Stories of the Benefits and Challenges of Implementing Character Education in Southeastern High Schools

by

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Abstract

Character education has the potential to increase student academic performance as well as social and emotional skills regardless of socio-economic level, race, gender, or grade level. Yet prior theory and research suggests there is a lack of preparation for educational leaders in developing and implementing aspects of character education. Most educational leaders are tasked with creating their own programs to encourage character education within their learning organization. The purpose of this dissertation study was to examine key strategies and challenges when developing and implementing aspects of character education in a high school setting from the perspective of the school principal. Data were collected and analyzed as part of a qualitative narrative inquiry study. Three high school principals from a major metro southeastern city were interviewed twice. These interviews were conducted to gain insight into the stories and experiences of developing and implementing aspects of character education. The study found that involving all members of the learning community and positive praise were the main indicators of success with implementing character education. The largest challenge identified was the lack of preparation for educational leaders towards the development and implementation of character education. Furthermore, recommendations are provided for future practice and research.

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Chapter I: Overview

Guiding students to understand and observe good character was extremely beneficial for their overall development and growth (Almerico, 2014; Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Berger, 2003; Berkowitz & Bier, 2017; Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009; Bond, 2016; Brooks & Kann, 1993; Davidson, 2014; Elias, 2014; Hoge, 2002; Lindahl, 2009; Rizzo & Bajovic, 2016; Tozer, Senese, & Violas, 2009). With the right program, or mixture of models and initiatives, being created within an educational organization, students have been shown to take accountability and ownership over their education, which connected with finding value (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017; Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009; Elias, 2014; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002; & Wilkens & Wilmore, 2015) and making meaning (Berger, 2003; Diggs & Akos, 2016; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; McLean & Pegoraro, 1989; Nelson, 2009; & Tozer, Senese & Violas, 2009). The focus of this dissertation study is on the role of educational leadership, specifically high school principals, in designing and implementing aspects of character education.

Character Education

Character education is defined as the intentional attempt in schools to foster the development of students' psychological characteristics that motivate and enable them to act in ethical, democratic, and socially effective and productive ways (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006, p72). Studies have been conducted that focus on the role of the teacher and educational leadership and how principals, specifically, influence classroom instruction, climate, and character development (Barch, Harris, & Bonsall, 2012; Berger, 2003; Bond, 2016; Brooks & Kann, 1993; Diggs & Akos, 2016; Elias, 2014; Lindahl, 2009; Saphier & King, 1985; & Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016). The studies in Bond, Diggs and Akos, and Sebastian, Allensworth and Huang's articles also focused on aspects of character education, such as the relationship between

leadership and student academic success. Findings demonstrated a strong bond between effective leadership and student success. Furthermore, many of these leaders crafted their own curriculums and embed aspects of character development within daily instruction, ensuring students were constantly developing, both academically, socially, and personally (Diggs & Akos, 2016; Sebastian, Allensworth & Huang, 2016). Dewey criticized traditional education and educational leaders for their overall lack in "holistic understanding of students" and solely designing curriculums and instruction that are "overly focused on content and process" with little to no focus on building up the whole student (Neill, 2005; Dewey, 2007).

The definition of character education varied amongst academic scholars who have debated over the best way to coin the phrase (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009; Berkowitz & Bier, 2017; Brooks & Kann, 1993). Following the same pattern, most of the definitions state in one way or another that it is an intentional attempt to embed social, psychological and productive habits into students so they are successful and productive as adults. School administrators and leaders can work together to craft the best strategies and methodologies surrounding character education that will be of the most benefit to their organization as a whole (Barch, Harris, & Bonsall, 2012; Berkowitz & Bier, 2017; Brooks & Kann, 1993; Cleary, 2008; & Elias, 2014). This dissertation study relied on Althof & Berkowitz (2006) definition of character education, which states it is "the intentional attempt in schools to foster the development of students' psychological characteristics that motivate and enable them to act in ethical, democratic, and socially effective and productive ways" (2006, p72).

Scholarly Foundation

Character education is a growing field that is being explored more in-depth by educators, educational leaders, and educational researchers. Berkowitz, a leading educational researcher in

the field of character education, has conducted studies on character education and its relationship to school leaders (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017), gifted children (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009), and the effects on academic achievement (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). His research was utilized as grounding and support for this dissertation study. Since educational leaders set the tone for their organizations, whatever they deem important reigns high on the priority list for other administrators, teachers, and students alike (Barch, Harris, & Bonsall, 2012; Berkowitz & Bier, 2017; Farrington, 2017; Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016; Saphier & King, 1985; & Wynne & Ryan, 1997). It is beneficial when educational leaders place their energy towards instructional strategies and implementations that will benefit the entire whole (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017). In doing so, it is helpful that these leaders have a sense of the individuals who make up their organization, and have a clear understanding and acknowledgement of their needs. In public education, it becomes a balancing act of implementing the state requirements and mandates but also personalizing strategies and methodologies to meet the needs of the unique student body. Effective leadership takes many forms but one of the most essential components is providing the skills necessary to allow others to self-govern and become strong leaders for themselves (Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016). This is extremely important for students to grasp as they will eventually graduate the K-12 institution and enter the real world where they will be responsible for making constant decisions and relying on critical thinking skills. Character development programs are a component that can aid in preparation for life beyond a K-12 setting.

Outcomes of Character Education

Character education is a wide field mostly associated with socio-emotional learning, which is currently receiving a lot of attention in schools today (Barc, Harris, & Bonsall, 2012;

Carter, 2000; Diggs & Akos, 2016; Elias, 2014; & Farrelly, 1993). Multiple educational researchers have started correlating social-emotional learning and guidance to student academic achievement (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2017; Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009; & Elias, 2014). Character education has also shown many positive results throughout various studies which identify different techniques, methods, programs, and textbooks that have a strong impact on students' academic, social, interpersonal, and social- emotional skills (Elias, 2014). Furthermore, many educational researchers have published empirical literature that correlates character education as a benefit towards the growth of emotional intelligence (Wilkens & Wilmore, 2015), spiritual leadership (Sweeney & Fry, 2012), school culture and climate (Saphier & King, 1985), moral literary (Rizzo & Bajovic, 2016), citizenship education (Hoge, 2002), social-emotional learning (Elias, 2014), and gifted education (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009) when implemented successfully.

Although social-emotional learning and character education have a multitude of similarities, there are differences between the two. The Committee for Children pointed out, "Misunderstandings affect decisions about what programs we implement and how, and may lead to over-implementation and additional, unnecessary work for educators" (2018). The biggest difference lies in exactly what the programs are targeting. Social-emotional learning focuses on building social skills, such as empathy, whereas character development is concerned with moral reasoning and decision-making skills, encompassing the entire development of student character.

Schools that created, maintained, and found the right character development strategies to pair with their student bodies demonstrated high academic achievement (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Bond, 2016; Diggs & Akos, 2016; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002; & Youniss & Yares, 1999) as well as an increase in student morale and a

decrease in negative student behaviors and reports (Almerico, 2014; Barch, Harris, & Bonsall, 2012: Farrelly, 1993; Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995; & Nelson, 2009). When character education programs are utilized effectively, gains are reported in test performance, appreciation of education, understanding content knowledge, and overall GPA. Previous empirical research has discovered a link between character education programs and positive outcomes in various student domains, such as academic, social, and behavioral (Diggs & Akos, 2016). Research supported various benefits of implementing effective strategies and methodologies of character education in all phases of schooling: elementary, middle, and secondary education.

Making the time to utilize character education and intertwine it into daily instruction as part of the curriculum will in turn inevitably help solve issues that arise in schools, such as student conflict (Davidson, 2014; Elias, 2014, Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Ryan & Lickona, 1992; & Youniss & Yates, 1999), lack of student motivation (Althof & Berkwotiz, 2006; Berkowirz & Bier, 2017; Farrington, 2017; & Nelson, 2009), and lack of trust (Almerico, 2014; Barch, Harris, & Bonsall, 2012; & Vygotsky, 1980).

Overview

This dissertation study explored the experiences of three extraordinary educational leaders who work in different public high school settings surrounding a major city in the southeast. Charles County School District is the pseudonym used throughout this dissertation to represent the district. These leaders have crafted and prepared their own character development programs to enhance the academic and developmental state of faculty, staff, and students within their organizations. The goal of this dissertation study was that their stories and experiences would reveal key strategies, as well as identify challenges of implementing character education.

Furthermore, their stories and experiences would serve as a guide for other educational leaders as they explore character education to create and personalize programs that fit the needs of their educational institution. Three high school principals from the Charles County School District were selected for this study because they are recognized in their state and nationally for their extensive work with implementing character development education. Charles County is a pseudonym. A qualitative, narrative inquiry approach was utilized in order to share the stories and experiences of these leaders as they interact with the implementation of character education and development and discuss the results of character education being implemented into their daily routines and curriculum in the form of identifying key strategies as well as identifying challenges.

Problem

The problems addressed in this study focus on implementations and challenges of character education. This dissertation study focused on the high school setting as it is the last chance for K-12 educators to have an impact on students before they enter the real world, whether it be through college or the work force. There are different factors that contribute to why a high school student drops out of school, yet "most of the research on dropout has focused on the characteristics of individuals rather than on features of schools or the local community (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson 2007, p326). High school should be a place that properly equips students with academic content knowledge as well as skills and values in order to achieve success.

As times have changed and evolved, America became more industrialized and education shifted to meet those needs towards society, such as preparing for the surge in workforce and surviving during different wars. Currently, students navigate their education utilizing 21 st-

century skills that rely heavily on technology to aid in retaining content knowledge in order to reproduce this information successfully on state standardized assessments. This change has caused educational researchers to note the possible effects of current educational methods and pedagogies. If we are not too careful, we will start producing mini robots who can recall content knowledge and information but strongly lack social, inter- and intra-personal, basic communication and coping skills (Almerico, 2014; Berkowitz & Bier, 2017).

As many states within the United States have shifted their main educational focus to prioritizing state standardized testing, it has changed the way education is delivered, retained, and valued (Berger, 2003; Berkowitz & Bier, 2017; Davidson, 2014; Kohn, 1995; Lindahl, 2009; McLean & Pegoraro, 1989; & Wynne & Ryan, 1997). This priority also takes away from educational leaders focusing on developing student character as their ability to recall content knowledge takes the spotlight. Students are given a mass amount of content knowledge with an emphasis placed solely on scoring a proficient or distinguished score that is connected to their class grade. With so much attention surrounding testing, one of the issues surrounding educational leaders becomes developing and implementing aspects of character education into curriculum and instruction due to a lack of time and resources.

In addition to developing or selecting the proper character education model for a specified school climate, it was also found to be equally essential that the school leadership, specifically the administration, was onboard and consistent with uplifting the vision with all faculty, staff, and students; therefore, the implementation must be across the board (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Barch, Harris, & Bonsall, 2012; Berger, 2003; Berkowitz & Bier, 2017; Berkwotiz & Hoppe, 2009; Brooks & Kann, 1993; Dewey, 2007; Farrington, 2017; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016; & Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016).

Multiple studies agreed, "Character education operates at its best when it is part of school culture" (Diggs & Amos, 2016). The school leader was an extremely important aspect in the effectiveness of character education within an organization. Yet, many educational leaders reported a lack of preparation surrounding character education. Educational leadership reparation programs, as well as teacher preparation programs, across the nation lacked sufficient education surrounding character education programs, models, and strategies. At best, students at both levels took a course over classroom management (Barch, Harris, & Bonsall, 2012; Berkwotiz & Bier, 2017; Brooks & Kann, 1993; Cleary, 2008; Elias, 2014; Farrington, 2017; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016; & Vygotsky, 1980). This dissertation study focused on strategies and challenges of developing and implementing character education. Future implications of research may include identifying the lack of preparation over character education that educational leaders receive during their schooling and/or training.

Therefore, it became the responsibility of the educational leader to consider the teachers and students' needs in order to identify and implement the best strategy, or combination of strategies, to target character education within the organization. Yet, oftentimes, this failed to happen as educational leaders do not receive the proper training over character education (Barch, Harris, & Bonsall, 2012; & Lickona & Davidson, 2005), are not privy to all the character education resources (Farrington, 2017; Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016, & Vygotsky, 1980), or have not identified the specific needs of their organization in regards to character development (Berkwotiz & Bier, 2017; Brooks & Kann, 1993; Cleary, 2008; & Elias, 2014). Professional development sessions for educators at all levels do not generally focus around the implementation of character development programs. In most cases, they are targeted towards integrating technology in the classrooms, increasing state standardized scores, and learning about

new educational software (Almerico, 2014; Barch, Harris, & Bonsall, 2012; Brooks & Kann, 1993; Carter, 2000; Farrelly, 1993; & Katilmis, Eksi, & Ozturk, 2011). Development is needed in character education for educators due to it representing a large field of exploration. Many school leaders do not know where to start in crafting the right character education programs and initiatives to implement at their institution.

Purpose

This dissertation study highlighted three educational leaders, all public high school principals in a major southeastern city known for its high population and immense diversity. The principals are all employees of the Charles County School District. These educational leaders are considered exemplary character education leaders within their communities by consistently implementing aspects of character education into their curriculums and instruction. All three have been recognized on various levels: district, regional, state, and national levels. These educational leaders have taken it upon themselves to craft character education models, strategies, and implementations that have had lasting impressions on their educational organizations in both academic and social realms. A goal of this study was to outline the key strategies and challenges of implementing character education while also demonstrating the personalization of curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of various school cultures through sharing the experiences and stories of successful and non-successful implementations of character education.

I gathered the necessary information to address this study's research questions by investigating how these educational leaders gained their knowledge on character education, where their value of character education stems from, how they created their individualized improvement plans surrounding character education, discussing key strategies and challenges of implementing character education, the specific strategies, methodologies, and models

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implemented in their schools, and how they measure the effectiveness of their schools' character education initiatives. Furthermore, I inquired into how they collect data to ensure their modes of character development are effective both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Character education is not meant to be a one size fits all remedy for student behavioral problems and other disciplinary issues that may arise. It is, instead, a powerful tool that should be utilized to help prepare students for their futures, as well as the present. Character education has resulted in helping various students and adults with conflict management and resolution (Farrelly, 1993), critical thinking skills (Davidson, 2014), decision-making processes (Bond, 2016; & Wilkens & Wilmore, 2015), sense-making (Nelson, 2009), inter and intra-personal skills (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002), resilience (Gardner, 1983), accepting failures as well as dealing with successes (Kohn, 1995), and with taking accountability and ownership (McLean & Pegoraro, 1989; & Vygotsky, 1980). These benefits helped serve as a purpose for this dissertation study, which identified key strategies, challenges, and personalization of character education.

Sebastian, Allensworth, and Huang (2016) called for a study to be completed similarly to this dissertation study. It is "well established that school leaders have mostly indirect effects on student outcomes, but there is less clarity on what the critical mediating processes are and how they matter for student achievement. Often, studies have focused on a single mediating process or on an overall combined measure of school organizational capacity that includes multiple processes" (2016). Berkowitz (2009), Bier (2017), and Elias (2014) also agreed that a study such as this should take place and that additional resources should be utilized to explore the various strategies of character education, and how educational leaders can be better prepared for crafting these initiatives.

The three participants voluntarily agreed to participate in this dissertation study to share the stories they have experienced with developing and implementing character education into their Charles County high schools. In the beginning of the study, participants completed a background survey over their knowledge of character education, the value they place upon it, as well as the specific strategies used to promote positive character. At the end of the study, participants were interviewed orally to formulate connections between all data and information collected. Interviews were recorded so transcripts could be created in order to notice themes and patterns and to form connections.

Research Question

1) What do the stories of educational leaders reveal about key strategies and challenges of implementing character education?

Research Design

This dissertation study took a qualitative approach at observing character education strategies, challenges, and personalization into curriculum and instruction. By taking a qualitative approach to this study, the lives and experiences of the three participants were observed and shared in a story-telling methodology. Narrative inquiry, laid out by Clandinin, is the approach utilized to provide an overview of my study (Clandinin, 2016). Since the beginning of time, individuals have valued storytelling for a variety of reasons. People live, interact, adapt, and make concrete decisions based off of information gleaned from stories.

Narrative inquiry allowed the strategies, challenges, and personalization of character development to become transparent as aspects of character education are displayed and described- "In narrative inquiry we intentionally come into relation with participants, and we, as inquires, think narratively about our experiences, about our participants' experiences, and about

those experiences that become visible as we live alongside, telling our own stories, hearing an other's stories, moving in and acting in the places- the contexts- in which our lives meet. We intentionally put our lives alongside an other's life" (Clandinin, 2016, p91). Educational leaders across the globe will be able to potentially learn from and live alongside the three participants in this dissertation study by their stories and experiences surrounding character education to be on display.

