

Perceived Impact of Character Education Program At A Midwest Rural Middle School:
A Case Study

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Abstract

Today there exist a concern for the safety and success of students in the public education system. Families, educators, and community members are concerned with the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of students in an environment where incidents of violence are growing. Events like the school shootings at Jonesboro, Arkansas, and at Columbine High School left our nation concerned with the problems within the school system. Many believe that character education can be an effective solution. The purposes of this study are to describe key elements of one school's character education program, and to determine the impact that this program had on academics, attendance, and discipline incidents within that school. The data in this study provides a document analysis in a single rural middle school consisting of students in grades 5-8, in a school where the teachers and community members perceived that discipline issues were out of control. The study centered on the belief that character education has a positive impact on attendance, academics, and the number of discipline incidents. This research was valuable because it proves that character education is effective. Its positive impact was seen in attendance; students learn that when they are absent from school they really miss important opportunities in their educational experience. It has a positive impact on discipline; they understand what types of behavior are socially accepted not only in school, but in the global community that they are a part of. It is important that students make real world applications of character education.

Introduction

March 24, 1998, was a day that gained both local and national recognition for Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Unfortunately, it was not the recognition that school stakeholders dreamed of achieving. This recognition was because of a massacre that two middle school boys created. Two students in Jonesboro, Arkansas, killed 5 people (1 teacher and 4 students) and wounded 10 others in an ambush-style school shooting.

On April 20, 1999, the Columbine High School Massacre occurred. Two seniors killed 12 students and 1 teacher, injured 21 other students and an additional 3 people who were trying to escape. Although Columbine was not the first incident of school violence, it is the one that caught the attention of the American public. *Pulling a Columbine* is a phrase that didn't exist 30 years, or even 20 years ago. Now, almost every student and adult knows the implications or intention of that phrase.

One is able to review timelines of school shootings and it reveals that school shootings have happened every year since the 1990's. Not all school shootings are listed on the timeline. On October 9, 2006, a 13 year-old student walked into a Joplin, Missouri middle school carrying an assault rifle and fired one shot. Luckily this situation was handled quickly and no one was injured. However, the site of the Joplin shooting was approximately one hour from the school where I, the researcher, was employed. Likewise, the impact of the 1998 Jonesboro incident is important because Jonesboro, Arkansas, is approximately 200 miles from my school district within the geographical area where this study was conducted and is less than a 4-hour drive. The shootings in schools continue throughout America. On Feb. 10, 2012, a 14-year-old student shot himself in front of 70 fellow students. As recently as February 27, 2012 at a high school, a 17 year old student shot and killed three students and injured six others (U.S. News, 2008). The

violence being displayed in schools has been linked to long-term bullying and social ostracism. Bullying in schools is escalating and becoming a key concern throughout the nation. “No school is free from the pervasive problem of peer aggression and bullying” (Cornell & Mayer, 2010, p. 10). Schools are recognizing how widespread bullying is and how serious the consequences for those who are the victims and those who victimize others (Espelage, Swearer, Hymel, & Vaillancourt, 2010). In addition to school bullying another concern was cyber-bullying among school-age children. Technology and social media have given both victims and perpetrators an additional way to interact (Willard, 2007). My concerns over the possibility of school violence and bullying occurring in my school district escalated after the school shooting incidents in neighboring districts. I wondered if my new students and their families would have similar feelings. As I made inquiries of the teachers I would be working with in the Fall of 2005, my unease grew when I received confirmation from the teachers that, in their opinion, discipline was out of control. Because of my concerns and the expressed concerns of the teachers, we began to search for strategies to reduce the potential of school violence within the school where I would be serving as principal.

In the fall of 2005, I became the principal of Greyson Middle School and, immediately, the staff and I discussed the need to find a program that would be a positive influence on the attitudes and behavior of our students. The faculty and I, as educators, loosely defined *character education* as educational experiences that helps students to develop behaviors that the local community would consider moral, well-mannered, non-bullying, and typical of a good citizen. As we reviewed character education programs we were astonished to find the quantity of programs available. During the 2005-2006 school year, the teachers and I, as a committee, reviewed many of these commercial character education programs. The committee reviewed 15

different character education programs and narrowed the field down to four. Of the final four, we identified the program that we hoped would be most beneficial for our school and prepared to implement it within the next school year. During the second year, 2006-2007, the staff participated in four trainings to learn strategies for implementation of the character education program. We began publicizing the character education program within the local community in an attempt to build awareness among students, parents, and community members. As principal, I met with three community groups in order to present our rationale for a character education program. We sought support from local organizations to help publicize the character education program we chose. The three groups I met with were: Ministerial Alliance, Rotary Club, and Chamber of Commerce. The local newspaper representatives attended the Chamber of Commerce meeting. Internally, I met with our school district administration team, including our assistant superintendent and superintendent, in order to incorporate the program district-wide as well as community-wide. The character education program was fully implemented in the third year, 2007-2008, within the school. In the fourth year 2008-2009 of the program, I transferred to another school and a new principal, my assistant principal was appointed to the principalship I held for three years.

Background of the Study

School procedures have changed as a result of school shootings. Now schools must have a crisis procedure in place in case of school shootings or other forms of violence occur. Likewise, schools are looking for ways to improve school climate and ways to educate students in character traits that help ensure fewer incidents of violence. Researchers say attitude and character can have a great impact on the school environment (Lunenburg & Bulach, 2005; Murphy, 1998; Ryan, Bohlin, & Thayer, 1996; Shriver & Weissberg, 2005; Tatman,

Edmondson, & Slate, 2009). Negative attitudes can become contagious among students because “contagious youth culture of academic negativism and misconduct can thwart learning and disrupt the school routine” (Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999, p. 99). In the school environment, those attitudes can spread throughout the student population so quickly that it becomes difficult to correct them before they result in heinous behavior. Research has shown that school climate improves when character education programs are implemented (Murphy, 1998). Implementing a character education program that is carefully organized can have positive results on student behavior as Bennett (1991) indicated that, “If we want our children to possess the traits of character we most admire, we need to teach them what those traits are” (p. 133). Character can have a positive effect individually and on the student population as a whole.

Participants in a study conducted by the Character Education Partnership identified desirable outcomes related to implementation of character programs. These outcomes include:

- “... Increasing socio-moral cognitive development, problem solving skills, and emotional competency
- Improving academic achievement
- Increasing attachment to school and coping skills
- Reducing violence/aggression and drug use...” (Character Education

Partnership, 2003, para. 6). The improved student attitudes begin to permeate the school setting. There is a decrease in negative student behaviors. This same attitude improvement affects the culture and is infused in curriculum and is reflected by improved student achievement, interactions, and parental involvement (Character Education Partnership, 2003).

“Most Americans will tell you that character education is a good idea. According to pollsters, 90% of us want schools to teach core moral values” (Matera, 2001, p. 191). This study

is important because the educators teach to reach the whole child and part of meeting the needs of the whole child is incorporating universal character education traits within the curriculum.

Adults serve as role models for students with whom they interact (Tatman, et al., 2009).

