvising will suffice.” Instead, acts of civility should be characterized by the “rise of conscious purpose, conscious desire, and deliberate reflection” (Dewey, 1916/2009, p. 350). He criticized the overemphasis on conventions and traditions to dictate students’ actions. He advised to avoid a narrow definition of civil behaviors that he termed to be “sentimental goody-goody” (Dewey, 1916/2009, p. 350). Moore (2012) also was concerned about how civility was approached in the classroom. He stressed that there must be a balance between the two moralities.

Summary

A review of the literature demonstrates that civility is considered to be an essential component of a democratic society. The challenge is to define those civil behaviors and explore how they can be modeled, rather than inculcated, to help students develop their own sense of “inner morality”.

Purposes of this Study

The review of the literature demonstrates the significance of civility, but also reflects the myriad of definitions. Research is needed on how civility is perceived in our public schools and how that definition is actualized. Civil behaviors have tremendous impact on students and ultimately on our society. This study is shaped along the research conducted by Wilkins et al. (2010) and uses the same definition of civility, “behaviors that show respect toward a person in order to maintain social harmony or recognize the humanity of that person” (p. 594). However, this study investigates three different questions via a survey and focus groups:

1. What do educators believe are important descriptors of civil behavior for school age students?
2. What do educators perceive are the most prevalent uncivil behaviors of school age students?
3. What behaviors do secondary school students value as important or detrimental to a civil environment in public school?

Methodology

Mixed methodology was utilized for this study (CITE). It was anticipated that a mixed methods approach will provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the topic of civility. The quantitative method featured a questionnaire consisting of ten items describing civil behavior and ten items describing uncivil behavior. The list of descriptors for the quantitative survey draws from suggestions in the literature describing what constitutes civil and uncivil behavior (Benton, 2007, Burns, 2003, Feldman, 2001; Forni, 2002; Plank, McDill, McPartland, & Jordan, 2001; Wilkins et.al., 2010). Participants were asked to rank the importance of the civil behaviors and the prevalence of the uncivil behaviors. A Likert Scale was used for respondents. The items from the survey are listed in Tables 1 and 2.

Randomly selected high school students took the quantitative survey, too, and then participated in focus groups. Comments from the student focus groups were coded independently by the primary researcher and assistant to ensure inter-rater agreement. Seven distinct themes emerged from the responses; with many of the students' responses addressing several themes. The coded themes are listed in Tables 3 and 4.

Participants for the Quantitative Study—Survey

Educators in school districts in Southwest Texas near Sul Ross State University were contacted by email to participate. Graduate students in the Education Department at Sul Ross State University also were invited to participate. A Qualtrics survey link was emailed to 276 educators in August 2018, and 114 anonymous responses were received with a return rate of 41.3%. From a geographical perspective, 59% of the respondents were from rural areas, 15% were from suburban areas, and 26% were from urban areas. The ethnic distribution was 50% white, 46% Hispanic, and 4% other. Seventy-two percent (72%) were female, and twenty-eight percent (28%) were male. Most of the respondents were currently working in schools (76%) and referred to as contracted teachers; while 24% reported they were pre-service teachers.

Participants for the Qualitative Study—Focus Groups

Twenty high school students from a small, rural school district in Southwest Texas were randomly selected to participate by the school principal. Twelve students returned the Consent Forms to participate. Those who did not return their Consent Forms may have forgotten, were not interested, and/or did not want to miss class. The twelve students were divided into two focus groups that were held on April 17, 2019. Forty-eight percent (48%) of the students were female, and fifty-two percent (52%) were male.

Data Analysis

Teachers' survey results demonstrated their favored behaviors in the classroom. Ten civil behaviors were rated, and the scores are reported in Table 1.

Reported Teachers' Priority Ratings for Civil Behaviors

Table 1

Participants' Priority Ratings for Civil Behaviors

Civil Behavior	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
Aware of needs of others	39%	45%	15%	.9%	0%
Respond appropriately to needs of others	47%	42%	9%	2%	0%
Demonstrates skills to successfully manage conflict with others	61%	35%	4%	.9%	0%

Dress and groom themselves in ways appropriate for school	28%	42%	25%	.9%	0%
Sincerely compliments others	30%	45%	23%	2%	.9%
Use polite expressions and greetings with others	41%	50%	7%	.9%	.9%
Responsive to situations in which they may help others	46%	42%	11%	2%	0%
Respond respectfully to opinions of others	57%	39%	4%	.9%	0%
Consider how their behavior may affect others	54%	40%	4%	.9%	.9%
Include others in their activities	38%	39%	21%	2%	0%

For analysis purposes, the ratings of “extremely important” and “very important” have been combined. Overall, among the civil behaviors, the descriptor, “Ability to demonstrate skills to successfully manage conflict,” was rated one of the highest as “extremely important” or “very important.” Ninety-seven percent (97%) of all male educators rated that descriptor the highest, and 95% of all female educators concurred. For pre-service teachers, their rating for that item was 100%. Respondents who were contracted teachers rated the descriptor at 94%. The overall rating for this top descriptor was 96%.