Theoretical Framework

Dewey, a well-known American educator, philosopher, and theorist, was relied upon frequently for this dissertation study. He was a leading educational researcher and a proponent of thought known as pragmatism; this view "rejected the dualistic epistemology and metaphysics of modern philosophy in favor of a naturalistic approach that viewed knowledge as arising from an active adaptation of the human organism to its environment" (Field, 2017). Considering this point of view, Dewey relied heavily on human action to proceed and develop based on the environment he/she was a part of. His theories support the usage and implementations of character development programs. More specifically, Dewey's 1938 theory of experience is the theoretical framework for this study. The two criteria for this theory include interaction and continuity enacted in situations. Character education and development rely on inter and intra personal interactions daily, as well as strong continuity in ensuring effectiveness. Dewey stated,

> The belief that a genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are miseducative. Any experience is miseducated that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.

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An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted. Again, a given experience may increase a person's automatic skill in a particular direction and yet tend to land him in a groove or rut; the effect again is to narrow the field of further experience (2007).

Dewey's theory of experience grounded this study as experience played a key role in factoring out what strategies and methodologies of character education benefit students, as well as what challenges arose. The participants in this study drew from their own experiences teaching and leading students (as well as faculty and staff) to determine what effective character education and development look like in the form of implemented strategies. As educational leaders interact with the community of learners they are serving, they are able to have immense impacts from academic, social, and developmental standpoints. Furthermore, it is in the continuity of these interactions and experiences that educational leaders are able to identify the effectiveness of such programs, models, and tools used to encourage the development of students' character.

Pairing interaction and continuity provided validity to this dissertation study as the participants, all high school principals, drew from past experiences, current practices, as well as future endeavors to draw conclusions on best practices for the implementation of character development as well as advice on challenges that arose. The findings from the three participants were compared and contrasted in the findings section of this study to determine different ways character education can be successfully implemented. Dewey explained, "once we have a theory of experience, then as educators can set about progressively organizing our subject matter in a way that it takes accounts of students' past experiences, and then provides them with experiences

which will help to open up, rather than shut down, a person's access to future growth experiences, thereby expanding the person's likely contribution to society" (Neill, 2005, p1). These educational leaders were asked to share any data collected towards the improvement and implementation of character development to further be grounded in Dewey's theory of experience, as well as challenges faced. It is "important to understand that, for Dewey, no experience has pre-ordained value. Thus, what may be a rewarding experience for one person, could be a detrimental experience for another" (Neill, 2015, p1).

The lived experiences of the three participants in this dissertation study are shared with other educational leaders in hopes of encouraging others to promote character education on various levels of their organization. The experiences of the participants produce extra value when it fulfills the needs of others. Dewey added, "The value of the experience is to be judged by the effect that experience has on the individual's present, their future, and the extent to which the individual is able to contribute to society" (Neill, 2005, p1). Furthermore, this theoretical framework is directly related to narrative inquiry, which is the methodology for sharing the data collected and analyzed in this dissertation study.

Assumptions

The assumptions associated with narrative inquiry included integrity and perspective. The assumption of integrity is that all participants were being open, honest, and transparent about their answers on the background interview and the follow-up interview. It is essential to be able to gather the most accurate information while conducting this study to prepare an honest narrative in the findings. The goal of these narratives is to take others through the experience so they can relate, learn, inquire, etc.

Perspective served as the second assumption for this study. How experiences are viewed and perceived differ from person to person. Clandinin adds, "This understanding of experience also shapes ways in which the inquiry is both lived through and subsequently shared with a broader audience. Differences in views of reality, knowledge developed from an inquiry, the relationship between experience and context, and the relationship between researchers and participants all shape borders" (Clandinin & Huber, 2016, p14). Each person interprets experiences and takes away different aspects that impacted them personally or professionally.

Delimitations

One of the major delimitations of this study was participant exclusion. The population of interest was high school students and high school principals. The research question focused on the stories and experiences of the principals/from the principal's perspectives in regards to developing and implementing aspects of character education. Another delimitation was a small sample size. To effectively understand the experiences of the high school principals, the sample size was narrowed to focus on their individual involvements with character education. Lastly, geography served as a delimitation. This study was performed in one of the largest cities in the southeastern section of the United Stated. It is also important to point out COVID-19's impact on this study. Due to the global pandemic of coronavirus (COVID-19), schools across the nation began to shut down in March 2020 and transitioned their students to an online virtual learning platform. This study intended to include at least five weeks of direct observations with each participant to take place between the two interviews. Due to COVID-19, I decided to limit any close contacts with participants.

Significance

       This study aimed to shed light on the implementation of strategies, challenges, and personalization of character development programs while also filling gaps in the current empirical research. These gaps include a discussion over the lack of preparation for educational leaders in regards to developing and implementing character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017), thus pointing out why many leaders do not know how or do not implement character education within their educational organizations, and a focus on personalizing the implementation of character education programs, methods, and techniques to benefit a school culture (Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016).

       This study also addressed a problem of practice as educational leaders are not trained for implementation of character development programs and feel overwhelmed in selecting the wrong programs and strategies, or do not see the positive results within their organization due to selecting and implementing a character education program that does not meet the needs of their student and faculty body (Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016). It also provided various definitions of character, character education, and intelligence, while pointing out that character education is a term that becomes defined differently and more in depth with each empirical study completed. The vastness of the field was explored so educational leaders can understand there is not necessarily a right way to attack or integrate character education into curriculum and instruction.

       The importance and significance of character education was outlined as this study also discussed the roles and responsibilities of educational leaders, specifically high school Principals in the southeastern area, in consistent implementation of character education. Through a background interview and a follow-up interview, effective integrations of character education

and development are exhibited in this dissertation study. Not only did this study aim to present successful and beneficial aspects of character development, but it only holds personal significance to me as I hope to become a leading researcher in this field, an avid character education follower, as well as implement various aspects of character education into any and all organizations I work at to benefit not only the student body but the entire culture and climate of the building.

I am studying character education because of the strong correlation between various character education methodologies for development and student academic and personal achievements and growth. I am particularly interested in the experiences of school administrators who have displayed a deep understanding and respect for the implementation of character education programs and strategies. I explored the implementations of character education by direct observation, surveys, and interviews.

Three educational leaders who serve in high schools across the southeastern area were chosen for this study from Charles County's state and nationally recognized character education program and involvement. All of these leaders have displayed extraordinary aspects of implementing various components of character education into their institutions. Since character education can be such a large and overwhelming field to explore, my hope is that this study not only encourages other educational leaders to develop a strong curriculum that enforces character development but to motivate and inspire educational leaders, teachers, and parents to develop their own unique ways of ensuring students are receiving daily doses of character education each and every day.

The significance of this study was formed by observing educational leaders who are exceptionally known for successful implementations of elements of character education.

Davidson pointed out, "It is critically important that character be taught with great intensity and intentionality, through professional development, curriculum development, and course integration. However, character cannot be taught through educational courses alone - it also must be *caught* through the lived reality of a shared culture" (2014, p 77). This dissertation study aimed at sharing the successes of educational leaders in hopes of benefitting other members in the field of education.

My study also aimed to define character education as much as possible, while also pointing out that it is a wide field of numerous definitions and meanings. Althof and Berkowitz agreed, "Character education remains a phenomenon difficult to define, as it includes a very wide range of outcome goals, pedagogical strategies and philosophical orientations" (2006, p. 502). A goal of this dissertation study was to point out the adaptability and flexibility of character education programs to meet the needs of various student bodies. This dissertation study is significant to the field of education, specifically character education, by offering three different perspectives that are all successful.

Character education and development is a valuable aspect of education that was almost completely eliminated from American public school curriculums with the intentions to prepare better, smarter individuals for a competing society. Yet, the current lack of character education programs and strategies across the board yield a current state of high disciplinary problems, high drop-out rates, high suspension rates, and a high rate of "failing" schools. Wilkens and Wilmore believed emotional intelligence "may be the key" in combatting employers concerns. Researchers have echoed these apprehensions suggesting that "school performance and high IQ are not necessarily true predictors of life success" (2015, p. 41). Theologian Desiderius Erasmus reminded us that the main hope of a nation "lies in the proper education of its youth" (Wilkens &

Wilmore, 2015, p. 44). An additional goal of this study was that it sparked interest in educational leaders on what types of character education benefit, align, and fit with their overall school culture.

The gaps in empirical research that this dissertation study aimed to close are the following: how can effectiveness of character education programs, strategies, and methodologies be conducted, how can teachers and educational leaders become better prepared for implementation and integration of character education into current curriculums, and how character education and development can be personalized to meet the needs of various school cultures and student bodies.

Definition of Terms

- 21st-Century School- charged with serving a socio-culturally diverse group of students with varying needs and interests that requires schools to prepare students for life successes through a balanced education that ensures both mastery of academic skills and the social competence required to be productive adults (Wilkens & Wilmore, 2015, p. 35)

- Character- (moral aspect) one's motivation and capacity to do what is ethically right and socially responsible (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017, p. 34)

- Character education- the intentional attempt in schools to foster the development of students' psychological characteristics that motivate and enable them to act in ethical, democratic, and socially effective and productive ways (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006, p. 72)

- Culture- is the foundation for school improvement (Saphier & King, 1985, p. 67)

- Intelligence- the bio-psychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in culture (Gardner, 1983, p33-34)

- Leaders- show their technical, human, and educational skills through activities that call them forth rather directly (Saphier & King, 1985, p. 72)

- School Improvement- emerges from the confluence of four elements: the strengthening of teachers' skills, the systematic renovation of curriculum, the improvement of the organization, and the involvement of parents and citizens in responsible school-community partnerships (Saphier & King, 1985, p. 67)

Organization

The structure of the study was broken down into five chapters. The first chapter is an introduction which lays the foundation for the study. The problem that needs to be addressed is identified followed with the purpose of this dissertation study. The research question is clearly stated, and the research design is outlined. The theoretical framework used for this study is identified as well as assumptions, delimitations, study significance, and key definitions of terminology used in this study.

The second chapter is the literature review. First, a description and definition of character education is provided. Then benefits of character education as well as effective implementations of character development aspects are explored by highlighting various studies. Principal leadership is presented, alongside effective leadership. Finally, exceptional leaders of education described their experiences working with and implementing aspects of character education to increase student academic, social, and personal achievements.

The methodology is broken down in chapter three by first explaining the design and restating the research question. The participants are fully explained and detailed, as well as measures used for this study. Data collection is accurately explained in addition to how the analysis was conducted over the collected data and information. Chapter four presents my

findings, and chapter five interprets these findings relative to the previously published literature

reviewed in chapter two.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of character education to assist in better understanding the stories and experiences of educational leaders as they implement various aspects of character development into their curriculums. It served the overall dissertation study by providing a platform to readers for understanding the purpose, need, and significance of this study. Key strategies and challenges of implementing character education into curriculums and instruction are discussed from an empirical viewpoint, as well as breaking down the need for educational leaders to create and personalize character education programs to fit the academic, social, and emotional needs of their educational institutions.

The review relied on current empirical literature and begins with a brief overview of character education over time and includes definitions of corresponding terms to set a firm foundation and understanding of character education. Throughout the beginning of the literature review, multiple definitions of character education are given to aid in comprehension and to offer depth of the term. Different benefits of character education, such as character strengths and the impact on school culture, are discussed as my study aims at identifying benefits of implements of character education at the high school level.

In addition to benefits, challenges- such as standardized state testing- are also discussed here and explored in this dissertation study. The literature review includes various pilot studies that displays how character education looks in their learning organization. These studies also explore benefits and challenges of developing and implementing aspects of character education. The connection between teacher, school counselor, and the principal and the employment of character education is discussed. There is a focus on the principal's role and responsibilities as the participants in this dissertation study are all high school principals. The current policies

surrounding character education in the state are included in this literature review as the study took place in the metro southeastern area. The review ends with a return to the theoretical framework that guided this dissertation study.

Character Education

      Character education over time. The quest for constructing and delivering a well-rounded, wholesome education has been at the forefront of many heated debates for centuries. Althof and Berkowitz pointed out, "Classical thinkers, like Aristotle and Confucius, have reflected in depth upon the questions central to both of these fields; i.e. what kind of person do we want each of our children to be and how can we raise and educate them to be that way?" (2006, p496). With a plethora of historical knowledge, people, and events that have contributed to the world and current state of society, how does one pinpoint exactly what to teach to others and what to associate great meaning with. What gives one piece of knowledge and information more weight and importance than the next? Education has changed as factors in history have been reprioritized and shifted around throughout the decades.

      Mann, a well-known American educational reformer who dedicated his life to promoting the benefits of public education believed in the system and valued its ability to shape individual's characters. Furthermore, he believed in the capabilities and endless possibilities of public education by illuminating the importance of development. Empathy was the quality he urged all educators to utilize to mold student behaviors. The intent behind applying empathy was to shape students emotionally and intellectually (Tozer, 2009). During the struggle of preparing students for state standardized testing or incorporating elements of empathy into the classroom, the ladder takes the back seat.

Dewey, another renowned American educational reformer, psychologist, philosopher, and political activist who was ironically born the exact year Mann died, devoted his career to crafting and defining American education. He pushed for a different type of pedagogy. He endorsed a social order in hopes that students would develop skills for participation in a democratic society. He felt children should be active participants in their learning process versus passive receivers. This belief was included in his educational reform (Wilkens & Wilmore, 2009). In addition to constructing their own learning, students should be constructors of their actions and be held accountable as they are evolving, working through the various grade levels.

Original goal of education. The original goal of education was to shape the entire human being, from academic awareness and a strong knowledgebase to a development and understanding of morals and values. Elias added,

> "Dewey (1916) was not the first, but he was perhaps the most articulate, advocate of the imperative of viewing school as a microcosm of life's various influences and forces that afforded young people, from preschool through college age, with opportunities to learn essential lessons for life. These lessons were not learned by abstraction and deduction, but rather from a continuous process of engagement, reflection, and reconstruction of the knowledge and principals contained in educational experiences" (2014, p40).

> The entire structure of education was set up much differently than it is now, as well as major factors of education being prioritized at a completely different rate with a completely different perspective.

> The history behind the field of education has witnessed many changes throughout time. Edward Thorndike was extremely influential in the 1920s and 1930s for establishing a behaviorist approach to education and schooling, thus adding to character education. Exposure,

practice, and reinforcement were the elements that were used to transmit knowledge and develop skills. A controlled environment where students were exposed to the 'right' experiences and habits became known as the traditional approach (Rizzo & Bajovic, 2016). This traditional approach paired the importance of academic knowledge and gain with a steady emphasis on the development and growth of character.

"Intelligence plus character- that is the goal of true education" as stated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Morehouse College's *The Maroon Tiger* in 1947. Education initially originated as a tool to help shape individuals into contributing members of society. During the 1800s, "education was designed to develop the citizen" (Tozer, Senese, & Violas, 2009, p37). The entire character of human beings was considered when crafting what should be delivered during instruction and moments of engagement. It went far beyond the traditional four core content areas and truly developed the morality, values, and beliefs of young students as they grew into adults. Education served the whole being until the mid-1900s when societal changes due to war caused education to take a quick turn.

Shifting the focus. The Cold War of 1947-1991 had a lasting impact on the goals and vision of American education. The aftermath caused educational leaders to revisit the curriculum and increase studies in math and science (Wilkens & Wilmore, 2015). This increase in core content areas caused a major decrease in character development and growth of students' social skills. Although intellectually and academically students were evolving, issues were still present within their endeavors due to a lack of resilience and life skills. Education has yet to return to valuing character development within instruction. Wilkens and Wilmore added that "indications of withdrawal and social problems, anxiety and depression, attention or thinking problems, and delinquent or aggressive behaviors steadily increased from 1970 to 1995" (2015, p38). In 2002,

Wilkens and Wilmore took a look at two student cohorts from 1980 and 2002 and compared them to glean which group experienced more stress and anxiety.

The study found that "in fact, in 2002, children with emotional problems rated higher on stress indices than those who were institutionalized for those same problems in the 1980s" (Wilkens & Wilmore, 2015, p38). With technology advancing daily, one could make the connection that it is not a lack of resources or materials, but in fact how we are utilizing these resources. The educational focus is on state standardized testing which labels students and places an immense judgment on them from one isolated test on an isolated day. If the shift moved to developing students' character as their intellect evolves, many of these problems would solve themselves.

A body of scholarly research surrounds the idea that 21st century learning and inquiries are exactly what students need to be successful in such a diverse, technology driven reality. The four essential core areas of English Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science does not cover or address how to handle conflict, how to manage time and/or money, how to code switch and adapt to various environments, etc. When educators do not take the time to develop their students' characters, and when schools choose to not incorporate character development in their curriculum, true education is not being perpetuated. Specific content knowledge and academic skills are being passed down as students are being robbed of a basic understanding and comprehension of human interactions, emotions, and situations.

In the early 1990s, the Josephson Institute launched Character Counts, a program designed to provide practical strategies for the implementation of character development techniques for teachers of all grades. Its goal was to serve as a foundation for various educational leaders across the nation. This led to the Character Education Partnership, which has helped

published many pieces of empirical work that demonstrate the potential effectiveness of character education (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006, p498). A synthesis of the literature suggested the importance of character development, and that there is a direct relationship between character education and student academic achievement.