Teaching these traits is an integral part of education because not all students are exposed to the same behaviors at home that are expected in public schools. “While the development of a child’s character is clearly not the sole responsibility of the school, historically and legally schools have been major players in this arena” (Ryan, 1993, p. 16). “Teachers, administrators, and even parents resonate to the idea of teaching the students the core values deemed essential for cultural survival” (Lasley, 1997, p. 654). Violence that once seemed to be nonexistent within the educational system has appeared more frequently during middle school age children than in the past. “The dramatic increase in the prevalence of problem behaviors during adolescence is a national concern” (Simons-Morton, et al., 1999, p. 99). Schools are not seen as the *safe* places they were in the past.

The statistics gathered by Tatman et al. in 2009 regarding violent student behaviors such as “...attacks, shakedowns, robberies, attempted suicides and gun related crimes...” (Tatman, et al., para. 3) demonstrates a real need to improve student attitudes and character. Education is impacted daily by tardiness, lack of respect, defiant behaviors, and the stress these impose on the teaching staff. Violence in the school setting requires additional security measures and personnel to ensure safety and protect instructional time (Tatman et al., 2009). Through the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) survey revealed 68% of teachers saying pupil behavior had worsened in the last two years (Taylor, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

As a middle school principal preparing to work at a new district, I wanted to see how teachers and staff perceived the climate and culture of the building they worked in. The faculty and staff felt that discipline was out of control, and that attendance was a problem as well. This motivated me to research possible solutions for the problem. Beginning with Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, the work of Lickona, Berkowitz, and Bier on character education, I saw that implementing a character education program was a solution that was yielding positive results. I also saw character education as an effective tool to yield not only positive results in culture and discipline, but attendance and academic achievement as well. I started my study by researching moral development theories to serve as a foundation for the implementation of a character education program.

Lawrence Kohlberg approached psychological and philosophical assumptions to develop his Theory of Moral Judgment. He worked with Anne Colby to create the Moral Dilemma test to measure and recognize how moral development changes and progresses as people progress through life (Kohlberg & Colby, 1987). This became a definite foundation to build character development. Utilizing Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development for a foundation to refer to gives researchers a guide to develop a character education program that coincides with the stages as student's progress through the stages on Kohlberg's theory (*Figure 1*).

Level One: Pre-conventional Morality	Stage 1: Punishment-Obedience Orientation
	Stage 2: Instrumental Relativist Orientation
Level Two: Conventional Morality	Stage 3: Good Boy-Nice Girl Orientation
	Stage 4: Law and Order Orientation
Level Three: Post-Conventional Morality	Stage 5: Social Contract Orientation
	Stage 6: Universal Ethical Principle Orientation

Figure 1. Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Wong, 2000, para. 2)

Working from an educational stand point, many utilized Kohlberg's theory to research and study to see how moral development should be incorporated and utilized within the education system for an effective character education program. Lickona laid the early foundation of character education's impact. Berkowitz, Bier, Tatman, Edmondson, and Slate began the dynamic study of character education. Their research has shown that character education, when implemented effectively, does produce results with moral development (Lickona, 2003; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Tatman, Edmonson, & Slate, 2009).

Working with all of the research and studies mentioned here, my study has shown that character education not only impacts school culture and security, but can also have a positive impact on attendance, academic achievement, and discipline referrals. This study is important to the field of character education to reflect that character education has benefits beyond creating an environment that improves the well-being, both physically and mentally, of the students involved. It has shown that character education was an important part of the education system. This study starts from the implementation stage and provides a guide through each step of the implementation process of a character education program. This study is both significant and relevant to educators, the community, and the parents. It can serve as an effective tool for

making positive changes through character education. This study has advanced understanding of character education's importance to student success and adds to previous studies by providing knowledge useful to the implementation of character education programs.

Historical Perspectives

In the early years as a nation, the idea that students need to learn more than just knowledge was accepted in the ideals of public education. It was thought that students needed to learn how to be effective and responsible members of our democratic society. In *Character Education: A Historical Overview*, the authors create a timeline of emphasis of character within the education system (Tatman, Edmonson, & Slate, 2009). In common schools in the 1800's in Colonial America, the schools were brought together for a primarily moral purpose. The health of America's new democracy would depend on the morals and virtues of its citizens. As a new nation, failure was possible if its citizens weren't educated with common morals and virtues (Ryan, 2003). Civic virtues were prominent in early textbooks. Among these virtues were hard work, respect for parents, love for God and Country, and honesty. By teaching these virtues, schools attempted to develop responsible citizens (Levy, 2000). "Schoolbooks were meant to train the child's character" (Levy, 2000, p. M2).

In 1963, Madalyn Murray O'Hair challenged prayer in schools, not by challenging freedom of religion, but challenging freedom *from* religion in the education system. A devout atheist, O'Hair wanted prayer in school completely eliminated. The court case *Murray v. Curlett* eventually made its way to the United States Supreme court and was another challenge to the education system (All About History, 2012). It is interesting to note that not a single Christian organization filed against O'Hair, possibly because they thought the idea of the abolition of school prayer was absurd and would never make it through the judicial system.

Abington Township School District v. Schempp was tried at the Supreme Court at the same time. This case was about the state law in Pennsylvania that required the reading of 10 Bible verses every day. It is interesting to note that in this case, the law stated that “The readings were without comment and any student could request to be excused” (All About History, 2012, para. 1). Combining the cases together with one ruling, the Supreme Court ruled that school prayer and bible reading were unconstitutional (All About History, 2012). This decision was another important moment and effectively changed the public education system. With this ruling, the emphasis of moral or values education began to fade due to the concerns that morals or values could cross into the grey area of the separation of church and state.

The 1960s brought about controversy over establishing a *values-free* classroom. Since in a pluralistic society, no one was able to establish a common set of character traits for teachers to reinforce, the goal became a values-free classroom. Teachers no longer had the authority to teach morality education (Tatman, Edmonson, & Slate, 2009). In order to stay away from charges that character education was somehow affiliated with religious education, lessons about character focused on universal, nonreligious traits (Tatman, Edmonson, & Slate, 2009).

In 1998, Annette Kusgen McDaniel states, “...the conduct of United States youth during the last 20-30 years has been marked by two trends: (a) a rise in destructive behavior, and (b) a rise in self-destructive behavior” (1998, p. 1). As violence increased among students and young adults, people began to re-evaluate the need for values education. Research was beginning to focus more on character education, and character education began to return to America’s school system. During the 1970s, research began to try to effectively understand moral development. Working from Piaget’s foundation in the study of cognitive and social-cognitive development theories, Lawrence Kohlberg and Anne Colby have expanded the study of moral development.

James Rest also contributed to cognitive development/moral judgment theories. Kohlberg's Moral Dilemma and Rest's Defining Issues Test (DIT) were created as ways to measure moral development. Albert Bandura, Augusto Blasi, and William Damon made progress as well when referencing moral judgment and development and bring new ideas to the surface. The contributions of the works listed above are incredibly important to the field of moral and character education.

During the 1980's and 1990's *values education* experienced a name change becoming *character education*. Often educational leaders define values as personal convictions emerging from personal beliefs. However, they theorized that the general public would agree upon the traits essential to *good character*. Educators believed that students need schooling to learn how to make good decisions, demonstrate respect, and be empathetic toward others. The public began to think about the necessity of such programs because of the increase of acts of defiance and violence within the public school system and a growing perceptions of the decline of acceptable character traits in public education (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). Then, in 2007, Berkowitz and Haynes wrote, "Today, character education is making a comeback. Thirty-one states mandate or encourage character education by statute. While pronouncements by legislatures don't necessarily translate into quality character education programs, it's a start" (p. 13A).