The descriptor, “Respond respectfully to the opinions of others” also received an overall rating of 96%. Elementary and secondary teachers selected the descriptor; “Respond respectfully to the opinions of others,” to be the highest priority (“extremely important” or “very important”). One hundred percent (100%) of elementary teachers, and 93% of secondary teachers rated the descriptor “extremely important” to “very important.” Respondents from rural areas rated “Respond respectfully to the opinions of others” at 92%; while respondents from both suburban and urban areas rated the descriptor at 100%.

Reported Teachers’ Perceptions of Prevalent Uncivil Behavior

Next, teachers were surveyed on their perceptions of uncivil student behaviors. They rated ten uncivil behaviors. Table 2 lists the uncivil behaviors with teachers' rating.

Table 2

Participants’ Prevalence Ratings of Uncivil Behavior

Uncivil Behavior	Very Prevalent	Prevalent	Slightly Prevalent	Not Prevalent	Not at all Prevalent
Argue or quarrel with others	10%	33%	42%	14%	2%
Call others offensive names	12%	29%	36%	15%	7%

Blame others for their own negative actions	14%	37%	30%	14%	4%
Litter hallways, classrooms or school grounds	9%	19%	33%	29%	11%
Complain about school grievances (i.e. grades, schedules, tests, etc.)	20%	27%	31%	17%	5%
Make sarcastic remarks to others	16%	37%	30%	10%	7%
Use offensive language on school grounds	17%	28%	31%	12%	12%
Inconsiderate of others in their use of classroom supplies	10%	17%	42%	26%	5%
Exclude others from their activities	9%	29%	40%	16%	6%
Respond inappropriately when they do not get what they want	11%	36%	34%	15%	6%

For analysis purposes, the ratings of “very prevalent” and “prevalent” were combined. Males rated the descriptor, “Make sarcastic remarks to others,” and the most prevalent at 60% (“very prevalent” or “prevalent”). Females selected the same descriptor as most prevalent at 51%. The overall rating was 53%.

The second most prevalent uncivil behavior reported by educators was “Blame others for their own negative actions.” Respondents rated the prevalence of that uncivil behavior at 51% (“very prevalent” and “prevalent”). Males rated the prevalence at 57%; while females rated the prevalence at 50%.

Discussion

Data collected suggested that uncivil behaviors are not highly prevalent in the schools where the participants work or observe. No rating of very prevalent or highly prevalent was greater than 60%. There is a high level of agreement among teachers on what constitutes civil behavior, with the “Ability to successfully manage conflict” rated 96% overall, and “Respond respectfully to the opinions of others” rated 96% overall, too. There also is a high level of agreement among teachers on what are the most prevalent uncivil behaviors with “Making sarcastic remarks to others” top (53%) and followed by “Blame others for their own negative actions” (51%).

Reported Students’ Perceptions of Civility in Focus Groups

Before the focus group discussions began, each student took the same survey on civil and uncivil behaviors as the teachers did. They also were asked to rate the level of civility at their school. Using a rating of five for ideal to three for worst, 33% of all students rated the level of civility at a two; while 67% rated the level of civility at a three or higher.

The researcher then conducted the focus groups. Table 3 addresses the question, Is incivility a problem at your school? If so, how should it be addressed? There were nine responses from

Focus Group One and six responses from Focus Group Two. The varied student responses were evaluated for commonalities. The primary researcher and assistant identified seven themes and concurred that many participants' responses were labeled under two or more of those themes. The seven themes in response to incivility, based on students' responses, included:

- 1) Positivity is best to promote civility;
- 2) Simply ignore incivility;
- 3) Importance of respect;
- 4) Personal accountability;
- 5) Negativity promotes incivility;
- 6) Dangers of incivility;
- 7) Need involvement from others

Table 3

*Coded Themes of Responses to Question:
How Should Incivility Be Addressed at Your School?*