Intelligence plus character. When students' characters evolve and their social skills are strengthened, an ownership and accountability appear towards their education. Students start to value their time spent in the classroom and see the teacher as a vital part of their lives. Wilkes and Wilmore shared the definition of intelligence put forth by Gardner in 1983 as "the bio-psychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in culture" (2015, p37). Yet when students are not offered a solid curriculum and skill set in character development, they lack overall problem-solving skills, particularly those in critical and creative thinking.

In order to understand the impact of character education, it is essential to break down the word "character". Berkowitz and Bier (2005a) defined character as

> "the complex set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable an individual
> to act as a moral agent, i.e., the subset of psychological characteristics that lead one to
> want to and be able to do the right thing. Such characteristics include empathy,
> compassion, conscience, moral reasoning, moral values, moral identity, perspective-
> taking, moral indignation, moral sensitivity, etc." (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009, p132).

As human beings evolve and change over the years, as well as being faced with different issues as they grow throughout their academic careers, it is essential to help young students develop their character and lead them down positive, resilient, supportive, effective pathways.

Although there has been much debate over the years in regards to a consensual definition for character education, it is best understood by Beland (2003) and Lickona (1991) breakdown of the term. It is stated as "the deliberate attempt to promote the development of virtue, moral values, and moral agency in youth, especially in schools" (Berkowitz, 1997, p34). Almerico's definition of character education focuses on the curriculum. It should develop students by offering essential traits that create a strong character. It should be deliberate, with the intentions of developing noble individuals with core values. In order for it to be effective, it requires dedicated planning (2014). Yet, many higher educational institutions are failing to properly train prospective teachers as well as aspiring administrators for implementation of character development.

Character education literature. The literature surrounding character education is growing rapidly daily, but there are still some gaps within the research that cause for future study and inquiry. Past research focused heavily on specific programs, specific schools who have displayed positive results utilizing elements of character education, and/or leaders in the field. However, studies are needed in the areas of further research, the curriculums set forth in teacher and administrator preparation programs, what effective management of education looks like, breaking down curriculums, additional effective pedagogical strategies. Berkowitz and Bier added, "What is needed is more systematic research on specific strategies and meta-analyses of the studies included in the various reviews. While there is substantial research on a very small set of individual strategies (e.g., service learning, moral dilemma discussion, cooperative learning), most of the strategies are only studies as part of multifaceted character education initiatives" (2017, p48). Consistent studies are needed to yield results over time. By breaking down the character system into components, it allows for a greater comprehension and understanding of

the concept. Furthermore, it would provide educational leaders with a common language (Sweeney & Fry, 2012).

Farrington's (2017) review of the empirical literature centered on character education also resulted in limited research methodologies with a poor quality and scope of data. The study claimed, "They have done a laudable job of evaluating key strategies associated with effective practice in character education, but more work needs to be done to illuminate the *mechanisms* whereby good practice develops the character of children and adolescents in K-12 schools and to further build robust theory about character development" (2017, p54). Questions surrounding character education range from what does it look like to who's responsible for the implementation and delivery to what type of strategies are best for my organization. It can be an overwhelming task matching the correct elements of character education with an educational organization.

Before teachers and administrators hit the field of education, they should be properly prepared in their educational, and sometimes, graduate, preparation programs. Yet much research has yielded the results that both teacher preparation programs and administrative preparation programs do not focus on, deliver, or even touch on the aspect of character development. At best, a classroom management or social justice class is offered as part of the curriculum. Rizzo and Bajovic added, "In fact, the lack of preparation of pre-service teachers to deliver moral/character education has been raised in the literature as a concern (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Nucci, Drill, Larson, & Browne, 2005)" (2016, p131). Rizzo and Bajovic's study examined a pre-service preparation program for teacher candidates in Ontario.

The study found that moral and cognitive development are two separate entities, therefore demanding different requirements and elements of implementation in order for success. Since

schools are on a serious time crunch and have a misappropriation of priorities, little to no time was documented as being left over for moral development. It was revealed that out of 270 teacher respondents, 37.9% doubted their own abilities in having a positive outcome on the character of *some* students posing the idea that some students seem unreachable (Rizzo & Bajovic, 2016). The study also found many examples of empirical research that proved many teacher and administrative educational preparation programs have not yet incorporated character education aspects of teacher in their curriculum (Cummings, Harlow, & Maddux, 2007)" (2016, p133). Without the proper preparation, many educational leaders and educators are faced with personalizing character education within their own areas.

This does not benefit the culture as a whole, as students are receiving tid-bits of information that they must piece together on their own. This is the same case for the teachers and administrators; they are learning as they go. It is a reactive process rather than proactive and beneficial. Empirical research is needed as to why these preparation programs do not implement aspects of character education in their curriculums. There are many different programs that have been developed to teach emotional intelligence to students; yet, only a few have provided components and strategies that prepare and provide training for educators and educational leaders to aid in development and implementation (Wilkens and Wilmore, 2015). If these programs are not implemented correctly, the aim and goal is completely missed. There is a significant difference in the outcome of a character education program and/or strategy which relies heavily upon those who deliver the information.

Education cannot be effectively managed when individuals are not being properly prepared for the aspects that come along with cultivating the intelligence and character of other (growing) human beings. Mehdinezhad and Mansouri added,

"Today's organizations need leaders who, thanks to an exceptional personality and charisma, power, influence and broad vision, commitment and passion, the heat necessary for the use of the talents and subordinates, make efforts to achieve organizational goals. In this regard, the importance and necessity of management in education is more vital than in other organizations, because in an educational system, most schools of education managers, due to the size and extent of its dimension, are faced with serious responsibilities of advancing organizational goals (Jafari & Yosefnezhad, 2002)" (2016, p55).

Empirical studies are needed in the area of crafting strong educational management. As society changes, the curriculum behind which schools stand need to incorporate enormous amounts of character development and enhancement strategies.

A school's curriculum is the framework for learning and identifying what is important and therefore, needs a strong focus. Many schools need to revamp their structure in order to incorporate elements of effective character education. Yet, there is a lack of empirical literature that guides educational leaders towards selecting and settling on the best strategies for their organization. Almerico added,

"Character education appears to provide students and teachers with many benefits in the classroom setting and beyond; however, one challenge educator's face is procuring the necessary curriculum materials and background to teach it. Even though at least 17 states in our nation require character education to be taught and 27 receive funding from the U.S. Department of Education to teach character education (Besson-Martilotta, 2013; McElmeel, 2002; Tyra, 2012), many schools or school districts have not created a curriculum or set instructions to meet this need (Desisio, 2008)" (2014, p3).

Other academic elements of education, specifically state standardized testing and other academic requirements, take precedence over the development of character, resulting in students who lack social and emotional skills and strategies for enhancement.

Lastly, there is missing empirical evidence surrounding effective pedagogical strategies that can be implemented for a range of needs. In terms of isolated, effective pedagogical strategies being offered, there is little empirical guidance (Berkowitz and Bier, 2005). Consistent and precise studies need to be held that focus on beneficial strategies that support and sustain the elements of character development. The main exploration of this dissertation is the lack of empirical literature revolving around the administrator's responsibilities in implementing effective character education and development strategies.

Benefits & Challenges of Character Education

Although character education programs and strategies definitely push for a safe, supportive, trusting environment, the benefits that can arise from proper implementation of these initiatives can benefit the entire organization as a whole in a multitude of ways. It is necessary for educational leaders to begin aligning character education and development with college and career readiness programs instead of tossing it to the end of the priority list. Davidson agreed, "Character education should be at the center of the most pressing educational and economic issues, not on the sideline. In order for that to happen character education must seek to develop a safe, supportive school culture as well as the conscience of craft and habits for excellence needed for schools, work, and life" (2014, p79). When implementing consistent character education, students begin to inevitability become prepared for the collegiate environment and/or the workforce.

Albeit character development can be a wide world of exploration that can seem overwhelming at times, it is a growing field alongside social-emotional learning, moral education, and service learning. This is encouraging as the current educational priority and emphasis is on high-stakes state standardized testing, mainly that of literacy and mathematics. Yet, character education is directly related to society and mirrors real-life experiences and interactions that students will come in contact with at some moment, if not multiple times, throughout their lives. School should be used as one of the main tools in shaping students' ability and capacity for dealing with a multitude of conflicts and issues that could potentially arise.

Althof and Berkowitz added,

"Societies need moral members. They need children to develop into moral adults. It is not enough for a society to be populated with benign hedonists, as a truly civil society needs citizens to care about the general welfare and those who cannot advocate for themselves. Human beings need to understand that they 'share a common humanity' and that respect must extend 'from particular persons to society in general' (Youniss & Yates, 1999, p.369)" (2006, p496).

As important as academic ability and knowledge is, students must leave their senior years and enter the world prepared for constant social and emotional challenges at different levels of intensity. For centuries, society has relied on schools to prepare the youth to contribute and participate in a competitive world. Teachers and educational leaders have been entrusted with providing academic knowledge by being masters of their content areas as well as developing the resilience and social-emotional skills of students' characters. Althof and Berkowitz pointed out that in order for a society to truly thrive, endure, and work together successfully, it requires citizens who are "intrinsically and actively pro-social" (2006, p496). Elias used a metaphor of

an airplane to explain the importance of embedding character education into academic curriculum. Representative of an era of change,

> "preparing our youth for an uncertain future is akin to building the airplane while it is in flight. But we have no choice; we do not have the luxury of putting development on hold until we figure out the destination and the kind of plane we need to build to get there, and we cannot substantially control the changing conditions in the skies. So build and fly, we must" (2014, p37).

Effective implementation of character education benefits the environment that holds so dearly high stakes testing. There has been increased numbers of children being diagnosed with anxiety and ADHD due to facing high pressure education standards, such as standardized state testing, without possessing the emotional skills to manage such pressure (Wilkins & Wilmore, 2015). Placing extreme pressures on young children without equipping them with the tools necessary to combat these stressors is a recipe for disaster. The authors also pointed out that unfortunately, student success and achievement was defined in many school districts across the nation as the total student population that passes their state standardized assessment in English Language Arts and mathematics.

Although character education is starting to become its own field of study, it is closely related to social-emotional learning (SEL). Character education and SEL converge to make the suggestion that schools promote all students' characters and socio-emotional development. Both fields require students to act morally, ethically, and possess skills to enact behaviors effectively (Elias, 2014). When schools replace social-emotional learning with a sole focus on content knowledge and gain, the true purpose of development and growth is lost. So many wonderful

opportunities for the promotion of positive character go missing as time is utilized on one specific mission. Yet, a standardized test score is not a predictor for success in society.

It is more important to focus on the development, personality, and temperament of an individual as they grow through the various phases of life. Temperament and character are contrasted, as temperament is considered unalterable and character can change and grow Farrelly, 193). Farrington added,

> Empirical evidence and rich theory suggest that these developmental experiences are important mechanisms by which character is developed. By augmenting studies of the effects of specific practices in character education with an equal attention to empirical and theoretical work about the mechanisms of character development, researchers can move the field substantially farther and make richer contributions to practice in schools, communities, and families (2017, p62-63).

More time should be dedicated to the field of character education, and the exploration of effective methodologies and strategies, verses the cost, time, and effort placed into writing, maintaining, and grading state standardized assessments.

One of the main issues within the inquiry of character education is how to measure effectiveness. The biggest issue surrounding measuring effectiveness is a lack of time. Few studies follow students for a long enough time to determine and measure whether their character education programs have directly impacted their life in a positive way. To really understand long-term developmental outcomes, significant research would be needed to support character education programs' effectiveness in developing moral and character as powerful predictors of excellence and success (Farrington, 2017; Davidson, 2014). Therefore, it is worthwhile to spend more time and efforts exploring the world of character education, making connections between

various programs and strategies, as well as creating new ones along the way; the field is limitless.

As long as the goal of character education is not lost, how it is delivered and what is looks like will and should vary from school to school. Davidson pointed out, "Character education must be about moral and performance character values so as to include ethical conscience, but also about what Green (1984) calls 'the conscience of craft.' The goal of character education must be to develop in students an ethical conscience as well as an ethic of excellence. Ethical conscience and the conscience of craft are not independent, but interdependent" (2014, p78). This interdependence was built through the leadership of the school, from previous empirical research, and through the collaboration with teachers, parents, students, and other staff members that will take part in the community of character building.

Character strengths. The effective implementation of character development leads to a strong build-up of character strengths. These character strengths, according to Sweeney and Fry, are "psychological traits that serve three major functions regarding sustaining, developing, and communicating character" (2012, p93). Students spend more time awake and alert at school during the week days than they do at home. The social networks one is embedded in is responsible for creating a person's character development. Values and beliefs stem from the culture of organizations one is a member of, such as family, friends, groups, etc. One of the main benefits of incorporating character development in school curriculum is being able to serve as that constant environment that shapes student behavior, action, and thought process. Schools should be utilized as the foundation to deliver this instruction and knowledge, as students spend a large majority of their childhood and young adult life growing up and evolving in this environment.

In this case, teaching and learning become more than just a job, career, or delivery of pedagogy. The entire environment transforms into a place where learning is embraced, valued, and cherished, where students take ownership, initiative, and accountability over their education, where all individuals continue to learn and grow as human beings. Character education, having the power to benefit all members of the organization included, does have a huge focus on the students. Almerico reminded us that the potential benefits of character education are "multifaceted going beyond the apparent outcomes of being a good person and responsible citizen. Ryan (1999) found that instruction centered on character development helped improve students' academic achievement and communication skills thus promoting a stronger sense of independence and self-confidence" (2014, p2). Altogether, character education promotes a well-rounded individual ready to combat whatever life throws their way.

Character education is directly related to upholding and maintaining a positive, safe, and secure school climate. When students do not feel welcomed or comfortable in their learning space, the interaction between student and thinking dulls. The National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (2009) pointed out "Considerable research has been conducted linking school climate to student performance. The overall conclusion of that research has been that climate exists as an essential element of successful schools" (Lindahl, 2009, p3). When students' individual characters evolve, there is a direct correlation to the overall culture of the school.

Impact on culture and climate. The culture and climate of a learning environment is essentially important to the success rate of that institution. Berger (2003) argued that excellence is born not from a course but from a culture. Curriculum is responsible for introducing and reinforcing skills and competencies, but it is the shared vision, habits, atmosphere that nurture

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individuals towards expertise. The morale that develops, and how individuals feel towards their

learning environment, is shaped by character habits and culture (Berger, 2003). As visitors enter

the building, they should be able to almost instantaneously get a feeling and gain some sort of

understanding in regard to the organization's culture. The energy that lives in the building will

reveal if it is a positive or negative environment.

Although it takes all members of the organization working collectively to build and

sustain a strong culture and climate, it is ultimately up to the school leaders to ensure this is

established and being upheld daily. Berkowitz and Hoppe added, "While it is essential to build

an implicit culture of care and ethics in classrooms, schools, and the diverse set of relationships

of which they are compromised, it is also important to explicitly focus on issues of character,

morality, ethics, values, and virtue in the curriculum" (2009, p135). Character education should

be an equal part of the curriculum paired with academic knowledge, mastery, and gain.

Rewards and recognition. Many schools utilize a rewards system as a methodology for

controlling student behavior. This creates a major focus on rewards and recognition as a social

good opposed to upholding good behavior for the sake of morality. This methodology also does

not endure behavioral tendencies. Kohn (1995) pointed out, "Schools tend to favor the reliance

upon extrinsic consequences for the teaching and socialization of students. This unfortunately

has a set of undesirable consequences" (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009, p134). Character education

spreads far beyond a rewards and recognition program; it trains and challenges all individuals

involved to constantly be aware of their words, actions, and decisions. Thus, creating alert

individuals who are accountable and conscious of their interactions with others.

There are countless benefits to properly implementing character education strategies that

fit the needs of an organizational structure. Some of the benefits include: less absenteeism, fewer

discipline problems, lower dropout rate, increase graduation rate, decreased behavioral referrals, and higher performance on achievement tests (Almerico, 2014). When educational leaders take out the necessary time to craft a character education curriculum that will meet the needs of their unique organization, they are making an investment towards cultivating a conducive, encouraging, positive learning space for all members involved.

Breaking barriers. Character development breaks many barriers as it is also beneficial towards and can be shaped to meet the intense needs of high poverty schools. Out of the many factors that contribute to the success or failure of a school is the school climate. It has been found to directly relate and have an effect on student achievement, particularly in high-poverty schools. 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools across the nation were examined. A common theme throughout the schools was the principal's autonomy in hiring, creating and maintaining expectations and standards, and implementations of programs geared towards ensuring success (National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, 2009). When educational leaders are granted the autonomy to make good decisions for their schools, enhancements in character and academic growth are apparent.

This is extremely important for the benefit of at-risk or behavioral challenged students. Nelson (2009) found "a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and student achievement in at-risk populations". The greatest individual contributor (for student achievement) was "students' understanding of emotions" (Wilkens & Wilmore, 2015, p38). Many character development strategies and methodologies ensure the student takes responsibility and accountability for their education. In doing so, students understand their decisions, rewards and consequences, hard-work, resilience, successes and failures, and so forth. For at-risk

populations, this allows students a chance to reflect over their choices while also allowing time for growth and change before they enter adulthood.