Dr. Thomas Lickona (1994) posits that a *crisis of character* (1994, p. 1) is manifesting itself nationally in acts of violence by youth. Lickona recognizes that today's society is facing a serious problem and he emphasizes his point with some stunning statistics about youth violence. Violence among males in the range of 15 to 24 years of age have a crime rate that is statistically seven times higher than in Canada and forty times higher than in Japan. In the years since 1965,

youth violence has increased by more than 300 percent. The rate of violence by girls has tripled (1994). Using more recent statistics from the United States, youth violence continues to be a public health crisis. For example, the second leading cause of death for America's youth is homicide with an average 16 young people murdered daily (Center for Disease Control & Prevention, CDC, 2012). Berkowitz and Haynes also refer to a *crisis of character* in their 2007 article showing that Lickona wasn't alone in his concern over the crisis of character. Berkowitz and Haynes explain that the legislation No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has often forced teachers to place character education on to the back burner while focusing on standardized test scores. While the focus in schools has been on standardized test results the lack of character development for our youth has been virtually ignored (Berkowitz & Haynes, 2007).

The statement, *a crisis of character*, is still valid, and possibly even more relevant due to events that started a new trend in youth violence. Lickona may have called it *a crisis of character* in 1994, but his words only foreshadowed the tragic events that were to take place only a few years after his statement was made. There had been school shootings prior to his statement in 1994, but those shootings were not frequent events. Prior to 1995 school shootings were rare. These shootings did not typically result in multiple deaths (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2012). School shootings have continued since Columbine. Those events brought attention to the need for character education within the public school setting.

Founded in 2000, the Foundation for a Better Life (FBL) promotes values and good character for all ages. The FBL has recognized that the need for good character and good values goes beyond the public education system and school age children. The organization also has programs available to colleges to continue the character education to continue through the next stages of life. The Foundation for a Better Life has funded an aggressive campaign, designated

as Pass it On, which utilizes print ads, billboards, television commercials, public service announcements, movie theater ads, internet ads, as well as an internet website known as Values.com. They also have a sister organization, Random Acts of Kindness, that also supports people being good and doing good things. These types of organizations help students see that values and good character is important to society in general, that society expects and needs these character traits as well. They also are able to see that adults can model good values as well (Lumpkin, 2008).

Since the conception, public education addressed teaching morals, values and character. The need for this type of education has almost always been recognized. Thus, moral education is not a new idea, but is, in fact, as old as education itself. “Throughout history and in cultures around the world, education rightly conceived has had two great goals: helping students become smart and helping them become good citizens. They need character for both” (Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2007, p. 24). Today, character education is one option to consider when schools are looking for something to decrease discipline problems, increase student’s attendance rates, and improve academic achievement. Built on the foundation of values education, character education programs began to be developed. The Character Education Partnership further explains why character education is re-emerging:

Although character education has always been of vital importance, schools strayed from proactive efforts to incorporate character development into their teaching in past decades. Ironically, this neglect came at a time when the need became greater due to increased challenges in raising ethical children. A number of factors such as a weakening in guidance by some families and communities brought on widespread reflection toward the end of the 20th century. The tragedy at Columbine and other fatal shootings at a number

of schools punctuated these concerns across the country. Now character education is becoming a priority in our nation's education reform as we are increasingly realizing that character development must be an intentional part of education rather than a process that happens naturally. (Character Education Partnership, 2012, para. 1)

Authors and Theorists in Character Education

Dr. Thomas Lickona was an early leader in establishing a program for character education. Dr. Lickona attended State University of New York at Albany where he received his Ph.D. in psychology. He has done extensive research on children's moral reasoning. He has written many books, one of which, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Teach Respect and Responsibility* has become a hallmark for educators considering the implementation of a character education program. He is on the Board of Directors on the Character Education Partnership. In the Center for the Fourth and Fifth R's, he serves as director. He is author, consultant, and keynote speaker. When researching character education, Dr. Lickona's name often appears, and his work is often referenced. His work has scholarly significance because his research relates character education and the importance of embedding it into school curriculum (Damon & Berkowitz, 2002).

Dr. Phillip Fitch Vincent is another well-known name in the field of character education. Dr. Vincent received his B.A. in Philosophy/Religion with a minor in Psychology in 1976. In 1980, he received his M.A. in Gifted Education. In 1991, he received his Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction/Middle Grades Education. He has 20 years of experience in education. He has worked with educators in more than 33 districts within North Carolina. He also does consulting for school districts across the United States. He currently serves as director of the Character Development Group. Dr. Vincent is the author of many books and articles within the education

community. He is also available as a keynote speaker for character education programs. He is highly regarded by his peers within the character education theories. Dr. Vincent's research and work is significant because of his experience in the public school system and his knowledge of curriculum and instruction (Character Development Group, 2008).

Dr. Marvin W. Berkowitz and Dr. Melinda Bier are Co-Directors of the Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Dr. Berkowitz is an author, consultant, and keynote speaker. He is also the co-editor of the *Journal of Research in Character Education* and serves as an advisor on the Project Wisdom as an advisor. He is a recipient of the Sanford N. McDonnell Lifetime Achievement Award from the Character Education Partnership. His work is significant not only for his research, but for the fact that he has experience in Missouri's public school system (CEP, 2012). Dr. Melinda Bier co-authored *What Works in Character Education* with Berkowitz. She is the Associate Director for the Center for Character and Citizenship, College of Education, University of Missouri, St. Louis. She has worked alongside Berkowitz and Sanford N. McDonnell for projects for the Character Education Partnership.

Dr. Lawrence Kohlberg studied under Jean Piaget researching moral development. He taught at University of Chicago and Harvard University. He is most recognized for his work on moral judgment and development. He wrote many books, including *The Philosophy of Moral Development and Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education*. He is also responsible for creating the Moral Dilemma, an interview-style test that was based on his stages and levels within cognitive development and was used to measure a person's moral development. The test is still used today in researching moral development (Crain, 1985).

Damon, Blasi, and Bandura are among others that realize that this approach has effectively changed thinking, but not all evidence supports that changing thinking doesn't always change behavior (Bandura, 1999; Blasi, 1999; Damon & Colby, 1996). Each of these has made their own mark on the study of moral development, what affects moral development and development and behavior.

The people that are often associated with character education are educators, parents, psychologists, researchers and various religious associations. There are vast resources available on the Internet. Some of the websites dedicated to character education are: Character Education Partnership (<http://www.character.org>), Character Counts! (<http://www.charactercounts.org>), Project Wisdom (<http://www.projectwisdom.com>), and CHARACTERplus (<http://www.characterplus.org>), just to name a few. Just typing *character education* in to a web browser will bring up about 285,000 possibilities to explore.

