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

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

Introduction

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

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

Timelines reveal that since the 1990's school shootings have happened every year. Not all school shootings are listed on the timeline. On October 9, 2006, a 13 year-old student walked into a Joplin, Missouri middle school carrying an assault rifle and fired one shot. Luckily this situation was handled quickly and no one was injured. However, the site of the Joplin shooting was approximately one hour from the school where I, the researcher, was employed. Likewise, the impact of the 1998 Jonesboro incident is important because Jonesboro, Arkansas, is approximately 200 miles from my school district within the geographical area where this study was conducted and is less than a 4-hour drive. Shootings in schools continue throughout America. On Feb. 10, 2012, a 14-year-old student shot himself in front of 70 fellow students. As recently as February 27, 2012 at a high school, a 17 year old student shot and killed three students and injured six others (U.S. News, 2008). Violence being displayed in schools has been linked to long-term bullying and social ostracism. Bullying in schools is escalating and becoming a key concern throughout the nation. "No school is free from the pervasive problem of peer aggression and bullying" (Cornell & Mayer, 2010, p. 10). Schools are recognizing how widespread bullying is and how serious the consequences for those who are the victims and those who victimize others (Espelage, Swearer, Hymel, & Vaillancourt, 2010). In addition to school bullying another concern was cyber-bullying among school-age children. Technology and social media have given both victims and perpetrators an additional way to interact (Willard, 2007). My concerns over the possibility of school violence and bullying occurring in my school district escalated after the school shooting incidents in neighboring districts. I wondered if my new students and their families would have similar feelings. As I made inquiries of the teachers I would be working with in the Fall of 2005, my unease grew when I received confirmation from the teachers that, in their opinion, discipline was out of control. Because of my concerns and the expressed concerns of the teachers, we began to search for strategies to reduce the potential of school violence within the school where I would be serving as principal.

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

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

Background of the Study

School procedures have changed as a result of school shootings. Now schools must have a crisis procedure in place in case of school shootings or other forms of violence occur. Likewise, schools are looking for ways to improve school climate and ways to educate students in character traits that help ensure fewer incidents of violence. Researchers say attitude and character can have a great impact on the school environment (Lunenburg & Bulach, 2005; Murphy, 1998; Ryan, Bohlin, & Thayer, 1996; Shriver & Weissberg, 2005; Tatman, Edmondson, & Slate, 2009). Negative attitudes can become contagious among students because "contagious youth culture of academic negativism and misconduct can thwart learning and disrupt the school routine" (Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999, p. 99). In the school environment, those attitudes can spread quickly throughout the student population becoming difficult to correct before they result in heinous behavior. Researchers have shown that school climate improves when character education programs are implemented (Murphy, 1998). Implementing a character education program that is carefully organized can have positive results on student behavior as Bennett (1991) indicated that, "If we want our children to possess the traits of character we most admire, we need to teach them what those traits are" (p. 133). Character can have a positive effect individually and on the student population as a whole.

"Most Americans will tell you that character education is a good idea. According to pollsters, 90% of us want schools to teach core moral values" (Matera, 2001, p. 191). This study is important because the educators teach to reach the whole child and part of meeting the needs of the whole child is incorporating universal character education traits within the curriculum. Adults serve as role models for students with whom they interact (Tatman, et al., 2009). Teaching these traits is an integral part of education because not all students are exposed to the same behaviors at home that are expected in public schools. "While the development of a child's character is clearly not the sole responsibility of the school, historically and legally schools have been major players in this arena" (Ryan, 1993, p. 16). Because of that understanding, "Teachers, administrators, and even parents resonate to the idea of teaching the students the core values deemed essential for cultural survival" (Lasley, 1997, p. 654). Violence that once seemed to be

nonexistent within the educational system has appeared more frequently during middle school age children than in the past. "The dramatic increase in the prevalence of problem behaviors during adolescence is a national concern" (Simons-Morton, et al., 1999, p. 99). Schools are not seen as the *safe* places they were in the past.

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

Theoretical Framework

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

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

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

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

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

Working with all of the research and studies mentioned here, my research has shown that character education not only impacts school culture and security, but can also have a positive impact on attendance, academic achievement, and discipline referrals. This study is important to the field of character education to reflect that character education has benefits beyond creating an environment that improves the well-being, both physically and mentally, of the students involved. This research shows that character education is an important part of the education system. This study starts from the implementation stage and provides a guide through each step of the implementation process of a character education program. This research is both significant and relevant to educators, the community, and the parents. This research serves as an effective tool for making positive changes through character education. This research has advanced understanding of character education's importance to student success and adds to previous studies by providing knowledge useful to the implementation of character education programs.

Implementation of Character Education Research and Theories

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

Within Dr. Lickona's view of character education, 10 essential virtues exist that he feels are universal and can easily be focused on without crossing the lines of culture, philosophy, and religion. Wisdom, fortitude, love, justice, gratitude, positive attitude, hard work, self-control, integrity, and humility are the 10 that Dr. Lickona speaks about.