Character education also promotes democratic citizenship. Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss (2002) added, "A key aspect of democratic citizenship is the capacity to 'move beyond one's individual self-interest and to be committed to the well-being of some larger group of which one is a member' which includes the ability (and the motivation) to follow debates on current public policy issues and to participate in local and national politics" (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006, p500-501). Utilizing aspects of democratic citizenship in the classroom promotes real life experiences and mirrors future society for students of various grade ranges.

Consequently, "Studies that compare today's young people to older cohorts (such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP) have shown that the new generation is the least knowledgeable about government structure, historical persons and events and contemporary politics- and is the most politically disengaged (Lutkus et al., 1999; Keeter et al., 2002)" (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006, p504-505). As students focus their attention on retaining key information and facts for purposes of meeting the requirements of standardized state testing, they are not critically thinking, reflecting, or making connections between grade-level ideas and content knowledge.

Character education serves a diverse group of learners, breaking the barriers between socio-economic, socio-emotional, racial, age, learning/readiness levels. Character education promotes a realistic infusion of society as students build their content knowledge and skills. Character education also encourages effective communication. Youth are being exposed to a host of technology daily and are able to communicate virtually with others anywhere in the world. Due to this reality, students develop and interact with each other fundamentally differently from

their predecessors' social norms (Rizzo & Bajovic, 2016). Advances in technology can also be incorporated into various character education models.

Connection to real life situations. With one of the current, main educational focuses being centered on technology, socio-emotional learning and empathy are close behind. Creating a strong curriculum grounded in elements of academics and character development education will offer students the most realistic depiction of real-life situations, as well as prepare students for unlimited circumstances. Wilkins and Wilmore added, "While the push for academic excellence has surged upward, the focus on character education and emotional and social competencies has begun to wane" (2015, p35). Character education curriculum ensures students are able to be self-sufficient and continue to make strong and positive decisions beyond their time spent in the K-12 environment. Without this focus, which is the reality of many schools across the nation, administrators, teachers, and students alike draw their attention to standardized state testing and lose focus on any other aspect of learning.

Berkowitz and Hoppe pointed out, "Many subjects are rife with opportunities to mine the character-related content (e.g., social, moral and ethical issues) already in readings, lessons, curricular issues, etc. All subjects are amenable to character-friendly pedagogical methods (e.g., cooperative learning, cross-age collaboration, constructivist methods, etc.)" (2009, p135). There is a consensus among educational leaders that character education programs benefit students but the issue lies in crafting the right formula of character education models, strategies, and programs that meet the direct needs of the student body being served.

Challenges. One of the challenges has been deciding what character education program and/or elements are best for the needs of the specified organization. Character education should be tailored to fit the requests, needs, interests, and issues within an institution. It should be

carefully crafted and developed just as an academic curriculum is created and highly respected. Lickona and Davidson (2005) expanded the definition of character education to include both moral character development and performance character development, with the latter encompassing those psychological characteristics that promote overall excellence in performance whether it be diligence or a strong work ethic (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009, p132). Character.org offered a simpler definition that is also used by the Character Education Partnership. It is simply "understanding, caring about and acting upon core ethical values" (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009, p132). As character development is definitely understood and acknowledged as a neurological and behavioral developmental course, it also relies on a phenomenological process.

Berkowitz, Bier, and MacAuley reminded us that the ultimate goal of character education, regardless of the definition, is "for children and adolescents to become good people, to develop into and act as agents for good in the world" (Farrington, 2017, p53). Since trying to define or box character education into a package can be a daunting and overwhelming task, it is essential to understand what character education is not. Many individuals unfortunately operate under the assumption that moral education, antibullying, or even school safety initiatives are synonymous with character education. Davidson explained,

> "Character education will once again fade from relevance if it does not embrace the fullest version of character to include ethics *and* excellence, moral *and* performance character. The emphasis on the development of moral and performance character aligns with current educational policies including the Common Core, 21st century skills, safe and supportive schools, and college and career readiness; it also supports the twin goal of academic achievement and whole person development that have long been the foundation of sound educational policy" (2014, p77-78).

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State standardized testing. State standardized testing has become the main focus and target of growth for students. It has taken priority in many schools across the nation as state standardized scores have a direct relationship to school funding, school success rates, and student/parent interest. State standardized test scores have also become the measurement that deems students successful or inadequate. In most states only certain, randomized skills are tested, most of which the educators are completely unaware as well. This isolated test on an isolated day holds all the weight of student success for an entire year or group of academic years. The test does not allow any other factors to be considered, such as socio-economic area (do the students have accessibility to the necessary resources needed to practice for such exam? i.e. computer/Internet) or elements of character.

Control and power. Education has shifted to a world of control. There is so much focus on controlling student behavior, controlling scores, controlling climate, etc. Elias agreed, "We see an urge to control, in the form of prescriptive emphases on academic achievement scores and school takeovers, at the expense of true learning, dialog, conversation, exchange, exploration, creativity, and discovery" (2014, p39). Rather than exerting so much effort and so many resources trying to control elements out of our reach, it makes more sense to promote the positive behaviors and outcomes that are desirable. Character education encourages students to take responsibility and accountability for their own learning and growth.

In relinquishing some of the control and power to the students themselves, education becomes a partnership that truly benefits and engages both parties involved. The core of character education is the creation. The results will last students a lifetime- "The importance of work ethic, industriousness, and craftsmanship is not simply a goal with long-term economic implications; it is a goal with immediate educational implications" (Davidson, 2014, p79).

Character education stems far beyond the K-12 realm as it sets the tone for students' future as transforming into a mentality and lifestyle.

Pilot Studies

Identifying effective character education. Effective character education has been displayed multiple ways throughout the literature. Yet Berkowitz and Bier pointed out that there are not many reviews of literature identifying effective character education practices. Most of the reviews found are academic outcomes (2017). Since character development programs vary, different techniques and strategies have been found effective in correlating environments. Berkowitz and Hoppe (2009) argued that effective character education implementation begins with "an instructional emphasis on the promotion of character development. This in turn entails multiple emphases. First, it needs to be central to the mission and core of the institutional identity" (2009, p133). Greenberg (1995) as well as Hanhimaki and Tirri (2008) agreed that the most central factor backing up Berkowitz and Hoppe's theory is the school leader; they dictate and navigate the authenticity of this priority.

The next step in implementing effective character development according to Berkowitz and Hoppe is to incorporate constant peer-to-peer interactions within instruction and student working periods. "Effective character education relies heavily on a set of strategies that promote or even require peer-to-peer interaction" such as class meetings in-person or utilizing technology, moral dilemma discussions, student government association, and cross-age initiatives such as elementary and/or middle school buddying programs, peer tutoring and mentoring, and multi-aged middle or high school homeroom/advisory periods (2009, p133). As students spend time together, they inevitably work through conflict resolution, interpersonal communication skills, critical thinking, decision-making processes, and sense-making.

Berkowitz and Hoppe offered four key approaches for identifying effective character education. The first approach is to start with a specific practice, strategy, or program and observe what outcomes take place. The second approach encouraged doing some research to identify effective programs and inquire as to what, how, and why they impact and what individual strategies are useful. The study to follow conducted in this dissertation takes the second approach, as three extraordinary educational leaders were identified for their effective implementations of character education within their organizations. Using surveys, direct observations, and interviews, I inquired into the what, how, and why of their instructional choices and attitudes towards the implementation of character education.

The third approach started with specific outcomes and then examined what the literature revealed about underlying factors and what those means. The last approach aimed at identifying broad principles of character education and using those as a conceptual framework. This also set the scheme for "clustering empirical findings on effective practices" (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017, p37). Farrelly's (1993) integrated character education model also relied on four key principles. They included: character develops through moral action (McLean, 1992), character develops through interaction with the environment (Pegoraro, 1989), character integrates the whole personality (McLean, 1992), and character involving consistent patterns of action and values (McLean, 1992).

LAUSD. The Jefferson Center for Character Education in Canoga Park, California conducted a study at Limerick Elementary School with Principal Ronni Ephraim. The goal of the project was to identify schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) that were open to pilot a character education program with hopes that it would greatly improve student behaviors and conduct and enrich the academic environment (Brooks & Kann, 1993). In fall of

1990, Limerick and 24 other LAUSD schools initiated a program that included the following elements- "direct instruction, language-based curriculum, positive language, content and process, visual reinforcement, school climate approach, teacher-friendly materials, teacher flexibility and creativity, student participation, parental involvement and then some, and evaluation" (1993, p21). The program was found to boost student moral, overall behavior, and academic success.

In 1991, Northern Michigan University formed a Student Leader Fellowship Program (SLFP) that was composed of a two-year, cocurricular leadership development program with the goal in mind to foster citizen leadership. The program was primarily grounded in the concepts of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), ethics in leadership (Burns, 1978), and the practice of learning through experience (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). SLFP taught leadership theories and various skills through guided practice. Over time, there was less oversight from program staff as trust and development was obtained. Barch, Harris, and Bonsall stated, "Every step of the way, values such as integrity, excellence, service, courage, and lifelong learning are emphasized and modeled for student participants with the vision of them carrying those values with them beyond college life to their careers, families, and other socially responsible community involvements" (2012, p72). Programs such as SLFP trickle down into organizations and learning environments and return back to the community by crafting a mindset in citizens.

Due to the generosity of Sanford N. McDonnell and Teresa M. Fischer, UMSL, the Center for Character and Citizenship was established in 1994.
It is noted that:

> at the CCC we have had to grapple with many marriages: the marriage of moral
> education and character education; the marriage of moral and character education to
> citizenship education; and so on…Both authors came to their respective positions with

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strong intellectual roots in the field of moral education, Althof as an educational psychologist and Berkowitz as a developmental psychologist. This has led to some interesting grappling with conceptual and practical areas of overlap and disjunction (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006, p495-496).

Leaders and Laggers. The 2012 United States Chamber of Commerce report, *Leaders and Laggers*, which serves as an annual state report that dissects the overall effectiveness of the American education system. The 2012 report admonished the American educational system for not successfully preparing students for the demands of the 21st century society and modern workplace (Wilkens & Wilmore, 2015). In order to fill the gap and offer students a well-rounded, substantial education, character education and development should be embedded into American education. According to various educational researchers, it is essential that character revolved around the development of key strengths "that facilitate congruence between leaders' values and beliefs and their actions. Some of these important enabling character strengths contained in the literature included self-regulation, agency, humanity, transcendence, wisdom, justice, and courage, which bolstered the likelihood that leaders will behave in accordance with their moral and ethical belief systems (Cloninger et al., 1993; Klann, 2007; Leonard, 1997; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Riggio et al., 2010)" (Sweeney & Fry, 2012, p90). This outlook encouraged not only students but administrators and teachers to practice and live out character development, which enhanced their individual self as well.

Covey. Covey is best known for his 1987 book, the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. In 2009, he official launched The Leader In Me school program that was based off of his book and value character education. The program focus was on a paradigm shift that takes the focus off of teaching leadership skills as an isolated entity to actually embedding those skills in

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the daily actions and beliefs of the overall community. The unique thing about this program was the time taken out to develop the adults in the learning community first. There was training and professional development dedicated towards the leaders and adults involved in the process before it was integrated into the curriculum for the students. With a firm understanding and participation in the program, the benefits span across the organization and effect everyone. Covey (2008) was able to demonstrate that "emotional intelligence can and should be embraced and taught to the entire learning community. He found that teaching leadership skills builds the emotional competence of the learning organization" (Wilkens & Wilmore, 2015, p37).

Middle school meta-analysis. The Middle Grades Review published "The Promise of Character Education in Middle School: A Meta-Analysis" by Calvary R. Diggs from the University of Minnesota and Patrick Amos representing University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in 2016. Formal research in character education was conducted to see if it truly serves as a benefit to students, particularly middle school students. Six traits were used to identify effectiveness in character education. These traits included: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Pre- and post-tests were used to analyze eleven studies. The qualitative elements called for a development of descriptive categories.

From past research, two descriptive categories were created- developmental opportunity and elements of program effectiveness. Developmental opportunity was inspired from Lockwood's (2013) theory of developmental character education and elements of program effectiveness derived from Berkowitz and Bier's (2007) findings concerning the creation of effective character education programs. The meta-analysis found that "character education was and has been shown to have a statistically significant effect on academics, yet that same effect was not meaningful in an applied sense" (Diggs, 2016, p9). Evidence-based academic

interventions and initiatives appeared to be the most beneficial approach to improving student academic achievement and behaviors. Clearly (2008) pointed out that, "Even in situations where character education programs did not have observable outcomes, teachers still believed in the practice and desired more training" (2016, p2). The middle school years, which encompass grades 6-8, and early adolescent (ages 11-14) have been closely related to a variety of problem behaviors including antisocial tendencies, risky behaviors, delinquencies, and an overall rise in impulsivity.

Overall, the meta-analysis found that students get a chance to perceive and reflect upon their own character due to these character education programs. The studies included in the meta-analysis that had curriculum integration were closely associated with stronger program outcomes. Another aspect "notably absent descriptive element in the studies was principal and/or leadership support. Having the support of school leadership can positively influence program outcomes as seen in Caldarella et al. (2011) and Lassen et al. (2006)" (2016, p10-11). Character education programs must be meaningful and carefully crafted to meet the needs of the student body being served. Character education should grow and develop throughout the academic years as students do.

University of Chicago Consortium. In 2017, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research took up the question of how young people both *learn* and *become* across the myriad settings in which they interact in and grow through. The study led them to find a set of ten developmental experiences, five being action experiences and five representing reflective experiences. The developmental experiences model built from this study included both *active* and *reflective* components. The active components provided opportunities for individuals to *encounter, tinker, practice, choose, and contribute*. Whereas the reflective components allowed

for young people to make sense and meaning of their active participation by *describing* and *evaluating* their experiences and observations, *connecting* experiences to other things they care about, *envisioning* how an experience might inform or contribute to a desirable future, and, over time, *integrating* one's developmental experiences into one's self-concept and the 'story' of oneself (Farrington, 2017, p61). The study also yielded in creating a framework, the Foundations for Young Adult Success (FYAS). The factors surrounding the outer ring were agency, integrated identity, and competencies. The four inner circle factors were self-regulation, knowledge and skills, mindsets, and values.

The central question in the study focused on *how* the key factors and foundational components identified in the FYAS framework developed over time. This study by Berkowitz and colleagues (2017) pursued three approaches for identifying evidence-based practices for the enhancement of developing character from the available empirical literature. This study contributed to the field and exploration of character education by investigating unique contributions to development as well as encouraging researchers and practitioners to think about not only the practices used to promote student character outcomes, but also different kinds of character-building experiences and opportunities. Farrington reminded us that "ultimately, it is what children and youth *do* and *experience*- and the meaning they make of those experiences- that led to young people's development" (2017, p62).

Character.org. Character.org is an advocacy group for character education and development based out of Washington, D.C. Since at least 1996, this predominant character education organization has used its flagship guidelines *The Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* (11P) (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017, p36). Character.org recognizes National Schools of Character for schools and educational leaders who are going above and beyond to

implement various modes of character education into their daily curriculums. St. HOPE (Helping Others Pursue Excellence) Leadership Academy became a National School of Character. A deep commitment to relevant, student-centered, and student-driven learning develops their scholars' identities and characters which in turn, cultivate the entire child (Bond, 2016). Character.org promoted character education in various ways, from recognizing National Schools of Character, hosting their annual forum over character education in Washington, D.C., and crafting helpful value systems for school, districts, and various leaders to follow.

The HARLEM values system represented "honor, absolute determination, responsibility, leadership, excellence, and Mission" (Bond, 2016, p90). This is just one example of the many strategies Character.org offered to promote and encourage character development that is adaptable to all ages. Student success, both during the program and for those who have moved on, is attributed to their wholehearted belief in HARLEM values (Bond, 2016). This value system sticks with students as they grow into adulthood and venture out into the real world. Returning to citizenship education, it is important to point out that although the empirical literature surrounding character education and citizenship education are mostly separate, when practicing in the fields, there is a clear connection between the two. School mission statements oftentimes cite their goals and visions as being promoting responsible citizens with strong character and intelligence (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). This was exhibited at the Pleasanton, CA Unified School District.

The district has been cited as a National District of Character by the Character Education Partnership in 2004, with a promise to promote civic responsibility and respect for others by providing citizenship and character education (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). Even "one of the 'Six Pillars of Character' for Character Counts (http://www.charactercounts.org), a very widely

implemented character education framework, is 'citizenship'" (2006, p508). Character.org offered educational leaders many resources on a vast array of character education tools that can be paired together to create the right remedy for any student body.

Educational reforms. Many educational reforms, such as "Race to the Top", Building Data Systems, Recruiting Effective Teachers, and Turning Around Failing Schools have resulted in "an inadvertent practice of teaching skills in isolation" (Wilkins & Wilmore, 2015, p34). While these reforms may have allowed for more instructional time in mathematics and reading, the focus on character development elements, such as creative arts, has been pushed aside or eliminated altogether with (Wilkins & Wilmore, 2015). When pushing these aspects of growth and development aside, it left room for error in all aspects of learning.