Character Education and Moral Development

Having addressed the foundations for character, we need to discuss character and its use in the educational setting. How does someone measure character? What does good character look like, and how can we recognize which students have it? Kohlberg and Rest both created ways to measure moral judgment and character, and their work is a great foundation to start. Is it plausible to use those methods to measure every student's character? Teachers would have to spend hours recording the data from those tests. Character education can be a solution, if thoroughly researched and effectively implemented. One way to measure character in the education setting is to look at attendance, academics, and discipline. Students who exhibit good character could be students who choose to work hard in academics, have good attendance and do not have disciplinary problems. They would exhibit these behaviors by choice, because their

moral development tells them it is the right things to do. This could be an effective way to see if character education is having an impact on character if attendance goes up, academic achievement rises and a decrease in disciplinary problems is evident. Character education has a rich foundation in moral development and is a much more effective way to review and reflect to see just what areas and traits students need to understand.

Many people wonder what character actually means. There are so many different ways that society looks at character. Berkowitz and Bier explain why there might be misunderstandings when the word character is involved:

Character can be defined in various ways and is indeed used in different ways in common speech. We consider someone “a character” if they act atypically. We also commonly refer to “having character,” but sometimes that character is “good” or “bad.” It is unlikely that a school that proposes a character-education initiative is interested in either generating a “bunch of characters” or promoting the development of “bad character” in students. What we really mean in the field when we invoke *character* is sociomoral competency. Character is the complex set of psychological characteristics that enable an individual to act as a moral agent. In other words, character is multifaceted. It is psychological. It relates to moral functioning. (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, p. 73)

There are many character education programs to review, and it is not an unpopular option for schools to create their own programs based on values or virtues chosen by the stakeholders. When all the participants, such as teachers, parents and/or community members, participate in deciding the traits to focus on, it might help to eliminate confusion of the definition of character and of the virtues they have chosen to focus on. Lickona does address this approach.

When a school decides to develop a character education program, the content must be chosen first. The school will have to define character and the virtues it intends to target. The way the school defines character and the targeted traits will shape the initiative. These will be what the backbone of the schools character initiative becomes (Lickona, 2003). Berkowitz and Bier address various definitions of character in “stage one: defining the domain” (2005, p. 2) of character education. They realized that they must have a “conceptual model to guide us” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 2).

- Character is a psychological construct. That is, the outcome of effective character education is the psychological development of students.
- Character education targets a particular subset of child development, which we call character. Character is the composite of those psychological characteristics that impact the child’s capacity and tendency to be an effective moral agent, i.e. to be socially and personally responsible, ethical, and self-managed.
- Character education then ought to be most effective if it relies predominantly on those social, education and contextual processes that are known to significantly impact the psychological development of such characteristics. (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 2)

The Character Education Partnership, based on the work of Kevin Ryan and Dr. Lickona, chose to define character into categories for their program. These categories are; “Understanding (the “head”), Caring about (the “heart”), and Acting upon core ethical values (the “hand”) (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 18). Using these three categories, they implemented programs that focused on these areas. There are many ways to look at character education, and its defining traits.

The different character education programs attempt to state what character is and how it affects thinking, actions and behavior. For their work, Berkowitz and Bier researched over one-hundred different character education programs to see if they saw any trends and to see what seems to work, and what doesn't. They were able to narrow it down to 30 to 35 programs which met their criteria. From that data, they were able to judge the effectiveness of character education programs and conclude that character education does seem to have an effect on moral development. Berkowitz and Bier made some valid statements that help to show that character education does work, that is why their work is included in this study.

Implementation of Character Education Research and Theories

Many of the experts agree that focusing on character, as a part of any curriculum, is necessary for student growth and development. Dr. Thomas Lickona, author of *Educating for Character*, states that moral education is not a new idea. It is, in fact, as old as education itself (Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2007). Down through history, in countries all over the world, education has had two great goals: to help young people gain important knowledge and to help them use that knowledge to become good citizens (Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2007). "If students do not know how to function in society, what good are academics" (Lickona, Schaps & Lewis, 2003, p. 11)?

Within Dr. Lickona's view of character education, there are ten essential virtues that he feels are universal and can easily be focused on without crossing the lines of culture, philosophy, and religion. Wisdom, fortitude, love, justice, gratitude, positive attitude, hard work, self-control, integrity, and humility are the ten that Dr. Lickona speaks about. His article in the Fall 2003 edition of *The Fourth and Fifth Rs* addresses not only essential virtues, it also talks about

strategies to promote the virtues. The following list is Dr. Lickona's "Ten Strategies For Promoting the Virtues" from the same article:

1. A virtue a month
2. A virtue a week, related to the monthly theme
3. A 3-or 4-year cycle of virtues
4. A yearly theme
5. Assigning developmentally appropriate virtues to each grade level
6. A common set of character expectations
7. A character education curriculum framework
8. A published character education curriculum
9. A character education process model
10. A school culture approach. (Lickona, 2003, para. 1)

According to Lickona, there are two very important parts to implementing a character education program. His program is virtue-centered and focused on character traits, their definition and application. Therefore, Part One is to have the staff create a comprehensive list of essential values. The Part Two is to expand the ownership of the program. The ownership needs to be within the school as well as owned by the parents and community members in order to be effective. The staff must believe in it in order to create surveys to gain student, parent, and community involvement. In return input from parents, community and students' ideas can be heard and incorporated for ownership by them as well (Lickona, 2003). Even Aristotle, over 2000 years ago, realized that the part that adults play in the growth and development of children and adolescents is very important. Children's growth and development can be made or broken by all the adults that interact with that child (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. ii). With character

education it is important for the desirable traits to be recognizable and modeled in society so that the students can easily recognize the *real life* applications of these traits.

Common Components of Character Education

In 1987, the United States Department of Education was approached with a project called *Building Character in the Public Schools* by the National School Boards Association. School boards came together with over 15,000 participants across the nation (Huitt, 2004). There are two goals. One goal is to increase awareness of the importance of developing a character initiative that addresses character within the public school system. The other goal would be to create and improve the development of character education within the schools system (Huitt, 2004).

In 1996, Dr. Vincent describes what types of programs appeared to be ineffectively or did not work:

From my travels and work with school districts around the country, I have observed several practices which seem to be apparent in all successful or emerging character education programs. Individuals involved in character education neither see this as a fad nor an “add-on” program, unless a school or community has decided to “character lite.” This is represented by practices such as the purchase of a packaged program which is used once or twice a week or the reading of “inspiring” stories over the intercom for five minutes each day. It is apparent to serious practitioners that developing character is not easy. A character education worthy of its name reflects the ethos or life of the school. It occurs throughout the entire day. Character education two times a week or five minutes a day requires minimal buy-in and effort on the part of the community and the school. It

will produce, at the best, minimal results. Programs such as these are doomed to fail.

(Vincent, 1996, p. xiv)

So, it is important that a program is carried across the curriculum, not in *now you see it, now you don't* spurts. Once again, the saying, *practice makes perfect* comes to mind. If there isn't adequate time allowed to process and learn the chosen traits, the program probably isn't going to be effective.

How should the topics be approached? Is there a way that research shows is not effective? There is research that addresses this question as well. According to Annette Kusgen McDaniel, author of *Character Education: Developing Effective Programs*, there are ways to approach a program that are not effective. "The following methods have been found to be ineffective in promoting character in youth. Lecturing and moralizing, authoritative teaching styles, externally derived codes of ethic, and setting the ethics agenda without involving students in the process" (McDaniel, 1998, p. 4). McDaniel addresses the thought of the quick fix, the character trait Band-Aid; there is not a quick fix, or an easy solution for promoting character education. The process requires the hard work and dedication of all of the parties involved to become an effective, successful program (McDaniel, 1998).