Theme	Focus Group One		Focus Group Two	
	N	%	N	%
	Positivity promotes civility	5	29.4%	1
Simply ignore incivility	4	23.5%	2	16.7%
Importance of respect	2	11.8%	1	8.3%
Personal accountability	2	11.8%	3	25%
Negativity promotes incivility	2	11.8%	1	8.3%
Dangers of incivility	1	5.9%	2	16.7%
Need involvement from others	1	5.9%	2	16.7%

Focus Group One student responses placed more emphasis on positivity (29%) than students in Focus Group Two (8.3%). Students in both groups recognized the option of simply ignoring uncivil behavior (23.5% for Focus Group One and 16.7% for Focus Group Two). One student stated, "Everyone's reaction is based on how you perceive things. Don't take everything to heart." Students in Focus Group Two voiced a greater sense of personal accountability for the level of civility at their school (25% for Focus Group Two and 11.8% for Focus Group One).

Table 4 addresses the question, How important is civility? There were six responses from Focus Group One and six responses from Focus Group Two.

Table 4

Responses to Question: How important is civility?

Focus Group	Focus	Focus	Focus	Focus
	Group One	Group One	Group Two	Group Two
	N	%	N	%
Very Important	1	16.7%	0	0.0%
Important	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Somewhat important	3	50%	4	66.7%
Little Importance	2	33.3%	2	33.3%
No Importance	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

All students agreed that civility was important for their school. However, Focus Group One rated the importance of civility higher. Concern was expressed in both focus groups about the potential dangers of incivility, and several students referenced school shootings across the country. During the discussions in both Focus Groups One and Two, the theme of need for involvement from others was voiced nine times. Students felt that in the school setting, they needed the intervention of teachers and administrators to address some issues of civility.

Limitations and Future Research

The study participants (both teachers and students) were all from the Southwest Texas area. Furthermore, the respondents were primarily from rural areas in Texas (59%). It is unclear if these findings would be similar across the United States. Although the survey items were literature-based, the reliability and validity of the instrument have not been determined. Participants rated the uncivil and civil descriptors, but they may or may not have defined them in the same way. A larger number of students in the focus groups and teachers in the survey may result in different findings.

Finally, this study does not address the concerns that were raised in the literature about the approach for nurturing civil behaviors, as presented by Dewey. A qualitative research study may explore Dewey's questions.

Conclusions

It is evident that the importance of civility has a long history in our country. Since schools are perceived as one common experience that all people share, our schools are logical places to nurture civil behaviors. There is a remarkably strong consensus among the educators polled on what are the most important civil behaviors and what are the most prevalent uncivil behaviors.

The most important civil behaviors identified were “Ability to demonstrate skills to successfully manage conflict with others” and “Respond respectfully to the opinions of others.” The most prevalent uncivil behavior reported was “Make sarcastic remarks to others” followed by “Blame others for their own negative actions.” The common concern among 21st century educators regarding the use of sarcasm and George Washington’s caution against the use of “injurious words” almost three-hundred years ago is remarkable.

A comparison of survey ratings by teachers and students showed some similarities and differences. Students placed greater importance on the need to “Consider how one’s behavior may affect others”; while teachers rated the “Ability to demonstrate skills to manage conflict successfully with others” as more important. Students overwhelmingly stated that “Blaming others for their own negative actions” was most prevalent; while teachers selected both “Making sarcastic remarks to others” and “Blaming others for their own negative actions” as the most prevalent uncivil behaviors.

There are some reoccurring themes that appeared in the student responses: ignoring incivility and need involvement from others. Students reported that they cope with incivility by ignoring it, and they also commented that their teachers do sometimes, as well. Students expressed many times the wish that teachers and administrators would be more involved in addressing the topic of civility. One student commented, “Teachers should be more concerned about student civility and not just worried about what they have to teach and what we have to learn.” Another student cautioned that “We must be careful when we speak to others. Without civility, it will make students want to hurt themselves and others.” Another student concluded, “It is helpful to have a bond with a teacher and know they care and really want to help the student succeed in school and life outside after graduation.”

There are many perspectives on civility, but we all agree that civility is vital for a healthy democracy and society. This study confirms that we cannot just ignore incivility. The student focus groups demonstrate that students need more adult support and involvement in shaping a civil and productive learning environment. One student put it very succinctly, “Kids do not want to be at a school that is always negative.” More dialogue is needed among students and educators to design meaningful opportunities for civil human interactions and exchanges in our schools and ultimately in our society.

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