Character Education & Leadership

Teacher and leader preparation programs. In order for students to receive effective character development instruction, it is essential for teachers and building leaders to be fully versed and prepared in the curriculum, but to also have a firm grasp of the definition of character. Sweeney and Fry, explained, "A review of the leadership and psychological literatures yielded several themes regarding the definition of character. First, character was manifested through leaders' consistent moral and ethical behavior across all situations (Bass & Bass, 2008; Leonard, 1997; Peterson, 2006; Sperry, 1999)" (2012, p90). Character education must be understood and embraced throughout the entire organization and not perpetuated as another lesson to teach or thing to do, yet the aim should be to intertwine it in all aspects of pedagogy and instruction.

Not only is there a lack of empirical literature on preparation programs for education leaders and prospective teachers and the expectations and responsibilities of school counselors,

there is also a lack of literature on the administrator's specific role in implementing character education, as well as their responsibility towards cultivating teacher leaders that can also effectively implement character development strategies and methodologies. Sebastian, Allensworth and Huang agreed, "The hierarchical leadership connection from principals to other sources of leadership such as teachers is formally recognized in theory and consistently emphasized in literature, but few empirical studies have included this directional relationship when studying how systems of leadership connect to school processes and school outcomes (Neumerski 2013; York-Barr and Duke 2004)" (2016, p4). Without the proper preparation and guidance supplied for educational leaders and teachers, the true impact and meaning of character development loses its power and ability for positive change, both socially and academically.

Hallinger and Heck (2009, 2010) conducted a study measuring academic capacity as the central mediating variable linking together school leadership and student outcomes. Leithwood and Jantzi, ten years prior in 1999-2000, focused a study on the overall measure of school conditions including: school culture, structure and organization, purposes and goals, and the quality of information used for decision making processes (Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016, p6). These are examples of studies that have added to the field of character education but also focus too heavily on isolated elements of the field. It was well established that school leaders have mostly indirect effects on student outcomes, but there was less clarity on what the critical mediating processes are and how they matter for student achievement.

Often, studies have focused on a single mediating process or on an overall combined measure of school organizational capacity that includes multiple processes (Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016, p5). When the research focus was on an aspect of isolated leadership roles and/or responsibility, the system becomes flawed due to an unrealistic reflection

of how the school is actually organized and how it runs on a daily basis, as well as how the educational leaders function in reality (Leithwood and Mascall 2008; Neumerski 2013). A well-rounded and full view of the impact of the school leader on implementing character education is essential to the empirical literature surrounding the field.

School counselors. There is a lack of empirical research surrounding the role and responsibilities of school counselors in implementing and maintaining character education and development. There are articles that discuss comprehensive strategies for counselors, philosophical underpinnings of character education, ideological journeys, various models of character education, and leadership tips and techniques for character education programs that can be utilized for counselor's benefit. As school leaders, counselors, and teachers work together to create school improvement plans, they are running in circles trying to control aspects of education they cannot. It would serve a stronger purpose to target the behaviors and attitudes that need to change for a wave of change to occur.

The principal. The principal is a key factor in the implementation and development of curriculum that is perpetuated throughout a school. One of their main responsibilities is to identify needs and provide efficient solutions that will yield positive, long-lasting results. Sebastian, Allensworth, and Huang (2016) used a structural equation model (SEM) to test the conceptual model of school organizations at the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research to all teachers and students in grade 6 and higher within Chicago Public Schools. SEM was used to link principal and teacher leadership to instruction and learning through different mediating factors which include: school climate, program coherence, professional development, and parental involvement (2016, p2-3). The article also pointed out that "the central role of principals in developing distributed leadership is recognized in theory,

but few empirical studies have examined how principal leadership influences leadership among school personnel, especially teachers, or how multiple sources of leadership together relate to school improvement" (2016, p6). For proper implementation of character education, all members of the organization must be knowledgeable, engaged, and an active part of the process.

Principals hold a multitude of roles and responsibilities within their positions; they wear many hats and transition throughout their multiple parts numerous times per day. They are magicians in a sense, able to multi-task, manage countless people and activities, and create useful solutions during tight circumstances. Principals are tasked with collaborating with others to improve school processes, instruction and delivery, and student learning in various ways but also have the responsibility of working independently of teachers to improve aspects of the learning organization (Sebastian, Allensworth, and Huang, 2016). Their role in implementing effective character education is essential to the overall functioning and success of student development and academic achievement.

It is one of the essential responsibilities of educational leaders to ensure the environment is safe and secure, as well as conducive to learning, development, and constant growth. Rizzo and Bajovic added, "Administrators are responsible for setting the tone or direction of a school community; to ensure this environment is conducive to the advancement of moral literacy and development of moral character in students, supportive structures must be in place" (2016, p135). Principal instructional leadership determined further the success rate of various programs and their implementations across classrooms as principals were expected to be directly involved in instruction and be familiar with content and pedagogy (Stein and D' Amico 2000; Stein and Nelson 2003;) (Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016, p10). If educational leaders do not

properly prepare and lead their teachers, their delivery of instruction and character development elements may be lost in transition and therefore have little to no effect on student growth.

Principal leadership. All principal leadership is not effective leadership. If educational leaders are unable to identify the true needs of their organization and find solutions to those conflicts, their organization will struggle as a whole. After synthesizing the literature on principal leadership and effective leadership methodologies, four studies emerged. The aim of the first study, completed by Horng et al. (2010) examined how principals spent their time, and what they did with the results of that time spent. The study concluded that the time principals spent on "organizational management was related to achievement outcomes, but the time they spent on instructional activities was not" (Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016, p7). These findings were similar to those of Grissom and Loeb (2011). Their study compared the self-efficacy of different educational leaders in various daily tasks. The results of the study found that "only their skills in organizational management were related to school academic outcomes; school safety was the strongest aspect of their measure of organizational management (2016, p10). Both studies displayed a leadership confidence in organizational management components but lacked direction with instructional management factors of building an organization.

In another 2011 study conducted by Walker and Slear, results showed that principal leadership has a strong impact on teacher leadership, more specifically teacher efficacy. Walker and Slear explored the impact educational leaders and their behaviors have on the overall self-efficacy of teachers. A descriptive and correlational research methodology was utilized in this study, where 254 teachers were studied. The Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale of Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) and the Leadership Multifactor Questionnaire of Bass and Avolio (1992) were used for data collection. Results yielded a "positive link between principal

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behaviour and teacher efficacy" as well as two key factors that can predict changes in teachers' sense of self-efficacy, which were idealized influence and intellectual stimulation (Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016, p52). When teachers are equipped with the direction, support, knowledge, and skills needed to effectively lead their students, leadership becomes a shared responsibility, as well as a common goal and vision, throughout the building.

The last study that examined principal leadership focused on understanding whether or not, and if so, how, principals use teacher leadership as a mediating influence to build the overall capacity of the school in order to improve student achievement through school or organizational processes as mediating factors. The study found that "fostering a strong school climate through teacher leadership appears to be the key mediating mechanism through which leadership is related to student achievement" (Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016, p4). In order for principal leadership to be effective, educational leaders must create, sustain, and emphasize the importance of maintaining a strong school culture, which includes involving all members of the organization and ensuring everyone is working towards a shared vision and goals.

Furthermore, the study pointed out that "understanding the mechanisms through which leadership influences student achievement is critical for improving leaders' capacities. Leaders have many competing responsibilities, and it is not always clear which aspects of their work matter most for student outcomes…we examine[d] the processes through which principals have a direct influence on instruction and student achievement and those mediated through teacher leadership" (Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016, p3). For programs to have a true, meaningful impact on students, they must be consistent, continuous, coordinated, systematic and designed appropriately, both developmentally and pedagogically. It must be a school-wide effort to enhance the characters of all individuals involved.

One of the greatest benefits of character education is its ability to mirror real life. While content knowledge is important for building a base of information to grow upon, it is also essential that young individuals are exposed to snapshots of society to avoid specific societal and cultural shocks later in life. Vygotsky (1978) added, "Real-world simulations can be built to match developmental and environmental needs, creating a 'zone of proximal development' that approximates the current ability of the learner and the current reality of the context, consistent with Lapsley's notion that 'development takes place at the intersection of persons and contexts'" (Davidson, 2014, p80). One of the main goals of education should be to create well-rounded, flexible individuals that can successfully adapt to a variety of situations, circumstances, environments, and means.

In order to meet this goal, it is essential that the school leadership are visionaries, strategic, and consistent in their implementations of initiatives. Principal leadership must also exude trust. Berkowitz and Bier commented on the principal's overall effect, stating, "When considering what influences school implementation of character education, it is important to keep in mind that schools do not exist in vacuums, just as classrooms are not islands of practice. Most schools and classrooms conform to established norms, even if those norms prescribe ineffective practices" (2017, p36-37). Yet, in many cases, principals and other school leaders manage the people within their buildings and not necessarily the programs, initiatives, and student-centered methodologies that take place within the classroom.

Furthermore, district leaders and central office dictate a lot of what takes place within individual schools. Educational practice, instruction, and mandates are influenced by forces outside of the school, such as the school district, and sometimes even further outside of that (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017). Effective leadership begins with the educational leader of the

organization. Berkowitz and Hoppe added, "Character education relies fundamentally on both how people relate to the child and how people model healthy relationships for the child i.e., how they relate to others in the child's presence or how they represent their relationships to the child" (2009, p133-134). It is extremely important that the leadership of the school, particularly the administration and principal, understand, promote, and are consistently on board with character education initiatives that have a direct effect on student behavior and academic achievement.

Educational leaders play an essential role in ensuring the sustainability, development, and communication of character education throughout their organization. The literature reviewed in this piece supported the claim that a strong and consistent implementation of character education yields positive and sustainable results, both academically and socially. Furthermore, proper prioritization and implementation of character education benefited all members of the organization and does not solely apply to the students. The organization as a whole grew, developed, and moved together as one.

Effective leaders of character education understand that relying on instructional and behavioral strategies is not enough. One must nurture the inner character rather than aiming to shape it. Berkowitz and Bier reminded us that "Ultimately, the goal of character education is for children and adolescents to become good people, to develop into and act effectively as agents for good in the world. Hence this is as much about *being* people of character as it is about *acting* good. Both are essential." (2017, p43). Many schools miss this aim as their focus is not on cultivating the character of students but rather a reactive approach of taming and changing behavioral patterns, perhaps by consequences or redirection. A proactive and ongoing approach is necessary to make the lasting impact on students to where they will continue to make positive, strong choices even long after the present influence.

Cultivating character. Two key factors in cultivating character are designing a comprehensive initiative that promotes the overall development of character, while also focusing on socioemotional competencies, and choosing the right strategies to implement for the needs of the members of the organization. Character education should be personalized to meet the specific and unique needs of the school it serves. The flexibility to adapt character education to a school's academic and social needs is one of the reasons character education is so amazing, but also so difficult to conceptualize, define, and perpetuate. Yet, these skills are essential in having a chance to be successful and an effective, confident contributor to society (Elias, 2014). Students need to be equipped with 21st century skills to compete and thrive in today's society.

Education has adapted from an institution that focused heavily on the development of moral and social behaviors to a world of standardized state testing and scores. Without character education being embedded and implemented into core content area instruction and state-wide curriculums, students are being robbed of a multitude of social skills, conflict-resolution strategies, and a basic understanding of the basic elements of life. Davidson added, "Daily we witness the extraordinary human and economic costs that result when we do not educate for moral and performance character, ethics and excellence, honesty and industriousness" (2014, p78). As adults, we understand the importance of building up character as ours has much too often been built from trial and errors and life's great experiences. If we can help guide our youth towards conquering these failures and creating more victories, we have all succeeded as a society.

What better place to foster this growth and development than schools, where students spend countless hours interacting with others and facing experiences that mirror real-world events. Brooks and Kann pointed out that "schools are, essentially, a community of their own. If

the whole school community fosters the language, culture, and climate of good character, then the students who spend a significant portion of their time there would acquire the words, concepts, behaviors, and skills that contribute to good conduct, ethical decision making, and a fertile learning environment" (1993, p21). Educational leaders who have successfully implemented character education into their curriculums understand that it must be intertwined in every aspect of pedagogy and delivery, and cannot be an isolated strategy or day that students face randomly. Character education must be as much of the curriculum as the academic focus.

State policies on character education. The state, along with many other states, does have a policy set in place for the implementation of character education. It is Policy 160-4-2-.33 VALUES AND CHARACTER EDUCATION.

The requirements section of the policy states:

(a) Local boards of education shall provide instruction that addresses the core values adopted by the State Board of Education. Local boards of education shall also provide instruction in character education.

(b) Each local board of education shall adopt a plan for implementing values and character education and shall specify in that plan the instructional materials and strategies to be used.

(c) The department shall develop a values and character education guide which may be used by local boards of education in the development of values and character education programs.

Authority O.C.G.A. § 20-2-145; 20-2-240.

The policy was adopted on November 13, 1997 and has an effective date of December

29, 1997. The policy also outlines the State Character Education Law, Official Code of

[STATE] 20-2-145, which states:

(a) The State Board of Education shall develop by the start of the 1997-1998 school year a

comprehensive character education program for levels K-12. This comprehensive

character education program shall be known as the 'character curriculum' and shall focus

on the students' development of the following character traits: courage, patriotism,

citizenship, honesty, fairness, respect for others, kindness, cooperation, self-respect, self-

control, courtesy, compassion, tolerance, diligence, generosity, punctuality, cleanliness,

cheerfulness, school pride, respect for the environment, respect for the creator, patience,

creativity, sportsmanship, loyalty, perseverance, and virtue. Such program shall also

address, by the start of the 1999-2000 school year, methods of discouraging bullying and

violent acts against fellow students. Local boards shall implement such a program in all

grade levels at the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year and shall provide

opportunities for parental involvement in establishing expected outcomes of the character

education program.

(b) The Department of Education shall develop character education program workshops

designed for employees of local school systems.

Theoretical Framework

For this dissertation study, I used Dewey's theory of experience (1938) for the theoretical

framework. This framework directly related to this study as the past, present, and intended future

experiences of three educational leaders, specifically high school principals, was explored,

observed, and discussed. Since this theory relies on two domains, which include interaction and

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continuity, it paired perfectly with a dissertation study aiming to discover and reveal the relationship between character education programs and student academic, social, and personal achievements. For character education implementations to be effective, they must include interactions and continuity. This theoretical framework also has connections to Clandinin's work on narrative inquiry.

This dissertation study relied on the experiences and stories of interactions and continuity of character education implementations. As one of the major goals of this study was to determine effectiveness of various character education methodologies, this framework aided in the exploration. Grounding this dissertation study in Dewey's theory of experience added depth and validity to the qualitative findings that is displayed using a narrative inquiry approach. This study aimed to identify benefits and challenges of implementing aspects of character education. The interview questions participants answered centered on character education interactions and character education continuity. This study was interested in how these (character development) interactions and continuity affect students' academic, behavioral, and social abilities. Clandinin's work on narrative inquiry connects to this theoretical framework. As experiences of interactions and continuity arise, stories form to influence, impact, and potentially persuade others.

Summary

The purpose of this literature review was to provide an overview of character education using the current empirical literature. The changes in character education were included to support the idea that it is a growing, developing field. Various benefits and challenges that have been identified that are associated to the development and implementations of character education programs was discussed. This literature was provided as my study focused on the benefits and challenges of developing and implementing aspects of character education in a high

school setting. This literature review also included multiple pilot studies to explore how

character education is impacting different learning organizations. The current state policies for

implementing character education in the state was included in this literature review as my study

took place in the metro southeastern area. The literature review concluded with a revisit of the

theoretical framework used for this study to reinforce the claim that effective character education

calls for interactions and continuity.

Chapter III: Methods

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to highlight three educational leaders who serve as public high school principals in the metro southeastern area that are consistently implementing aspects of character education. The benefits and challenges of developing and implementing character education was inquired and observed. All three have been recognized on various levels: district, regional, state, and national levels for their involvement with character education. These educational leaders have taken it upon themselves to craft character education models, strategies, and implementations that have had lasting impressions on their educational organizations. The three participants voluntarily agreed to participate in this dissertation study to share the stories they have experienced with developing and implementing character education into their Charles County high schools.

Research Question

1) What do the stories of educational leaders reveal about key strategies and challenges of implementing character education?

Design

The design of the study was a narrative inquiry methodology. Narrative inquiry as a method can set up different analytical approaches for research (Clandinin, 2016). For example, they can rely on time or rely on experience. This dissertation study relied on capturing the experiences of the participants to describe challenges and benefits of implementing character education. The rationale behind this design choice was to share the experiences, interactions, and continuities of three educational leaders who effectively implement and integrate character education into their school curriculums, thus enhancing the overall climate for faculty, staff, and

students. Using this design allowed for the experiences and stories of the participants to be shared. These observations and insights demonstrated how educational leaders can implement character education strategies and overcome potential challenges to create a more responsive educational pedagogy surrounding character education. Readers of this dissertation study are able to identify benefits and downfalls of developing and implementing character education, determine what type of character education is beneficial for the school climate they are in, and/or find effective ways of creating a character education program that meets the needs of their unique school climate. One of the core aims of this study is to inspire other educational leaders to learn about and incorporate elements of character development within their learning institutions.