Character Education is not without opposition. Alfie Kohn is one of the loudest voices heard speaking out against character education initiatives. Good character is more than good behavior, and good behavior can be mistaken for good character by teachers and schools. It is easy to attribute character when a child follows the rules without being told repeatedly. This is a contradiction between what adults and children value as important. Kohn suggests that character education fails since children aren't able to automatically recognize character, and know the differences between character and behavior when they see it (Kohn, 1997).

By beginning his article with this quote, Alfie Kohn is assuming the worst about the education system. This tone continues throughout his article. Kohn's opinion is that the education system is trying to hide a way to teach children to work harder and do what they are told under the title of character education. Kohn offers his opinion on the two meanings of character education:

The phrase character education also has two meanings. In the broad sense, it refers to almost anything that schools might try to provide outside of academics, especially when the purpose is to help children grow into good people. In a narrow sense, it denotes a particular style of moral training, one that reflects particular values as well as particular assumptions about the nature of children and how they learn. (Kohn, 1997, para. 2)

In the same article, Kohn goes on to state that the point of character education is to indoctrinate students to behave a certain way instead of having meaningful conversations and reflections about the appropriate ways to think and act (Kohn, 1997). Kohn spoke out concerning the use of extrinsic rewards and motivations as the only focus and reason for the students to participate in a character education program. He speaks out against the conservative values that he believes are part of character education programs. As with any opponent to policy, it is important to look at both sides of the issue, and Kohn has value to his opposition. It is important to note that there probably isn't a perfect solution to the problem of student behaviors and attitudes, but is it better to do nothing than to try to find a reasonable solution? When considering adopting a character education program, or any other program within the education system, the responsible thing to do is to investigate both the pros and cons involved so that an informed decision can be made.

In an article by Kenneth A. Strike, he quotes a scene witnessed between a teacher and students discussing a student incident:

Consider, for example, the following discussion with a class of high school sophomores concerning an incident in which a student had stolen a tape recorder from an unlocked locker and later bragged about it to his friends.

Leader: Should his (the thief's) friends express their disapproval?

Mary: I'd say that you better not brag about it. You better shut your mouth or you'll get caught.

Sally: If somebody is going to be dumb enough to bring something like that into the school, they deserve to get it stolen. If you aren't together enough to lock your locker, then what do you expect. If someone is going to steal, then more power to them.

Leader: Is that what people think? It's okay if you can get away with it?

Mary: No stealing is wrong.

Leader: Well then, do you have a responsibility in a situation like this to try to talk the thief into returning the stolen goods?

Mary: You can't put pressure on students like that.

Bill: You can't ask that.

Mary: This school is responsible for enforcing the rules. We are teenagers. We have our own responsibility, but we can't be responsible for totally everything. It's totally ridiculous to put it on the students.

Bill: Yeah, the kids come here to learn, not to patrol the hallways. They come here to go to school.

Mary: We are the ones who are teenagers. The teachers are grown up. They are the big people. They are supposed to control the school. We are here to learn.

Todd: You shouldn't steal. But the way society is, everybody does it...[Expressing disapproval] depends on a lot of things – [like] who is whose friend.

This discussion reveals a disturbing gap between the students' acknowledgement that stealing is wrong and their willingness to accept responsibility to stop it. On a personal level, the students oppose stealing; on a cultural level, however, they are resigned to the inevitability of theft and tacitly support it. Mary, for example, warns the thief to be more discreet, while Sally blames victims who are "dumb enough" to bring valuables to school or leave their lockers unlocked. Mary and Sally are not hardened street kids in a ghetto school; but are leaders in an affluent, high profile, semi-urban high school. They and their peers have come to take stealing for granted; school is just like anywhere else in society... (Strike, 1993, p. 2)

This example shows how students compare their school environment to society; where things like theft happen every day, and the participants rarely get caught, and when they do it is because they were dumb enough to get caught (Strike, 1993). Students mirror their behaviors to what they see in society. Unfortunately, society is not always moral. This brings the argument that schools are not going to be successful with character programs until society itself changes and becomes a better model for our youth (Strike, 1993). As educators we have to think about what is done now, and how it will affect the future. Even though character education programs aren't going to make an immediate change within society, the hope is that they will positively impact the future.

In Character Education, no universal list of traits has been established because of the diversity inherent in cultural, ethical, religion or even regional differences. What one culture considers extremely important may be a trait that is not so important to another. Although there are many similarities in the lists of important traits, no master list has been established.

However, all agree that the person who is teaching traits of good character and acceptable behavior that embodies the trait. A negative example is when Sara values honesty in others, but does not practice being honest herself. To each trait there is both a value and application. In order to be successful with any character program, students need to be able to recognize both the definition and the application. With this in mind, many character programs have focused on principles that can easily be learned, recognized, modeled and practiced by everyone within the program. In developing character education programs, research revealed eleven areas of ideals that could be focused on without trampling on personal or religious values. These eleven principles are the foundation of character education programs:

- 1) Promotes core ethical values,
- 2) Teaches students to understand, care about, and act upon these core ethical values,
- 3) Encompasses all aspects of the school culture,
- 4) Fosters a caring school community,
- 5) Offers opportunities for moral action,
- 6) Supports academic achievement,
- 7) Develops intrinsic motivation,
- 8) Includes whole-staff involvement,
- 9) Requires positive leadership to staff and students,

- 10) Involves parents and community members, and
- 11) Assesses results and strives to improve. (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2003, p.
- 12) The foundation of these principles are key to character education.

Impact of Character Education Programs

There are many ways to research and evaluate the impact of character education. In this section, the focus will be on how character education effects attendance, academics, and discipline referrals.

Decrease the Numbers of Discipline Referrals

A discipline referral is a situation that requires immediate consequence resulting in a student immediately being sent to the principal's office. However, "By moral communities we mean school cultures with justice, caring and developmental discipline, all of which are interrelated and central to a modern theory of civic and moral education" (Lee, 2009, p. 167). Many programs address discipline referrals. Huitt agrees with theorists like Damon and Bandura, that changing someone's ways of thinking doesn't always change the way that person behaves (Huitt, 2004). The Character Education Partnership discusses the successes of the CEP's National Schools of Character. "They see dramatic transformations; prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, respect, and compassion are replacing negative behaviors such as violence, disrespect, apathy and underachievement" (Character Education Partnership, 2012, para. 1).

The Center for the Fourth and Fifth R's addresses *character-based discipline* this discipline by the students with sound values are skillful at resolving conflict without resorting to physical violence. If we teach students not only to solve problems on paper but also to solve problems with peers, then we are giving them the tools to be successful (Lickona, 2003). At an intermediate school in the southwest region, discipline referrals decreased by fifty percent. At

another middle school in the northwest area, discipline referrals were reduced from one hundred to thirty-five per month (Devine, Ho Seuk, & Wilson, 2000).

Improve School Attendance

“School attendance increases, sometimes drastically in schools where character education was part of the curriculum” (DeRoche & Williams, 1998, p. 23). At one intermediate school in the Southwest, in one of the poorest communities in the state, a five-year character education initiative was responsible not only for a decline in the number of student absences but also for that of the teachers. There was an approximate drop of 50% in staff absences that went over 10 days (Devine, Ho Seuk, & Wilson, 2000).