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

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

I

Impact of Character Education Programs

Character education can be evaluated and researched in several ways. In this section, the focus will be on how character education effects attendance, academics, and discipline referrals.

Decrease the Numbers of Discipline Referrals

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

The Center for the Fourth and Fifth R's addresses *character-based discipline* this discipline by the students with sound values are skillful at resolving conflict without resorting to physical violence. If we teach students not only to solve problems on paper but also to solve problems with peers, then we are providing them with the tools to be successful (Lickona, 2003). At an intermediate school in the southwest region, discipline referrals decreased by 50%. At another middle school in the northwest area, discipline referrals were reduced from 100 to 35 per month (Devine, Ho Seuk, & Wilson, 2000).

Improve School Attendance

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

Increases in Academics

"A growing body of research supports the notion that high-quality character education can promote academic achievement," (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006, p. 449). Several programs claim an increase in academic performance when character education is part of the curriculum. Child Development Project, Peaceful Schools Project and the Seattle Social Development all claim to link character education to an increase in academics (Benninga et al., 2006). Berkowitz and Haynes give examples that show that character education is having a positive effect on academic success (Berkowitz & Haynes, 2007). They relate the success of a

small middle school in the Midwest where new administration brought a character education program into the school and had an increase in academic performance (Berkowitz & Haynes, 2007). "Academic performance is up, disciplinary referrals are down by more than 70%, and the students failure rate has dropped to zero" (Berkowitz & Haynes, 2007, p. 13A).

Changes Within the School Culture

Dr. Berkowitz believes that character education is more than just a program; character education is a change in the culture and the life within a school. Most character education programs recommend a holistic approach to character education. A holistic approach involves everyday aspects of school, as well as support from parents and community. Within this approach, character education is considered part of the curriculum, everyday lessons, and part of every activity within the school system. Teaching values in every subject is important so that the students can recognize the expectations of good character, and how those expectations are recognized and implemented (Elkind & Sweet, 2004). Taking a holistic approach helps to make the students aware of the importance of character attributes, and allows them to gain ownership of the program since they are able to see that good character is expected in every aspect of life (Elkind & Sweet, 2004).

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

Improvement in Mental Health

So many children today feel as if they have no control over their lives because they do not know how to deal with people or issues. This feeling often leads to students accepting whatever happens to them. Both parents and educators realize the importance and understand other aspects of our children's school experience that matter (Cohen, 2006). Educating students and focusing on student's mental health, social emotional learning, and character education is critical. Mental health can play a vital part in helping children learn and develop in healthy ways. "There are over 300 empirical studies that support the notion that when schools make these core processes integral facets of school life, student achievement increases and school violence decreases" (Cohen, 2006, p. 7). "President Bush's act No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which drives today's educational policy and practice, is filled with rhetoric about the importance of character education and school climate" (Cohen, 2006, p. 2).

According to a study conducted by several institutions, including Stanford Research Institute and Harvard University, "One's attitude, degree of motivation, and people skills constitute eighty-five percent of the reasons people get ahead and stay ahead. One's skills or expertise constitute only fifteen percent of the reasons" (McElmeel, 2002, p. 170). If students

believe in themselves, they are much more likely to achieve success. When a student comes to class with a positive outlook and an attitude that he can accomplish anything, then anything can be accomplished (McElmeel, 2002). McElmeel's work took 17 character traits and linked them to books and stories that re-enforced the meaning and application of each trait (McElmeel, 2002). The researchers show, as follows, that character education programs can be successful. Many programs were researched by Berkowitz and Bier, where they looked for common practices and common outcomes from the programs and research available.

Research Findings and Issues

According to Murphy, children reflect what they see in society, and through their reflections, we see the reflections of ourselves (Murphy, 2003). That disturbing image has caused schools in increasing numbers to unite in order to return to the ideals that education should also form good character (Murphy, 2003). Although teachers have been teaching an informal type of character education since public education was introduced, today character education has become even more necessary as a formal part of the curriculum. Thus, character education is a relevant topic on the forefront within journals and academic research. Research shows that character education programs do have a significant effect on student's behavior, when implemented effectively (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). One school reportedly experienced success in helping students and staffs possess a more positive outlook (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2003). After noticing an ever-increasing decline and pessimism in the attitudes of students, this school decided to implement a character education program. For two years, this school implemented several changes with the hopes of seeing a more positive attitude from students and faculty (Lickona et al., 2003). Likewise, a 2000 report on South Carolina's four year Character Education initiative, which is a pilot program funded by the United States Department of Education, related that school attitudes improved 91% (Lickona et al., 2003).

Character education programs raise countless questions concerning the impact of the program. For example, what guidelines are available to judge whether a character education program works? Are standards required to be reached before a program is deemed successful? However, the question most frequently asked is, "Does Character Education work" (Berkowitz & Bier 2004, p. 74). That is in and of itself is not the correct question to ask. That question will be hard to answer until more research addresses the topic. Countless programs label themselves character education that such a generic answer is difficult to give. The effectiveness of the initiative to incorporate character will have to reflect how the initiative impacts students as they become global citizens (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). "Character education can work, but its effectiveness hinges upon certain characteristics" (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, p. 74).