Due to the nature of capturing experiences, taking a narrative inquiry approach allowed for story-telling and an exhibition of the participant's lives (Clandinin, 2016). Furthermore, it aided in revealing the strategies that are efficient in delivering modes of character education as well as point out specific challenges. Since character education focuses on the development of human growth, experiences and stories yielded stronger results towards identifying effective strategies as well as pointing out challenges. Understanding the behind-the-scenes quality of these programs, models, methodologies, initiatives, and program developments should promote and encourage educational leaders to integrate some of these aspects into their own curriculum, instruction, and school improvement plans. These three stories gauged from narrative inquiry explored how narratives have the power to naturally inform the field of character education. Furthermore, the narrative inquiry approach pairs perfectly with the theoretical framework for this study, which relied heavily on two elements: interaction and continuity. Both of these elements appeared consistently in the stories and experiences of the participants.

A descriptive study utilizing narrative inquiry was used for my data analysis and writings of chapters four and five. Narrative inquiry was beneficial for this study because it offers a way of understanding and inquiring into lived experiences. D. Jean Clandinin, author of *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, agrees, "To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study" (2016). Furthermore, there is a strong connection between Dewey and narrative inquiry. Clandinin stated, "Narrative inquiry is an approach to research that enacts many, if not all, of the principles of Deweyan theory of inquiry… [it] is a quintessentially pragmatic methodology. What genealogy is to poststructuralist Foucauldian sociology, what critical ethnography is to critical theory, what experiments are to positivism, narrative inquiry is to Deweyan pragmatism" (2016). Utilizing this methodology, the experiences and successes of these educational leaders are displayed in a narrative format. The goal of this dissertation study was to demonstrate how these narrative experiences offered insight into the field of character education by sharing stories that highlighted specific strategies for successful implementation as well as identified potential challenges that arise and how to avoid these barriers.

Sources of the Methodology

Narrative inquiry was the design of this study. The participant's stories and experiences are able to demonstrate the theoretical framework selected for this study. Specifically, *Engaging in Narrative* by D. Jean Clandinin was used to help guide this study. Clandinin pointed out that, "Narrative inquirers attend both to personal conditions and, simultaneously, to social conditions… the cultural, social, institutional, and familial narratives highlight the embeddedness of each individual's experience in particular contexts, as well as in particular times and places" (2016, p51). Utilizing narrative inquiry for this study ensured the experiences and daily routines

of all participants would be displayed in a storytelling, easy to interpret format. Narrative inquiry allows for myself, as well as my audience to "construct, reconstruct, and in some ways reinvent yesterday and tomorrow. Memory and imagination fuse in the process... Memory and imagination supply and consume each other's wares" (Clandinin, 2016, p195).

In addition to Clandinin, Manankil-Rankin, another leader in the field of narrative inquiry, pointed out an additional benefit of using this methodology. She stated, "Narrative Inquiry is a research methodology that enables a researcher to explore experience through a metaphorical analytic three-dimensional space where time, interaction of personal and social conditions, and place make up the dimensions for working with co-participant stories" (2016, p64). Utilizing three different experiences and narratives for my dissertation study enabled my audience to explore character education through different lenses. Furthermore, they can make a connection to the theoretical framework, which relies on interaction and continuity.

Pinnegar and Daynes create a connection between narrative inquiry and the theoretical framework utilized for this dissertation study. They explained that narrative researchers "embrace the assumption that the story is one if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience" (2006, p4). As Dewey draws on human interaction and continuity, narrative inquiry pairs well with this notion providing a narrative to further dissect the two. Pinnegar and Daynes continued, "Narrative researchers might also study the impact of particular narratives on experience... Narrative inquiry embraces narrative as both the method and phenomena of study" (2006, p5). Narrative inquiry allows for the reconstruction of a person, or person's, experiences to have an effect or difference in other's experiences and decision-making processes.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher worked in education for 8 years and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Religious Studies, a Master of Arts in English, and a Master of Arts in Secondary Education. The researcher has experience and prior training in the skills necessary to conduct this study. The researcher has participated in the National Forum on Character Education in Washington, D.C. Since August 2019, she has been responsible for serving as the Program Director for the English Department at a technical higher educational institution. She also serves as the Chair for Institutional Development for the School of Arts & Sciences and the Chair of the Employee Engagement Committee. None of the three participants had a direct relationship with the researcher that would have created a conflict of interest during the study.

Participants

There were three participants in this study. They are all high school Principals in the metro southeastern area representing the Charles County School District. The criteria set forth for the principals is at least three years of experience serving in their role as principal in the high school setting. Charles County was selected as it has a state-wide and nationally recognized character education program. Furthermore, they are ranked at the state level and nationally for standardized state testing scores, SAT scores, and CCRPI (College and Career Readiness Performance Index) scores.

Data Collection

Data were collected via background interview and a follow-up interview. The background interview, consisting of ten questions, prompted participants to reflect over where they gained their knowledge pertaining to character education, why they value it so heavily, and the specific programs, initiatives, tools, and resources utilized to promote consistent character

education and development. The follow-up interview consisted of twelve questions and was geared towards forming connections between all data collected. The follow-up interview was an oral narrative inquiry. This paired with the background interview goes a step further in acknowledging, understanding, and experiencing the lives and experiences of the participants and their interactions with character education through stories.

Stories have the power to shape lives by inspiring others to uphold legacies, promote good, and contribute something of worth. Clandinin added, "Each narrative inquirer needs to engage in such autobiographical narratives as she/he begins a new study… Through that writing, each of us comes to understand, to name, our personal, practical, and social justifications. This work shapes our research puzzles and identifies key narrative concepts and terms" (2016, p89). Significant time was carved out to identify themes, codes, and connections between the participants' experiences implementing character development strategies as well as working through various challenges that have been presented. Included in the appendix located at the end of this chapter are previews of the background interview questions that were completed by the three participants and the concluding follow-up interview questions for this study.

Below is a breakdown of the ten questions included in the background interview, which serves as the first interview for this dissertation study. Underneath each question I have explained the important and relevance to this study.

1. *Please provide a pseudonym for yourself.*

The purpose of this question was to protect participant identity.

2. *How did you come to value character education?*

This question was asked to gain background knowledge and an understanding as to how participants came to value character education on their own since most school districts and

curriculums do not include character education. I was particularly interested in how participants were introduced to character education and why they specifically think it is important to integrate into curriculums.

3. How were you prepared for implementations and integrations of character education?

This purpose of this question was to gain a background on how participants were prepared for the implementation of character education programs within an organization. I was gauging if the participants learned about character education implementations in an educational leadership program or something similar.

4. How do you define effectiveness?

This question was asked to create a level playing field in my findings. I needed to ensure that all participants define and perceive effectiveness using a solid methodology to confirm success had taken place. It was important to identify how each individual participant measured effectiveness.

5. How do you ensure effectiveness of character education at your institution?

The purpose of this question was to gauge how each participant measures the effectiveness of the character education programs implemented in their organization. It was essential to make sure each participant had a plan of action in regards to consistently measuring the effectiveness of their character education initiatives.

6. How do you prepare teachers for character education implementation?

Teachers are an essential role and part of the overall learning community. They arguably spend the most time with students. Therefore, it was important to ask my participants how teachers are prepared and what trainings they receive to support their efforts of implementing character education elements into their pedagogy.

7. How do you determine if teachers are effective in delivering character education?

The purpose of this question was to inquire how effectiveness is measured in regards to teachers. It is important to determine if teachers are being effective in their deliveries of character education and how. What specific strategies are they using and how is success being measured? This must be done somehow to ensure students are benefitting from teachers' efforts of integrating character education.

8. What forms of character education benefit your school culture?

There is a link between school culture and academic and social programs, such as character education initiatives. Therefore, it was important to ask participants to illustrate how character education has an impact on school culture and more specifically, what forms of character education are having this impact.

9. What forms of character education do not benefit your school culture?

Similar to the answer above for number eight, it is equally important to identify which forms of character education are not benefitting the school culture, whether they are inapplicable to the learning organization or they are having a negative effect on the environment.

10. What does character education look like within your organization?

Since character education varies so much, I thought it would be interesting to hear the stories and experiences of how character education looks and plays out within each of the three environments. Realistically, the three environments have multiple differences while all serving as high schools in the same school district. The three perspectives of how character education looks is important to this dissertation study.

This helped me gauge an understanding and begin a narrative over the participant's experiences with implementing character development strategies, as well as the challenges

they have faced. The last measure, the follow-up interview, was used to form connections between data received in the background interview. Both were held in a location that was familiar and comfortable to the participants so they felt welcome to disclose any last information that pertained to this dissertation study.

For the first interview, I used the software, Zoom, to contact each participant. Each participant was in their office at their representative school. Each interview varied in time, with Dr. Williams' interview lasting 47 minutes, Dr. Peter's interview lasting 63 minutes, and Mrs. M's interview lasting 52 minutes. In addition to these interviews being digitally recorded for future transcribing, field notes were also taken. Zoom was also utilized for the follow-up interview. Each participant was at their home during this interview. Dr. William's interview lasted one hour and 32 minutes, Dr. Peter's interview lasted one hour and 12 minutes, and Mrs. M's interview lasted one hour and 44 minutes. This interview was digitally recorded and field notes were taken. Prior to conducting the follow-up interview, I reviewed the district's 34-week character education program. However, no school data was collected for this study.

Post-Activity Data Management

Following the interviews, data were kept safely on my personal iPhone which was password protected. I immediately transcribed each interview electronically after it took place. Over a span of one week, I analyzed data, organized data, and reflected on data. Oftentimes, I would take a break to refocus and think of alternative ways to exhibit the data I received. The electronic versions of the transcripts, on my personal laptop, were deleted after printing multiple copies. After coding each transcript and determining overall themes and connections, the printed transcripts were shredded and thrown away.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed to point out benefits and challenges of implementing character education as well as highlight any patterns that occurred between the participants. "Restorying" was the narrative inquiry analysis approach; three-dimensional space/time was not an approach measured during the study (Clandinin, 2016). Immense time was spent reading through transcripts to generate themes. Themes were coded by hand (color coding) using In-Vivo coding. In-Vivo was the coding of choice to ensure the participant's voices are heard as In-Vivo takes key words and phrases from participants to connect ideas and create themes. Both interviews were analyzed deeply. Codes were color-coded to stay organized and prioritized based off of a culmination of all three studied participants. These codes were used to tell the narratives of the participants and to accurately address the study's research questions. Specific strategies on successful implementations of character development, challenges that potentially arise during this process, and guidance on personalizing character development initiatives are displayed.

The three participants have their own data collection, codes, and analysis. While summarizing the findings, a narrative of each participant is included. Then, information was synthesized and connected for cohesion. I spent ample time listening to interview audiotapes, composing transcripts, and reviewing all materials gained while conducting the two oral interviews. The member checking approach was used to support trustworthiness of findings. Each participant has reviewed and approved of their narratives in the findings section of this dissertation study.

Verification of Interpretation

This study gains credibility as the exact words and experiences of the three participants are displayed to remove as many biases as possible. Using a qualitative method paired with a

narrative inquiry design ensured the experiences, interactions, and continuity of character education initiatives of the participants are described in depth. Allowing the participants to answer an initial, background interview as well as conduct a follow-up interview allowed ample room for the participants to effectively describe their beliefs in and implementations with character education and development.

Validity was gained as the participants lead the information provided in the study, thus making it transferable. I served as an observer only and did not have any direct participation with the delivery or integration of character education within the organizations. In-Vivo coding ensured the exact phrasing and words of the participants' guide the dissertation study as I served as the vessel that delivers the separate and integrated stories of the participants. Each participant filled out an informed consent in the beginning of the study and voluntarily involved themselves after being nominated by their peers. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was gained for this dissertation study to ensure it meets ethical and moral guidelines. The final report reads as a narrative with metaphors and personal stories that aid in developing and implementing strategies of character development while overcoming challenges that may arise in the process.

An assumption surrounding this study is that other educational leaders would be able to mirror or recreate the strategies, methods, and models described in this dissertation study via stories and experiences. The core issue with character development is that it is such a large field that grows larger by the day. All strategies, tools, and resources geared around character development shared in this study do not necessarily benefit all students and their specified needs. Charles County School District has taken the proper time, utilized helpful resources, and included all participants of the learning community (students, staff, faculty, parents, administrators, board members, and other stakeholders) to carefully craft their district's character

education program. Furthermore, the three participants in this study have taken it upon themselves to go a step further and develop and implement routines that target their specific group of students in regard to character development. In addition, the experiences shared by the participants may not fit other individual's personalities or visions for their learning organization.

This study offers findings that fill a gap in the current empirical literature that is available on character education. It does so by focusing specifically on the school principal and how their interactions with developing and implementing character development yields benefits and challenges. These benefits and challenges are explored from the experiences and stories of the high school principals. Current research on character education does not include any aspects of integrating character education into an organization from the educational leader's perspective. Furthermore, current research does not explain educational leaders' role in development and implementations of aspects of character education.

It fails to be the ideal study as capturing data through experiences and stories is not the only way to discuss findings. Some readers of this dissertation study may feel the experiences of my participants are unique to their circumstances and therefore, other individuals (such as themselves) may not interact or have the same experience with character education. Furthermore, this study is demographically bound. The findings from this dissertation study only represent one school district in the metro southeastern area.

Chapter IV: Findings

This dissertation study set out to answer the research question: what do the stories of educational leaders reveal about key strategies and challenges of implementing character education? To answer that question broadly, character education has a lasting impact on students, both academically and socially as they venture into the world to represent themselves. Character education aids in the development of healthy habits and acceptable behaviors to various situations. Character education teaches students how to become effective, successful adults. This does not mean they will have perfect life, but rather they have possessed the skills required to overcome anything life throws their way.

The stories and experiences shared by the participants of this study revealed key strategies and challenges of developing and implementing aspects of character education into a high school environment. Some of those strategies included: positive behavioral reports, in-person interactions, visual aids, and rewards. Some of the challenges included: a lack of collaboration and participation from all members of the learning community and a lack of preparation towards crafting, developing, and implementing individual aspects of character education. Charles County School District was used for this study.

After time and experience playing around with various character development ideas and strategies, all three participants found elements that paired effectively with the developmental needs of their learning organizations. It was trail-and-error as all three of the participants for this study have gone above and beyond the general character education program developed by Charles County School District to ensure as many developmental needs are being met as possible for their unique student body, as well as faculty and staff. It was discovered during this study that it is essential for all members of the learning environment to be included and on-board with a

shared vision and goals towards the implementations of character development for it truly serve successfully.

Charles County School District

Charles County School District (CCSD) is the one of largest school system in the state. The district is responsible for educating over 100,000 students in an extremely diverse, constantly changing suburban environment. The core values of the school district are: achievement, integrity, creativity/innovation, and accountability. CCSD students are required to aspire to the highest level of excellence, demonstrate honesty, consistency, take responsibility for actions, outcomes, and expectations, and should be worthy of trust. They understand and support flexibility and can adapt in keeping up with changes in education and technology. The goals of the district are to: vary learning experiences to increase success in career paths, differentiate resources for areas/schools based on needs, develop stakeholder involvement to promote student success, and recruit, hire, support, and retain employees for the highest levels of excellence. These goals were established in the Strategic Plan for 2018- 2019 as recommendations set forth by the Board and Superintendent.

CCSD was reported accomplishing over an 85% graduation rate by the state's department of education. The district offers six high school magnet programs for advanced studies in: Math, Science, and Technology, International Studies, Engineering and Biotechnology, International Baccalaureate, Performing Arts, and Medical Sciences and Research. The school district also serves as the largest employer in Charles County. Many of Charles County's teachers live in the district, and over 65% of CCSD teachers have earned advanced degrees.

Charles County is unique and stands out amongst other school districts in the state as they have created their own district character education program. The program aims to provide

support to parents and their efforts towards developing strong characters in their children. The district partnered with parents and communities to create a list of words and definitions to help promote good character regardless of political views, race, gender, or religious convictions. These character traits aim at building a strong foundation for success in work and in life.

Charles County Character Education Program

The Charles County Character Education Program is broken into nine major traits: respect, integrity, responsibility, citizenship, compassion, resilience, tolerance, commitment, and accomplishment. The program is set to last 37 weeks and focuses on a more distinct character trait each week under the nine main objectives mentioned above. Every school in the district, regardless of age range, utilizes this program. It aligns with the theoretical framework surrounding this dissertation study, which is Dewey's 1938 theory of experience. This character education program promotes interaction between faculty, staff, students, and parents as well as continuity throughout the grade levels.