Increases in Academics

“A growing body of research supports the notion that high-quality character education can promote academic achievement,” (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006, p. 449). There are a number of programs that claim an increase in academic performance when character education is part of the curriculum. Child Development Project, Peaceful Schools Project and the Seattle Social Development all claim to link character education to an increase in academics (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006). Berkowitz and Haynes give examples that show that character education is having a positive effect on academic success (Berkowitz & Haynes, 2007). They relate the success of a small middle school in the Midwest where new administration brought a character education program into the school and had an increase in academic performance (Berkowitz & Haynes, 2007). “Academic performance is up, disciplinary referrals are down by more than 70%, and the students failure rate has dropped to zero” (Berkowitz & Haynes, 2007, p. 13A).

Changes Within the School Culture

Dr. Berkowitz believes that character education is more than just a program; it is a change in the culture and the life within a school. Most character education programs recommend a holistic approach to character education. The Good Character website refers to how to approach a holistic model of character education:

- Everything in the school is organized around the development of relationships between and among students, staff, and community.
- The school is a caring community of learners in which there is a palpable bond connecting the students, the staff, and the school.
- Social and emotional learning is emphasized as much as academic learning.
- Cooperation and collaboration among students are emphasized over competition.
- Values such as fairness, respect, and honesty are part of everyday lessons in and out of the classroom.
- Students are given ample opportunities to practice moral behavior through activities such as service learning.
- Discipline and classroom management concentrate on problem solving rather than rewards and punishments.
- The old model of the teacher-centered classroom is abandoned in favor of democratic classrooms where teachers and students hold class meetings to build unity, establish norms, and solve problems. (Elkind & Sweet, 2004, para. 6)

A holistic approach involves everyday aspects of school, as well as support from parents and community. Within this approach, character education is considered part of the curriculum, everyday lessons, and part of every activity within the school system. It is important that values

are taught in every subject so that the students can recognize the expectations of good character, and how those expectations are recognized and implemented (Elkind & Sweet, 2004). Taking a holistic approach helps to make the students aware of the importance of character attributes, and it allows them to gain ownership of the program since they are able to see that good character is expected in every aspect of life (Elkind & Sweet, 2004).

Many character education programs embrace this sentiment and promote a character education word of the month for each month (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Elkind & Sweet, 2004; Stirling, McKay, Archibald, & Berg, 2002). Each word directly deals with one's character. These words, when incorporated into the daily lessons, teach students how to treat others, how to have a positive outlook, and how to be responsible. "Character traits that are defined, discussed and modeled become internalized when students put them into practice" (Stirling, McKay, Archibald, & Berg, 2002, p. 259). Utilizing the word throughout the month as often as possible in lessons allows students to internalize and familiarize themselves to the concepts by hearing them throughout the school on a consistent basis. The entire school staff models this behavior for students as well as encourages the behavior in students.

Improvement in Mental Health

So many children today feel as if they have no control over their lives because they do not know how to deal with people or issues. This often leads to students accepting whatever happens to them. Both parents and educators realize the importance and understand that there are other aspects of our children's school experience that matter (Cohen, 2006). It is important to educate students and focus on student's mental health, social emotional learning, and character education. It can play a vital part in helping children learn and develop in healthy ways. "There are over 300 empirical studies that support the notion that when schools make these core

processes integral facets of school life, student achievement increases and school violence decreases” (Cohen, 2006, p. 7). “President Bush’s act No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which drives today’s educational policy and practice, is filled with rhetoric about the importance of character education and school climate” (Cohen, 2006, p. 2).

According to a study conducted by several institutions, including Stanford Research Institute and Harvard University, “One’s attitude, degree of motivation, and people skills constitute eighty-five percent of the reasons people get ahead and stay ahead. One’s skills or expertise constitute only fifteen percent of the reasons” (McElmeel, 2002, p. 170). If students believe in themselves, they are much more likely to achieve success. When a student comes to class with a positive outlook and an attitude that he can accomplish anything, then anything can be accomplished (McElmeel, 2002). McElmeel’s work took 17 character traits and linked them to books and stories that re-enforced the meaning and application of each trait (McElmeel, 2002).

Berkowitz and Bier, writing for the Character Education Partnership, share the results of their research. They created a 3-stage process to research the effectiveness of character education programs:

Stage one: Defining the Domain. Recognizing that terminology would be a problem because many different labels are applied to similar endeavors, we examined an extensive list of definitions of character education...Stage Two: Collecting and Reviewing the Research. Many different strategies were employed here, including electronic searches and referrals from our expert panel...Stage Three: Drawing Conclusions. We identified 109 research studies concerning character education outcomes and evaluated each study for the scientific rigor of its research design. (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 3)

The research shows, as follows, that character education programs can be successful. There were many programs that were researched by Berkowitz and Bier, where they looked for common practices and common outcomes from the programs and research available. These are some of the results (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

Research Findings and Issues

According to Madonna M. Murphy, children reflect what they see in society, and through their reflections, we see the reflections of ourselves (Murphy, 2003). That disturbing image has caused schools in increasing numbers to unite in order to return to the ideals that education should also form good character (Murphy, 2003). While teachers have been teaching an informal type of character education since public education was introduced, today it has become even more necessary to make it a formal part of the curriculum. Thus, character education is a relevant topic on the forefront within journals and academic research. Research shows that character education programs do have a significant effect on student's behavior, when implemented effectively (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). One school reportedly experienced success in helping students and staffs possess a more positive outlook (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2003). After noticing an ever-increasing decline and pessimism in the attitudes of its students, this school decided to implement a character education program. For two years, this school implemented many changes with the hopes that it would see a more positive attitude from students and faculty (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2003). Likewise, a 2000 report on South Carolina's four year Character Education initiative, which is a pilot program funded by the United States Department of Education, related that school attitudes improved ninety-one percent (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2003).

There are many questions concerning the impact of character education programs. For example, what guidelines are available to judge whether a character education program works? Is there a standard that has to be reached before a program is deemed successful? However, the question most frequently asked is, “Does Character Education work” (Berkowitz & Bier 2004, p. 74). That is in and of itself is not the correct question to ask. That question will be hard to answer until more research addresses the topic. There are so many programs that label themselves character education that such a generic answer is difficult to give. The effectiveness of the initiative to incorporate character will have to reflect how the initiative impacts students as they become global citizens (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). “Character education can work, but its effectiveness hinges upon certain characteristics” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, p. 74). Dr. Berkowitz suggests some important questions to ask when determining the effectiveness of character education programs. Following is some questions provided by Berkowitz and Bier from research studies on character education.

- One way is to look at which programs have research that demonstrates their effectiveness. In other words, *which programs can we conclude actually work, based on existing sound research?*
- A second way is to identify characteristics of effective character education programs. *What elements of practice do effective programs tend to share?*
- A third way is to look at character education that is generic (home-grown, not based on a commercially available program) and examine if such programs are effective. *What do schools generally do that is effective in promoting character development?*

- Yet a fourth way is to look at research into specific practices, rather than as parts of full character education programs. *What are the effects of specific character education practices?* (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 3)

Summary of Review of Literature and Conclusion

Daily Lickona's statement concerning "a crisis of character" is seen to be true (Lickona, 1994, p. 1). Moral development theorists, educational researchers, and educators agree that character education is an important part of the development and education process. This has led to research studies, such as this one, to see how character education was an integral part of development and the education process. This study was based on work previously done to see how character education impacts attendance, academics and discipline incidents. As stated, character education was one part of the original curriculum present in the colonial and American schools until the beginning of the twentieth century. Today education is focused on content curriculum only. However, teachers are finding that they need to help young people gain important knowledge concerning important character traits and their use to assist students in becoming good citizens (Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2007).