Summary of Review of Literature and Conclusion

Daily Lickona's statement concerning "a crisis of character" is seen to be true (Lickona, 1994, p. 1). Moral development theorists, educational researchers, and educators agree that character education is an important part of the development and education process. This belief has led to research studies, such as this one, to see how character education was an integral part of development and the education process. This study was based on work previously done to see how character education impacts attendance, academics and discipline incidents. As stated, character education was one part of the original curriculum present in the colonial and American

schools until the beginning of the twentieth century. Today education is focused on content curriculum only. However, teachers are finding that they need to help young people gain important knowledge concerning important character traits and their use to assist students in becoming good citizens (Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov, 2007).

Research Design

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

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

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

Researcher's Role

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

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

Researcher's Theoretical Lens

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

Data Analysis

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

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

Reliability and Validity

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

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

An extensive and comprehensive process of data collection has been provided by this qualitative research study. Using a triangulation of surveys, documents related to attendance, academics, and discipline, and data from the state department. The data collection identified trends and major themes within the study. The theoretical framework and data collection provided the progress of the data analysis. Lastly, the research design and analysis have provided a foundation for the study.

Summary of the Findings

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

Conclusion and Recommendations

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

Summary

The review of literature refers to "a crisis of character" that is having an impact on our nation. Character education is a popular tool that educators utilized to address the crisis within the education system. The goal of the study was to see if character education could produce positive results in regards to attendance, academics, and discipline. The review of literature explained that the education system has focused on content curriculum only in the 20th century, and that changes needed to be made to address character in schools. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was seen as content curriculum driven, and the standardized test score requirements, such as Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) tests, were seen as directly linked to the requirements of NCLB. An important question seems to be how character education could impact the rigorous standards of No Child Left Behind legislation.

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

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

Interpretation of the Data

This study revealed the impact of character education on attendance, academics, and discipline at Greyson Middle School. In order to see how the character education impacted those results, the pre-implementation, implementation, and post-implementation processes and applications were analyzed to reveal how the program impacted attendance, academics, and discipline.

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

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

Program Recommendations

The researcher reveals that character education provides positive results when implemented consistently. Eleven program recommendations were uncovered. (1) Create a needs assessment or survey to understand the climate of the building. Creating a survey to understand the students, parents and community member's perspective and gain insight to their needs is beneficial. (2) Create a committee that involves all stakeholders and share results of the surveys in order to make a data driven decision of the type of program that is needed for your school and community. (3) Build awareness and educate all stakeholders so they understand the need and purpose of such a program. (4) Choose a character education program that embraces the needs of your school and community. (5) Provide training for all involved in implementing the program. (6) Have multiple leaders and involve the students throughout the entire process. (7) Get the program visible throughout the community and get the community involved in implementing the program as well as throughout your school. (8) The committee should create goals and create a

plan to carry out those goals (9) Hold staff accountable for implementing the program (10) Continuous evaluation and monitoring of the program (11) Sustainability so the program will continue when staff changes and new students enter building.

The use of a survey enables leaders preparing a character education program to identify the common concerns from the view of staff, students, parents and community members. Involvement of staff, students, parents, and community leaders develops a stakeholder ownership through all stages of implementation. Creating a committee to make decisions concerning character education programs reinforced the feeling of ownership. Building awareness for the need of a character education and communicating the positive results allowed stakeholders and community members to understand the need for a character education program and the positive results the program can provide. Researching character education programs to identify the themes for each community and stakeholders is important. If no program can be embraced by all stakeholders, then creating a character education program that satisfies all stakeholders is an option. All stakeholders including, students should be included when developing a vision.

Based on my research, I found this program has provided the school with strategies that support increased attendance, academics, and discipline. The research will be valuable as schools look for programs to help with positive behavior, attendance, and academic strategies. This study is important because educators must teach and reach the whole child. By teaching the universal character traits within the curriculum, assists with meeting whole child's needs. This study is relevant to the research of the effectiveness of character education because of the timeframe implemented and the evaluation of all the stages. The evaluation of the project through all stages will be helpful to principals, teachers, and others who are involved in the selecting and implementing a character education program.

Recommendations for Further Research

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

In addition, researchers should examine the extent of training for character education prior to implementation and to examine to what extent the staff is onboard with implementing the program. Another recommendation would be to conduct more research on the implementation stages of character education programs. Finally, the role that community leaders, teachers, and parents have on the character education of students' needs to be further researched. Research also needs to address how their roles and actions impact student discipline,

academics, and attendance both with and without the application and use of a character education program.

Conclusions

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

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

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

1. The character education awareness initiative did have a positive impact on student attendance at Greyson Middle School.
2. Discipline incidents significantly declined in the total number of incidents with the exception of the transfer of leadership year (2010) when the discipline incidents returned to a high number.
3. MAP scores positively increased in the total number of proficient/advanced scores in all grade levels of the Communication Art scores until the transfer of leadership. The math scores show constant decreasing and increasing and do not reflect any consistent pattern.

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

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