Students' SAT scores are among the top state and national averages (Kiel, 2019). The students of Charles County outperformed the state by over 65 points and the nation by an astounding 75 points. Approximately 5,600 students took the SAT. When compared to state test-takers, Charles County demonstrates higher participation. The class of 2019 earned an average SAT score of 1114 out of a possible 1600. This is seven points higher than in 2018. Charles students exceeded the state and national averages in 2017 and 2016 as well. Superintendent Elena Krzak (pseudonym) stated, "Their success is a direct reflection of our team's strategic focus on the achievement of each student" (Kiel, 2019). Charles students are among the leading scorers in the state on the SAT, the state standardized test, and graduation rate.

Charles County schools have also been praised for the district's nationally recognized music education program and students volunteering during the summer months to feeding students and families in need. Five students from the county were named winners of corporate-sponsored National Merit Scholarships. Furthermore, six high school students won National Honor Society Scholarships (Kiel, 2019). The district is dedicated to high achievement both academically and socially, promoting character growth and development alongside academic knowledge.

Participants

There were three participants for this qualitative, narrative inquiry study focusing on the development and implementations of character development education. All three of the participants were principals in a high school setting in the Charles County School District. The participants have more than three years of experience serving in their role of principal. They have exhibited exceptional and consistent leadership in the field of character education. There are two participants that identified as female and one that identified as male. Two of the participants earned a doctorate degree in the field of educational leadership.

The participants created pseudonyms for themselves and their respective schools. A pseudonym was also created for the school district. For purposes of confidentiality, the following names are used to discuss the stories and experiences of the participants: Dr. Williams representing IB High School, Dr. Peter representing S High, and Mrs. M representing the District Leading School. Each school represented in this study has received numerous awards and recognition for their work in the field of character education.

Findings

The research question for this study was what do the stories of educational leaders reveal about key strategies and challenges of implementing character education. The findings support the principal's essential role in the effectiveness of the development and implementation of character education. They play a major role in the delivery and consistency of such programs, setting the tone for their learning organization. When educational leaders value character education, it trickles down into the teachers, staff, and students. It can- and should- also reach out to the parents and community leaders.

Although the three participants described three different ways of integrating aspects of character education into the curriculum, all three utilized the district's character education program as a baseline. The stories and experiences of the participants support the diversity and wide range of character education; different programs and initiatives work for different student populations. Yet, regardless of the individualization of these programs, commonalities were identified between participant's narratives. The power of positive praise and including all members of the learning community were two major themes that arose.

The findings are written in the format of a narrative. After analyzing the transcripts of the interviews, the following common themes emerged: *character education*, *effectiveness*, *school culture*, *vision*, and *leadership*. For each of these themes, I have included correlating responses from each participant. I have included sub-headers that represent the In-Vivo coding method that was done to analyze data collection for each participant's response. This was done to ensure the participants' voices were recognized and valued as their stories and experiences are being shared. Within each major theme, I have pointed out connections between all three of the participants that relate to that theme.

Character education.

Educational excellence. Dr. Williams defined her role as leader as a "blessing". She discussed the rich history of IB High School which includes both academic and character aspects. The "educational excellence and community involvement" have been tied together at IB High School before her role as principal began. Dr. Williams explained, "It was a goal of mine to transition into Charles County as I was familiar with their work in character education. Once I was hired, I decided to continue with expanding student opportunities to excel in both academics and in character. And that is exactly what we've done." She went on to discuss her "amazing team" and the importance of having shared goals and vision. Dr. Williams' passion for character education stemmed from the success she was witnessing from school districts like Charles County, who value, develop, and implement consistent practices of character development. She knew shortly after she had arrived at IB High School that she was going to "be a part of and witness educational excellence on a different level than she had ever been a part of before."

It's all about development. Dr. Peter defined education as a chance to develop. He stated, "It's all about development at the end of the day- developing their minds, choices, knowledge, and skills." His philosophy on education is a mix of two quotes from John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. The first one, from Kennedy, states "Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength for our nation." The second quote being, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character- that is the goal of true education" from King. He has both of these quotes hanging in his office at work and his office at home. Dr. Peter went on to add, "That is why character development is so crucial in the overall

learning and developmental process. Leaving it out has the potential to create a lot of issues down the line- issues that are easier to deal with when students are kids or adolescents."

Emotional intelligence. Mrs. M seemed to be the most data-driven out of the three participants. When asked how to define *effectiveness* and *character education*, she responded with numerical data that represented the District Leading School from the last two academic years. She continued, "There is growing recognition that perhaps the best predictor of future success, both in school and the workplace, is this idea of emotional intelligence." She broke down the biology of a brain and how it works when you are a teenager- "The frontal lobe may not develop until an individual is 25, 26 years old, and this part of the brain is responsible for impulses and decision-making. If we can offer teenagers advice, guidance, and a jump start of securing emotional intelligence, we should not miss that mark." She discussed the benefits she has been exposed to while being a principal in a school environment that values character education. She stated, "You see students transform into responsible, caring mini-adults who are taking accountability and making good choices. Now of course they slip up sometimes and make the wrong choice, but that is where we come in and help their developing brain comprehend."

Connections across participants. Dr. Williams, Dr. Peter, and Mrs. M all related education to building character as interdependent elements of development. As these participants provided definitions and experiences of character education, the three themes of excellence, development, and emotional intelligence emerged. The participants pointed out that one of the major roles of education should be to develop and guide emotion and character at the same rate of academics. These findings address the research question- what do the stories of educational leaders reveal about key strategies and challenges of implementing character education- by identifying a link between 'character' and 'education'. Participants value character education

because it is a major part of the educational journey. The importance of prioritizing character education is the themes that developed- excellence, development, and emotional intelligence. Participants have identified that effective development and implement of character education yields positive results.

Effectiveness.

Service Component. Out of the approximately 2,500 students at IB High School, over 350 are enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program. In addition, around 250 are enrolled in junior ROTC. In defining effectiveness, Dr. Williams highlighted the programs offered at IB High School. She stated, "The effectiveness of these programs, which also serve students in character development, is displayed by the many students who transfer into this district to be a part of these programs. There are a lot of great students who come here specifically for the IB program. Our goal is to continue to build on the service component. I want as many options as possible for students to expand on who they are and develop different skills." She continued to talk about the Advanced Placement (AP) courses and how she plans to encourage more enrollment from the general student population.

"An essential part of leadership is taking the time to recognize the success of others" Dr. Williams explained. She believes effectiveness can also stem from simple compliments. She pointed out the idea that when you make people feel good about themselves and increase their level of confidence, they are encouraged to be effective. Staff and students at IB High School are frequently appreciated on the morning announcements broadcast. Dr. Williams also likes to walk around the school and acknowledge students and teachers for various things. She attends as many classes and sporting events as possible. Each week, she calls one family to praise a student

for their good behavior and accomplishments. She stated, "It never ceases to amaze me how powerful promoting confidence can be."

We do it all. Dr. Peter giggled when asked about effectiveness. He stated, "We do it all, really. Our students are recognized for so many amazing things. I guess that is how I know we are really doing something; we are effective." He went on to proudly brag about S High's students' SAT average from 2019, which was the third highest score in the county. S High students surpassed the state as well as many national scores. S High is in the top three for highest performance on the CCRPI- College & Career Readiness Performance Index- in Charles County. In addition, S High has repeatedly been awarded the State Public School of Excellence and been named a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence. Many students earn scholarships, there are staff achievements, members of National Merit Program and Governors Honors. His proudest moment seemed to be discussing the Advanced Placement (AP) program a S High. He beamed with joy as he said, "I'm really proud of this program. We offer over 20 AP courses and 90% of our students score a 3 or higher on their test at the end. This means they are earning college credit while enrolled in high school."

Dr. Peter made sure I was aware that it did not stop at academics. The S High band has been invited to play at the Macy's Day Parade- the largest parade in the United States- in New York City for Thanksgiving on numerous occasions. The band has also played at the Rose Parade and earned the title of Grand National Champs. He went on to list multiple accolades in fine arts and athletics, such as being a Top 10 Athletic Program in the state. He stopped and pointed out, "Character development has a place with all three- academics, fine arts, and athletics. I think that's why we continue to excel in all three. We have intertwined aspects of

character education into everything they do. For example, those boys know when they put on a S High football jersey, they are representing something bigger than themselves."

Good behavior referrals. "There are a few different ways I could demonstrate how I know we are effective in our delivery of character education, but the first thing that comes to mind is our good behavior referrals" Mrs. M explained. District Leading School faculty & staff are encouraged to report good behaviors at the same rate as bad ones. Mrs. M smiled as she described how successful this initiative has been- "Punishments rarely improve student behavior, especially when students do not even understand the scope of their offensive or when and where they went wrong in the first place." The number of positive referrals has increased significantly while the number of bad referrals has decreased. Recognizing and rewarding good behavior was originally a teacher's idea. Mrs. M encourages her faculty and staff to share ideas and collaborate as professionals. She was "really excited" when this idea hit her desk. The teacher had been implementing this practice in his classroom for a few months and was pleasantly surprised by the positive results. He felt led to share it with Mrs. M in hopes of becoming a school-wide practice.

"Students have been displaying a deep gratitude upon returning to school on Monday, which is so exciting to see and a fantastic way to start the week… it has shifted the paradigm" Mrs. M explained how most of the good behavior referrals are shared with parents at the end of the week on Friday afternoon. Teachers are not forced to participate in the good behavior referral system but the option is available to everyone. Mrs. M added, "Of course some teachers make it a little more difficult than others to earn a positive referral, but it serves as a healthy challenge for our students. We have a lot of evidence that shows praising positive behavior can strengthen positive behavior, immensely." She emphasized *immensely.* Another way Mrs. M defined

effectiveness was as healthy challenges and a student willingness and excitement towards being challenged.

Mrs. M continued, "Much too often, we, as educational leaders, parents, etc. look at positive things and think 'well, that's how they are supposed to act in this situation… why reward it but it is essential to keep those behaviors going… they don't always know they are doing something so exceptionally well. Their brains are still developing and unsure of things, distractions all around them, still so much to learn about life. It is our jobs to lead them and highlight, in hopes of perpetuating, that good. It can truly change the trajectory of their academic careers, far beyond high school." Lastly, in our discussion on effectiveness, she pointed out that the District Leading School is in the top three for SAT point increase for 2019 in the Charles County School District. She aligned character education with academic achievement.

Connections across participants. Effectiveness of character education was described through the experiences of the participants. They recognized effectiveness in the academic, social, and extracurricular achievements of their students. Since character education is a major part of all of those elements, any achievements earned were tied back to character education and the effectiveness of implementation. Participants discussed the importance of making themselves visible and available for faculty, staff, and students. Two of the three participants specifically pointed out their involvement with faculty and students by simply walking the halls and engaging in communication. Another aspect highlighted by two of the three participants is praising positive behaviors. There is not necessarily an object to measure good behavior, like in academia or sports, so the recognition of these traits- that do get one ahead in the real world- are noticed and matter, thus being reinforced. These findings support the research question and the theoretical framework by highlighting the importance of interaction and continuity.

School culture.

All members of the learning community. Dr. Williams constantly encourages all members of the learning community- students, staff, faculty, leadership, board members, community members, and parents- to work together and fully support students by "actively participating" in the school and decisions made regarding the school. Dr. Williams explained, "We have planning days that are designated before the start of a new school year to work together with all members of the learning community to collaborate and put our best foot forward." She discussed the essential importance of parental involvement. As the school year begins, she develops a principal- student advisory board to mostly recognize the success of others. She elaborated on how students love highlighting their peers and celebrating in their accomplishments. Dr. Williams strives to create a real-world simulation in her school culture by implementing various elements, such as dealing with failures and honoring successes, promoting healthy competition, collaboration, working on and with teams, and career-readiness skills.

Working together. Dr. Peter views school culture very similarly to Dr. Williams in the idea that "everyone must be working together, constantly." S High faculty, staff, and community members are expected to work together to create an environment in which students can achieve academic and developmental goals during high school in hopes of continuation in college and their careers. The Academic Support and Enrichment (ASE) program at S High was created to provide students with additional assistance for testing, studying, and overall help with coursework. This program has increased levels of confidence in the school culture. They meet three times a week for thirty minutes each session and faculty, staff, parents, and community members are encouraged to volunteer as mentors. Other enrichment opportunities include: Leadership Club, Math Team, Model UN, Academic Bowl, Peer Helpers, SAT Prep, assistance

with college application process, Yearbook, Newspaper, Career Tech Pathways, and STEM Academy. "There is an opportunity, or many, for each student that increases confidence and self-esteem, which adds to a positive school climate. We want all of the students to feel like they have something they are attached to and involved in," Dr. Peter added.

A school council was also established intending to being the community and school even closer together by collaborating to: solve problems, provide support, improve overall achievement, and bring all member of the learning community together. Dr. Peter also discussed the importance of visuals when discussing school climate. He added, "The first thing you see when you walk through the front door at S High is our Wall of Fame. Students strive to get on this wall as it lists achievements in: SAT/ACT scores, State Journal Constitution Cup Winners, Valedictorians, and so on. Teachers are even motivated and encouraged by our Wall of Fame as it lists past Teachers of the Year and other awards teachers have earned during their service at S High… We are humbled by the history."

Students want to be recognized. Mrs. M stated a large part of the District Leading School's school culture is related to its history. The school campus used to be a college campus. Due to this, students are encouraged to take on a collegiate mindset that urges them to be mature about decisions, such as arriving to class in a timely matter. The realistic display of a college campus helps encourage and connect students with their potential futures of being a college student. An additional aspect of school culture, according to Mrs. M, is student recognition. "Students want to be recognized for the positive things they do," Mrs. M added. She described walking down the hallways and around the school campus as many students approach her with news of good deeds- "They are excited to talk to me and that makes me excited." Recognition is

described as "contagious" as students yearn for positive feedback and reassurance of their decisions. This helps increase the overall morale of the school.

Connections across participants. School culture has a direct impact on pedagogy, morale, and achievement. When teachers feel secure, supported, and an integral part of the school culture, they tend to be more connected to their students, more engaged in the delivery of instruction, and more invested in developing minds and characters. When teachers and students feel more confident about themselves, that boost of self-esteem seeps out into everything they do. Achievement is also positively affected by a strong school culture, as well as a healthy sense of competition and upholding the school's strong reputation. School culture should be representative of the outside world, offering students vast opportunities to gain different skill sets and knowledge. An element essential for building strong school culture is being able to work together as a team to meet shared goals. These findings support the research question by identifying the importance of working together as a team to meet shared goals and ensuring members of the learning community receive positive praise.

Vision.

Learning today for tomorrow's world. Dr. Williams proudly stated, "IB High School is one of the most diverse schools containing one of the best magnet programs in the Charles County School District, as well as the state." Acknowledging her past experiences working in other school districts, she believes IB High School students share in some of the same common issues as students all over the nation, such as dress code and attendance. The school's vision encourages not only students to focus on preparation for tomorrow's world, but also holds leadership, faculty, and staff accountable to meet this shared vision. Leadership, faculty, and staff are constantly encouraged to learn new methods of delivering instruction, attend or host

professional development sessions and/or attend conferences to upgrade and adapt their strategies to properly prepare students for tomorrow's world. The presence of the magnet programs at IB High School encourage many students to constantly challenge themselves and push beyond any barriers faced- "as they may not have that encouragement attending a school that does not offer so many and such opportunities- the same goes for faculty and staff. A standard has been set."

Reaching excellence and climbing higher. Dr. Peter wants to "exceed expectations in everything we do" by providing meaningful advisement to students and parents, provide a flexible, challenging curriculum, encouraging a positive school environment, endorsing the principles of good discipline, and providing an overall valuable high school experience. Furthermore, Dr. Peter pointed out his expectations for students to accept responsibility over their actions and for teachers to feel encouraged and supported. He added, "I try to implement the vision at all times by endorsing and displaying strong, professional ethics and encouraging open communication with the entire learning community so they will be involved in achieving excellence and going beyond." The curriculum at S High is constantly being adjusted and revised to meet the unique needs of the student body to "make sure our kids are college and career-ready when they leave S High."

Higher levels of learning for all. Mrs. M encourages "higher levels of learning" for the entire learning community. She pointed out that this starts with the students, as they are the core, but the vision is not solely limited to them. Mrs. M believes if everyone is working towards achieving high levels of learning, it can only impact the overall school in a positive way. Faculty, staff, parents, and community members are encouraged to participate in many aspects of the school, such as collaborating on school functions. Mrs. M also hopes students would be

encouraged to challenge themselves and "move beyond their comfort zones" by the achievements of notable alumni members from the District Leading School. These alumni members have been successful in: sports, television and film, modeling, the music industry, and political avenues. She wants this "to serve as inspiration that students can be whoever they want to be. Dream big, word hard and achieve greatness. Push yourself."

Connections across participants. Creating a shared vision and ensuring all members of the learning community are on-board is an extremely important piece of the puzzle. When everyone is working towards the same goals, there is a larger chance those goals will be accomplished. A theme recognized amongst the participants is the importance of developing the entire learning community opposed to solely students. When other members of the learning community develop skills and strategies, it directly impacts the experience of the students. It is also essential to set clear standards that everyone understands and agrees with. Standards set the tone and ultimately, encourage success. These findings support the research question by highlighting the importance of collaboration. It can serve as a strategy or a challenge depending on how cohesive the group is.