Research Design

The research design in this study was a case study. According to Creswell (2007), "Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes" (p. 73). The organization of this study was a single school building's character education program representing a bounded system comprising the case.

This single case study involved an analysis of documents of a character education program at a selected middle school in the Midwest. The purpose of this research study was to develop understanding of how the character education program impacts academic progress, attendance, and discipline, by utilizing documents and trend data from pre-implementation stages, planning stages, implementation stages, post-implementation stages, and transfer of leadership stages. The case study approach was selected because I identified a case and desired to develop an in-depth analysis of this program using multiple sources of information.

I believe that the information gained from this case study is beneficial to others who want to incorporate character education programs in their building. Multiple sources of information were analyzed to reveal the impact this program had at the selected middle school. I provided detailed description of the case by sharing the process of developing the program through the different planning stages, history of the case and the chronology of events. Analysis of documents from the case allowed me to report the impact of the case as reported by others. Since the research was primarily based on using multiple sources of documents including, archival records, and physical artifacts, I had to guard against over interpreting the documents. See Table 1 for sample documents I analyzed.

Table 1

Sample Documents

Documents for Character Education Analysis

1. Survey Results
 2. Journals
 3. Power Point Presentations
 4. State Agency Data
 5. Teacher Newsletters
 6. Parent Newsletters
 7. Memos
 8. Emails
 9. Board Reports
 10. Faculty Agendas
-

Researcher's Role

I chose document analysis to assist me in guarding against inappropriate use of personal knowledge and data concerning the case. I avoided interviews with students, teachers, and community members at the selected school where I previously held the position of principal. The perceived status of former principal, and now researcher, could result in the manipulation or coercion of subjects. I maintained an audit trail of activities related to the document analysis including all steps from obtaining, reviewing, coding, and analyzing the documents. I further participated in peer debriefings as a process of managing the document collection and data analysis processes.

The criterion for a single instrumental case study is when the researchers “focuses on issue or concern and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue” (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). I wanted to know if the character education program impacted academic progress, attendance, and discipline of students at a selected middle school. I planned to create an in-depth understanding of the case.

Researcher's Theoretical Lens

This research study is best described as a “paradigmatic” case study (Creswell, 2007). This study was shaped by my inquiry paradigm or worldviews because I brought a set of beliefs, or “philosophical assumptions” that guide the qualitative research (Creswell, 2007, p. 19). I would consider my worldview as a researcher to be that of a pragmatist. I was focused more on the problem being studied than the questions being asked about the problem. I was the key instrument to collecting the data as the researcher and must recognize the importance of the subjectivity of my own views when interpreting the data. I used an interpretive lens that is subjective to the documents that will be analyzed.

Data Analysis

This study was designed to conduct a document analysis. Using Creswell’s definition of framework, “an organizing model for the research questions or hypothesis and for the data collection procedure” (p. 55) the document analysis added to the framework already available. The first step was the creation of a chronological listing of all documents. This listing process sorted documents according to the five stages. The second step I began the process of reviewing documents thoroughly for evidence related to the character education program. The third step in the data analysis process was to utilize open coding strategies to identify evidence related to academics, attendance, and discipline. The fourth step utilized the categorizing strategies approach by “Rossman & Rallis,” (2003) where codes were grouped according to similarities and differences among the data. The fifth step was to sort the categories by each phase of implementation of the program so that the impact of the character education program on academics, attendance and discipline could be assessed.

I analyzed the data for common themes to determine if the program impacted student academic progress, attendance, and discipline at the designated middle school. I have analyzed the data collected by utilizing open coding strategies and identified the themes that emerged from the different documents. Results from the study were used to determine if character education impacted academic progress, attendance, and discipline in its current capacity. If the results of the study do not show improvement, then the information will be valuable to character education participants and partners in order to re-evaluate and make changes to the existing program based on research results concerning the program's impact.

Reliability and Validity

The following methods were used to ensure the reliability and validity of the study:

1. Maintenance of audit trail to document all research activities including obtaining, reviewing, coding, and analyzing data.
2. Participate in peer debriefings with colleagues and experts throughout the data analysis process.
3. Utilization of source triangulation through the use of documents from multiple sources including the school, school district, and state agency.
4. Disclosure of the researcher's role as a stakeholder in theoretical lens in the design of the study as previously stated.

An extensive and comprehensive process of data collection has been provided by this qualitative research study. There was a triangulation of surveys, documents related to attendance, academics, and discipline, and data from the state department. The data collection identified trends and major themes within the study. The theoretical framework and data

collection provided the progress of chapter four. The research design and analysis have provided a foundation for the study.

Summary of the Findings

The researcher presented the major categories and themes that were identified through the document analysis process. After analyzing all the documents, the major themes were: communication, discipline, attendance, academics, character education, incentives for students, and professional development for teachers. The themes were discussed under each document that was analyzed. Chapter Five will present the introduction, summary, research questions, interpretation of data, program recommendations, recommendations for future research, and the conclusion.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to use document analysis to discover how character education impacted student academic progress, attendance, and discipline at a designated middle school. The research plan guiding this study analyzed data that covered a five-year period including pre-implementation, planning, implementation, and post-implementation stages as well as the two years after the transfer of leadership of the school. This chapter includes interpretations from the data reported in Chapter Four as well as research questions, summary, program recommendations, recommendations for further research, and conclusion.

Summary

The review of literature refers to “a crisis of character” that is having an impact on our nation. Character education is a popular tool that educators utilized to address the crisis within the education system. The goal of the study was to see if character education could produce positive results in regards to attendance, academics, and discipline. The review of literature

explained that the education system has focused on content curriculum only in the twentieth century, and that changes needed to be made to address character in schools. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was seen as content curriculum driven, and the standardized test score requirements, such as MAP tests, were seen as directly linked to the requirements of NCLB. An important question seems to be how character education could impact the rigorous standards of No Child Left Behind legislation.

The purpose of this study was to use document analysis to discover how character education has impacted student academic progress, attendance, and discipline through the stages pre-implementation, planning, implementation, post-implementation as well as the two years after the transfer of leadership of the school. Historical and trend data documents were used to assess the impact that character education had on attendance, academics, and discipline. It is the goal of the researcher to discover effective methods of addressing the following questions:

1. How did the character education program develop, evolve, and continue after the transfer of leadership?
2. Did character education program impact academics at said middle school?
3. Did character education program impact attendance at said middle school?
4. Did character education impact discipline at said middle school?

Interpretation of the Data

This study was to reveal the impact of character education on attendance, academics, and discipline at Greyson Middle School. In order to see how the character education impacted those results, the pre-implementation, implementation, and post-implementation processes and applications must be analyzed to reveal how the program impacted attendance, academics, and discipline. The documents used in the data analysis are addressed in Chapter Four.

After analyzing all the documents, the major themes were: communication, discipline, attendance, academics, character education, incentives for students, and professional development for teachers. The themes were discussed under each document that was analyzed. The researcher found that attendance rates increased from the 2005 school year until the second year (2010) of the transfer of leadership. Improved attendance is seen as a positive factor. In addition, discipline incidences decreased by over half the total number of discipline incidents from the first year of awareness in the year (2006) until the second year (2010) of transfer of leadership. In 2010, the discipline incidents increased by half. However, the increase during the second year (2010) of transfer of leadership raises questions as to why the discipline incidents increased. This negative trend might have been a result of changes in teaching assignments, change in leadership, and less focus on the character education program.

The Communication Arts MAP scores increased at every grade level during the implementation years. However, during the transfer of leadership the scores were random with some grade levels declining and some increasing. The academic trend appears random in the majority of the grade levels for the Math MAP scores. At some levels the scores remained consistent as previous years and other years they would increase and decrease. The biggest positive with the academics is the total percent of proficient/advanced in communication arts and math increased significantly at the seventh grade level during the 2008 year and the second year of the Character Education program.

Program Recommendations

The research reveals that Character Education provides positive results when implemented consistently. Eleven program recommendations were uncovered. (1) Create a needs assessment or survey to understand the climate of the building. It would also be beneficial

to create a survey to understand the students, parents and community members perspective and gain insight to their needs. (2) Create a committee that involves all stakeholders and share results of the surveys in order to make a data driven decision of the type of program that is needed for your school and community. (3) Build awareness and educate all stakeholders so they understand the need and purpose of such a program. (4) Choose a character education program that embraces the needs of your school and community. (5) Provide training for all involved in implementing the program. (6) Have multiple leaders and involve the students throughout the entire process. (7) Get the program visible throughout the community and get the community involved in implementing the program as well as throughout your school. (8) The committee should create goals and create a plan to carry out those goals (9) Hold staff accountable for implementing the program (10) Continuous evaluation and monitoring of the program (11) Sustainability so that it will continue when staff changes and new students enter building.

The use of a survey enables those preparing a Character Education program to identify the common concerns from the view of staff, students, parents and community members. The involvement of staff, students, parents, and community leaders develops a stakeholder ownership through all stages of implementation. Creating a committee to make decisions concerning character education programs reinforced the feeling of ownership. Building awareness for the need of a character education and communicating the positive results allowed stakeholders and community members to understand the need for a character education program and the positive results it can provide. It is important to research character education programs to identify the themes for each community and its stakeholders. If no program can be embraced by all stakeholders, then creating a Character Education program that satisfies all stakeholders is an

option. It is also important that the vision be one developed by all stakeholders including, students.

Spreading awareness through community involvement is imperative. The community needs to understand the character education program, and the students need to see that strong character and moral compass is something that reaches beyond their educational experience. Students must see that good character is a real world expectation and a necessary component of being a member of a global and local society. Students need to see that having good character is a community expectation, not an option or choice for society. Measurable goals and plans are imperative. Stakeholders need to see that plans are in place and ready, and they need to see proof of reaching the goals to keep them invested in the program. Staff members need to be held accountable for implementing the program. If students see that teachers aren't held accountable for character education, the students could question the program's importance. Stakeholders must be fully invested and model the program so students see the importance of character education. The program must be evaluated and monitored to observe progress. It can be adjusted if the need arises. The program needs to be designed to easily facilitate any changes in staff or students. People who enter the program should be able to understand and be able to participate in any stage of implementation. Careful documentation is imperative for all stakeholders who may become involved in the program at any time.

Based on my research, I found this program has provided the school with strategies that support increased attendance, academics, and discipline. The research will be valuable as schools look for programs to help with positive behavior, attendance, and academic strategies. This study is important because educators must teach and reach the whole child. By teaching the universal character traits within the curriculum, it helps meet the needs of the whole child. This

study is relevant to the research of the effectiveness of character education because of the timeframe implemented and the evaluation of all the stages. The evaluation of the project through all stages will be helpful to principals, teachers, and others who are involved in the selecting and implementing a character education program.

Recommendations for Further Research

The key to a successful comprehensive character education program requires the support of the faculty leadership, parents, and the community. Therefore, continued research in character education that focuses on faculty roles, service, leadership, process, willingness to facilitate character development in students, and other issues will be essential to future efforts of discovery. Further study should be done to discover how Character Education impacts other areas of school improvement, such as parental and community involvement, school climate, school staff perceptions, community and parental perceptions. Further research is needed to better understand if Character Education has impacted academics, attendance, and discipline of the students during their high school years. Since Character Education was implemented at the Middle School in 2006-2007 school year the next study could be at the high school using 2010-2013 data and compare the high school data to the four years prior to the Character Education implementation from 2003-2006 in order to compare if the character education program made an impact on these students.

In addition, studies should examine the extent of training for Character Education prior to implementation and to examine to what extent the staff is onboard with implementing the program. Another recommendation would be to conduct more research on the implementation stages of Character Education programs. Finally, the role that community leaders, teachers, and parents have on the character education of students needs to be further researched. Research also

needs to address how their roles and actions impact student discipline, academics, and attendance both with and without the application and use of a Character Education program.

Conclusions

With growing violence within the American school system, and Lickona's statement concerning "a crisis of character," many schools are looking for solutions to these issues. Character education is in the forefront as a possible solution to the lack of character education that was once embedded into school curriculum. Elements of successful programs have made progress towards teaching our students to be tomorrow's leaders in government, work places, and successful and productive members of society. Elements of quality character education programs bring together school staff, students, parents, and community members to embrace and implement a chosen program. The more support received from all stake holders in the program, the more successful a program can be on academics, attendance, and discipline.

The purpose of this study was to discover how Character Education impacted students' attendance, discipline, and academics. The data showed that all three (3) areas were impacted positively to some degree. The implementation of the Character Education program has made a positive difference in students' experiences at school.

On the basis of the data presented in this paper, the following conclusions are offered:

1. The Character Education awareness initiative did have a positive impact on student attendance at Greyson Middle School.
2. There was significant decline in the total number of discipline incidents with the exception of the transfer of leadership year (2010) when the discipline incidents returned to a high number.

3. There is a positive increase in the total number of proficient/advanced MAP scores in all grade levels of the Communication Art scores until the transfer of leadership. The math scores show constant decreasing and increasing and do not reflect any consistent pattern.

After analyzing the documents, it is apparent that there is an implementation process that facilitates a successful program. The implementation process should be research based and thorough. With NCLB, this study is important because it has a definite impact on academics, attendance, and discipline. This study supports that character education can successfully be implemented into the curriculum without being an interruption to the content fields. Not only is it not an interruption of one's studies but, when implemented correctly, it is successful in positively impacting academics, attendance, and discipline. Based on my research it is clearly evident that character education has positive results. This research is valuable because it proves that character education is effective. It has a positive impact that is reflected in academics; students learn that character is related to work ethics. It's positive impact is seen in attendance; students learn that when they are absent from school they really miss important opportunities in their educational experience. It has a positive impact on discipline; they understand what types of behavior are socially accepted not only in school, but in the global community that they are a part of. It is important that students make real world applications of character education.

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