Leadership.

What is best for my staff and students. Dr. Williams firmly stated her commitment to ensuring IB High School excels as a learning community and as a cornerstone of the overall community. She described her confidence- alongside her faculty and staff- in continuing to make IB High School exceptional in academics and in building character. She added, "It is a personal goal of mine to positively and continuously impact the success and reputation of IB High School… it is fulfilling as I personally possess a true passion for helping others and problem solving through leadership." Her primary focus is decision-making, as "everything starts there."

She added, "I want, have, and need to do what is best for my staff and students." She pointed out the importance of keeping an eye on the little things as they add to the larger things, such as keeping the school in good condition.

Couldn't do it alone. Dr. Peter attributes his leadership style and success to working together and collaborating with others. He stated, "Just because I am the principal does not mean I am making all of the decisions alone. I trust the intellect of my faculty, staff, and parents to help contribute to the overall learning experience of students. I honestly couldn't do it alone; everyone has an important role that they play." He went on to highlight S High's PTSA, which stands for Parent-Teacher-Student Association. They were awarded Outstanding Local PTSA unit and the #1 PTSA by the East Charles Council. There is also a lot of alumni support. S High was named 2020 Best High School based on the rankings from U.S. News & World Report. "A large part of leadership is sharing your time, efforts, and talents with the community. It has yielded extremely positive results for S High," Dr. Peter explained.

Building leadership capacity. Mrs. M promotes leadership in others by demonstrating leadership qualities, serving as a role model, and promoting academic and social growth for students, faculty, staff, and parents. Mrs. M makes time to visit classrooms, host meetings, and speak with parents to talk about building leadership capacities. She added, "I may be the principal of this school but I have expectations of my faculty and staff to serve as leaders daily and constantly contribute any ideas for improvement, even if the idea is not fully worked out yet. That is why I am here, alongside my leadership team, to help make it work for our students and our school."

Connections across participants. Leadership does not always fall solely on the school principal. Although leading others is ultimately their responsibility, part of being a strong leader

is allowing others to lead. When you allow others to lead, you are truly encouraging and creating an environment of achievement and success. All of the participants discussed promoting leadership traits in their faculty, staff, students, and parents. These findings support the research question by identifying the importance of all members of the learning community. A key strategy of implementing character education is establishing and working collaboratively towards shared goals.

Summary

Findings supported the research question by identifying two major key strategies of effective character implementation. These key strategies are the power of positive praise and involving all members of the learning community by establishing shared goals. These strategies, when not implemented correctly, can serve as a challenge as well. Effective implementation of these strategies relies on a strong educational leader who has a firm understanding of the unique needs of their organization. Major themes that emerged from the findings include: character education (excellence- knowledge- emotional intelligence), effectiveness, school culture, vision, and leadership.

Findings also supported the findings from the literature review and the theoretical framework. The character education initiatives implemented in these schools are designed to develop the citizen by integrating a complex set of psychological characteristics that motivate students, faculty, and staff to act as moral agents, returning to Berkowitz definition of character education. It is a deliberate attempt to promote development. Similar to the literature review, this study's findings supported character education's relationship to: mirroring real-life experiences, promoting positive conflict resolution, promoting accountability and responsibility, strengthening school culture, academic growth, and demonstrating an increase in positive

behaviors. Unlike the literature review, participants did not discuss the relationship between

character education and other state mandates, such as standardized testing, or the lack of

preparation for teachers and/or leaders in implementing character education. In order for the

character education strategies to be effective within these organizations, participants spoke about

the importance of being hands-on and consistent, supporting Dewey's theoretical framework

relying on continuity and interaction.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Character education is a growing field with new discoveries being made frequently. There is a growing body of evidence in support of developing and implementing character education in K-12 settings. It can be paired with academic curriculum to enhance: communication skills, resilience, conflict management, collaboration, anger management, and college and career-readiness (Bond, 2016). Real-life scenarios should be acknowledged and taught alongside academic knowledge to create a well-rounded, wide variety of skill sets in students.

Character education is oftentimes grouped with Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Although it is related and can be classified to a degree as such, it is also its own entity (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017). The goal of character education is to enhance and better prepare the entire character of an individual to achieve more success personally, socially, emotionally, professionally, and academically. The main issue with understanding and implementing character development education is its vastness. There are hundreds of character education programs, resources, models, initiatives, and tools one can select to implement in their organization. Finding the right resources and tools- or creating your own- to utilize, further develop, and implement to meet the unique needs of a student, and faculty, population is no easy feat. It takes recognizing a keen sense of the social climate and culture of the organization, a deep looking-into, past the levels of academia (Berkowitz & Bier, 2017).

One of the two main focuses on K-12 education right now, particularly in high schools, is standardized state testing and implementing more technology into the learning process (Bond, 2016). Although these are valuable aspects to a degree, they take most- if not, all- of the priority

in planning, budgeting, and strategic plans for the academic year. Unless a school or school district makes character education a daily priority, it is more than likely not happening within their organization. Ironically enough, effective implementations of character education can have a significant impact on standardized state testing and integrating more technology into the classroom.

One of the many responsibilities of school leadership, particularly the principal, is to identify the academic and personal needs of their faculty, staff, and students (Wilkens & Wilmore, 2015). Granted, there are mandates and various elements to inevitably add in to that list of priorities, they're tasked with figuring it all out and putting it into action. This dissertation study aimed at identifying how three exceptional high school principals develop and implement aspects of character development into their schools, consistently and effectively. The strategies and tools that yield positive results were shared as well as some challenges faced along the way.

Participants

The participants for this dissertation study were three high school principals in the southeastern-area who were demonstrating consistent, effective developments and implementations of character education into their schools. More specifically, the three principals, one male and two females, were all high school principals in the Charles County School District. One obtained her Educational Leadership certificate, and the other two earned a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. They all served in their roles of principal for more than three years. One participant is retiring from her position as principal within the next five years.

The Charles County School District was chosen for this dissertation study as it has developed its own character education program and encourages educational leaders to build on it to meet the needs of their individual school. Character education is truly valued within this

school district. Charles County students have benefitted greatly from the implementations of daily character education curriculum. Charles high schools are ranked state-wide and nationally in regards to SAT, the State Milestones State Standardized Assessment, and CCRPI (College and Career Ready Performance Index).

Research Question Answered

The research question for this study was: what do the stories of educational leaders reveal about key strategies and challenges of implementing character education?

Key strategies. The stories of educational leaders, specifically high school principals, revealed that a strategy in developing and implementing effective character education into a learning environment relies on selecting the right initiatives for the members of the specific organization. Character development and education must be personalized to meet the needs of the students, faculty, and staff. It is also increasingly important that parents, board members, district leaders, and community members are also on-board with the character curriculum to reinforce expectations and acceptable behaviors.

Another strategy recognized from this study in regard to implementing character education was the importance of involving all members of the learning community in the decision-making process for how the character curriculum will look and be delivered to students. The stories and experiences of the participants demonstrate how this is a crucial stage of the development process. When these members of the learning community come together, the character curriculum is enriched with various aspects of real-word situations. Furthermore, there is constant reinforcement of what is expected from students.

The last strategy for implementing character education was the power of positive praise. From the participants' stories and experiences, positive praise seemed to be the number one thing

that turned students from demonstrating bad behaviors to now considering and trying to obtain

positive feedback. Positive praise helped students recognize the effects of their behaviors far

more than any negative referrals or suspicions. Positive praise not only has a lasting, strong

impact on student behavior but also positively impacts the overall learning environment when

extended to faculty and staff.

Challenges. The main challenge of implementing character education, gleaned from this

study, was the same as the strategy. Charles County School District is unique in the way of

developing a district-wide character education program that gives educational leaders firm

ground to stand on. This general framework provides direction and allows room for future

integrations and adaptations. This is important so principals can add in or take away elements

that contribute positively or negatively to their student population. Yet, still- in working to

personalize character education to meet the unique needs of the organization, trial-and-error is

used to try out different ideas and initiatives- "What is needed is more systematic research on

specific strategies and meta-analyses of the studies included in the various reviews. While there

is substantial research on a very small set of individual strategies (e.g., service learning, moral

dilemma discussion, cooperative learning), most of the strategies are only studies as part of

multifaceted character education initiatives" (Berkowitz and Bier, 2017, p48). Principals must

prioritize character education and have a firm understanding of the needs of their organization.

Discussion

The development and implementation of character education programs varies by

institution and more importantly, by educational leader(s). Although there are some common

themes that emerge- *collaboration, vision, excellence, culture*- this is an individualized process

that requires a leadership aware of the needs of the organization. This education leader should be

flexible, visible, and reliable. This study yielded findings that support positive praise and collaboration as key elements of effective development and implementation of character education.

An interesting feature of the findings was the benefits of implementing character education were also identified as potential challenges when addressed incorrectly or neglected. Participants described their experiences learning the process of implementing effective character development by trial-and-error Thus, discovering the importance of collaboration, community, (positive) communication, and consistency. The findings of this study aligned with the existing literature highlighted in chapter two. The findings mirror the results of the pilot studies mentioned, as well as much of the advice put forth by Berkowitz. Integrating positive praise and including all members of the learning community also connect with Dewey's theoretical framework, which relies on interactions and continuity.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on this dissertation study and its findings, there are four proposed recommendations for practice. They include:

- praising positive behavior/ implementing positive behavior initiatives
- identifying consistent implementation of character education can have a positive impact on assessments, such as the SAT
- the importance of ensuring all members of the learning community (students, staff, faculty, administration, board members, parents, and community members) are on-board with the shared vision and are working cohesively to develop/implement aspects of character education

- the importance of praising faculty and staff at the same rate as positive praise for the students. These recommendations, if implemented, should yield positive results within any learning organization over a short period.

Praising positive behavior has the power to change the trajectory of a student's academic career. When praising positive behavior, it encourages students to reproduce that behavior to receive the same results. It is important that students understand that positive behaviors can be recognized alongside the referrals for negative behavior. With this dissertation study, it was observed that students respond extremely well to positive praise. Not only does the praise increase self-esteem, it encourages the students to continue to make good choices. It creates a healthy environment of competitiveness as other students will want to receive the same level of positive praise. It also brings together the faculty, administration, and students as they can celebrate common ground. It increases teacher morale as they can share with parent's positive traits of their student rather than only communicating with parents in regard to something negative; thus, also strengthening the relationship with the parents.

As another recommendation for practice, it is important to point out that character education has the strong potential to have a positive impact on various assessments, such as the SAT. With this study, students did exceptionally well on their SAT assessment when receiving constant and consistent character education and development. When students' characters are enhanced by education, they tend to take more responsibility over their actions and more accountability of their educational path. Many schools offer and may enforce SAT Prep courses but without character education, it typically overwhelms and intimidates students. Once students learn various character traits, such as striving for success, handling failures, and calming anxieties, they have a much better chance at focusing and producing successful scores.

It is essential to get everyone in the learning community on-board and ensure they have a shared vision (and shared goals) towards developing and implementing character education into an organization. With parents, staff members, faculty, administration, board members, and community members all on the same page, students have a greater chance of achieving success, in whatever form that may be. Character education and important character traits will be constantly reinforced for the students with everyone working towards the same outcome. There will not be any contradictions or confusion for the student when faced with a decision. With everyone sharing the same expectations for the student, it further leads the student in the right direction and helps them have a keen sense of direction beyond the high school setting.

The last recommendation for practice is to provide praise to faculty and staff at the same rate as the students. Although the students are the focus and were considered the most for the purposes of this study, it has been discovered that there is also great importance in providing praise for the adults in the learning environment. When the teachers and staff are recognized for the great things that they do, that energy trickles down to the students. Faculty and staff not only have the ability to serve as fantastic role models that the students can model but providing positive praise also increases the confidence-level and morale of the teachers. For authentic, engaging instruction to be delivered to students in a meaningful way, it is essential that the teachers feel valued and appreciated within their organizations. It also shows students that good behavior continues to be recognized and rewarded throughout adulthood and in a professional career.

Recommendations for Research

This dissertation study has two recommendations for future research. The field of character education needs more thorough and thoughtful empirical literature. It is essential to

complete these studies so the potential power of character education can be shared with others in hopes of integrating it into more school curriculums. The two recommendations for future studies include proposing/investigating ways to make character education more user-friendly and researching and offering more ways for the community at large to be involved in the overall process.

Since character education is such a large field and there are so many resources and programs that schools and school districts can rely on, it is essential to understand that every program will not meet the needs of your student population. Research should consider ways to help lead school administrators and district leaders through the process of crafting, developing, integrating, and choosing the best resources and character development aides to meet the needs of their student population while also considering their faculty and staff. This process can be overwhelming and difficult without any resources available on how to get started. The state does not mandate any policies or initiatives regarding character education. Administrations are provided detailed plans on preparing for a standardized test or implementing new technology, but school leaders are left to navigate development and implementations of character education on their own. With so many other elements to prioritize, character education usually gets pushed down the list, if not removed altogether with.

Educational leaders need support and guidance as they navigate through the various elements of character education. Determining which program or groups of strategies are the most comprehensive for a unique student population is essential to the success of character education programs. Different instruments, such as a survey or flow chart, could be created to increase participation and integrations of character education as educational leaders would have a foundation to follow and build on. Breaking character education down into primary groups and

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subgroups could help educational leaders navigate through different processes and procedures to identify what aspects of character education would work for their school culture. Making the process of exploring character education more user-friendly will encourage others to incorporate it into their academic curriculums.

The second recommendation for future research askes for more ways the community members can become involved in character education at their local schools. There are many potentially beneficial relationships that can be formed between the school and the community, particularly with high school students. Community members should have more information on what is going on at their local schools and how they can help prepare students for the real world. Businesses should be given information on how they can partner with the schools to better prepare students for the transition of going to college or joining the work force. Businesses could also begin to create trusting relationships with high school students that may be able to intern or come back to their businesses after gaining a college degree, thus teaching students the importance of and how to properly network.

The overall effectiveness of a character education program may be increased by the relationships that are formed with the community the school serves. Although the students' home life and parents/guardians are the ultimate key to developing strong character, each and every individual plays a part in promoting character as a basis for success that will inevitably feed back into the society we are all a part of. Qualities of a strong character should begin at home, be reinforced at school, and should permeate throughout the community. If future research supports this claim and commits to such an effort, the overall character of communities will shift towards the good. Considering the current state of our nation and the entire world due to COVID19, racial injustices, and environmental issues, we should thirst for such change.

Summary

The stories and experiences of the participants developing and implementing character education support multiple ideas: it takes collaboration, trial-and-error is necessary, positive praise works wonders, include all members of the learning environment, and be consistent and visible. Character education has the potential to significantly impact not only students but entire learning communities in beneficial ways. Partnerships form between: students and teachers, administration and students, administration and teachers, students and businesses- thus promoting collaboration and growth. If character education is promoted and for the most part, mastered, within schools across the nation- across the world- imagine the impact on the way society would function.

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Appendix A

Background Interview Questions

Background Interview Questions

1. Please provide a pseudonym for yourself: _____

2. How did you come to value character education?

    _____

    _____

    _____

3. How were you prepared for implementations and integrations of character education?

    _____

    _____

    _____

4. How do you define effectiveness?

    _____

    _____

    _____

5. How do you ensure effectiveness of character education at your institution?

    _____

    _____

    _____

6. How do you prepare teachers for character education implementation?

    _____

    _____

    _____

7. How do you determine if teachers are effective in delivering character education?

_____

_____

_____

8. What forms of character education benefit your school culture?

_____

_____

_____

9. What forms of character education do not benefit your school culture?

_____

_____

_____

10. What does character education look like within your organization?

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for completing this initial survey! All responses will be used only for the purposes of completing a dissertation study that highlights the relationship between character education programs and student academic, social, and personal development. This survey will be followed with a follow-up interview.

Appendix B

Follow up Interview

Follow up Interview

Thank you so much for your participation in this dissertation study!

All answers recorded in this follow-up interview will only be used for data collection and analysis for the dissertation study. This interview will be recorded with a tape-recorder in order to return to your answers and write-up a transcript for further analysis. Findings will be presented using the pseudonym you have provided in the initial survey completed at the beginning of this study. Please feel free to elaborate as much or as little as you would like for each question. There are 12 questions in this follow-up interview.

Thank you again so much for your time, willingness, and passion for character education!

Interview Questions

1. How do you create a shared vision towards character education with your faculty and staff?

2. How do you get students onboard with this vision?

3. How is the vision communicated to students, faculty, staff? For example, is it done at the beginning of the school year?

4. How do you define character education?

5. How do you determine what works/is beneficial to the unique needs of your organization?

6. How is data collected in regards to character education implementations and integrations?

7. How much time is dedicated to character education initiatives in your building?

8. What resources are used for character education programs?

9. How do you personalize character education to meet the needs of your school culture?

10. What impact does character education have on your school culture?

11. Are any additional members of the learning community (i.e. parents and/or stakeholders) involved in the character development and education process?

12. Is there any additional information you would like to share regarding the field of character education?