Character Education as a Bridge from Elementary to Middle School:
A Case Study of Effective Practices and Processes

Ruba Khoury
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, U.S.A.

This qualitative single-case study illuminates the significance of effective character education implementation during elementary school years as students transition into middle school. The researcher conducted the study in an American school that consisted of two divisions: K-6 lower division and 7-12 upper division. The lower-school division was a National School of Character winner. Data were collected via individual interviews with educators in both school divisions, one focus-group interview with lower-school teachers, and a review of documents and artifacts. Findings revealed distinctive key practices and processes based on the different roles of participating educators and shared key practices employed by all educators alike. Data also revealed multiple indicators of effectiveness in both school divisions. The researcher also highlighted the main challenges in the way of character education effective implementation based on participants' responses. The researcher concluded with recommendations for further study and final reflections.

Background of the Problem

Being morally competent, or having the desire to do what's right, is strongly related to good character (Park & Peterson, 2006). Lickona (1991) described *good character* as applying principles such as respect for others, fairness, responsibility, and truthfulness on a constant basis when faced with ethical or behavioral choices. Sojourner (2012) indicated that *good character* is related to positive behaviors and virtues, as opposed to *bad character* that is related to negative vices or behaviors. The current terminology refers to the term *character* as it relates to positive behaviors or virtues.

In a 1948 speech at Morehouse College, Martin Luther King, Jr. emphasized the significance of the role of education in developing students' intelligence and character; he said, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically…. Intelligence plus character…. That is the true goal of education" (Excerpted from Morehouse College Student Paper by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1947). Over the years, character education "has been linked to school climate which, in turn, has been associated with positive behavior, improved attendance, and higher academic achievement as measured by various state assessments" (Hough, 2011, p. 137). There have been different perspectives among researchers in regards to the impact of character education. Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) argued that character education has little impact on student achievement, which is partially attributed to the differences between the goals of academic achievement and those of character education. On the other hand, Berkowitz and Bier (2005a) pointed out that effective character education promotes academic success. Furthermore, Lovat, Clement, Dally, and Toomey (2011) indicated that character education helps improve students' self-awareness and social interaction among peers in the school setting; and so, with an enhanced learning environment, students' academic achievement improves as well. Berkowitz and Bier (2007) specified that effectively implemented character education has a robust impact on student development; it positively and effectively

impacts a "range of risk behaviors, a set of pro-social competencies, various school outcomes including academic achievement, and social-emotional competencies" (p. 42).

Moreover, Berkowitz and Bier (2005a) argued that one of the reasons effective character education should be included in schools' curricula is that it cannot be avoided anyway. Damon (1988) stated, "Morality cannot be excluded from the classroom, no matter how hard one tries. It is part of the very fabric of schooling" (p. 131); therefore, schools, educators, and staff cannot avoid influencing the development of their students' character for better or for worse. The California Department of Education (2015) stated that upon the integration of character education into the school curricula, character becomes an essential part of the school climate, where school becomes a safer place. Schools that implement character education and integrate it into their educational culture find a noticeable decrease in anti-social behavior and a noticeable increase in student academic achievement (England, 2009). With the wide consensus that it is imperative for schools to contribute to the character formation and moral development of students, 80% of the states in America currently have mandates pertaining to character education (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008).

Adolescents and Character Education

While significant attention was given to moral and character education for elementary schools in the last few decades, not much attention was given to higher age groups, including the middle school level (Hildebrandt & Zan, 2014). Young adolescents' ambiguity regarding ethical and moral choices increases during middle school years (Nucci & Powers, 2014) as they experience critical physical, emotional, and social changes (Russell & Waters, 2014). Therefore, it is essential that schools take into consideration the effective implementation of character education, in order to smooth young adolescents' transition into adulthood with the least complications possible (Wagner, 2008). Good character traits are vital for students to develop before graduating from middle school in order to build better decision-making skills; hence, today's middle school students need an advanced character development intervention (Wagner, 2008). Tapper (2007) indicated that character education implementation in middle schools had a profound impact on students' behavior and school climate. An effective character education program provides the support young adolescents need to efficiently deal with life issues before problems emerge, as opposed to intervening after they fall into bad decisions (Battistich, 2008).

As appears in more detail under the Literature Review section below, research implies a high need for effective character education implementation in middle school settings due to the impact it has on middle schoolers' social behavior and on the general middle school climate. The challenges are directing the focus toward teachers' pay for performance and standardized test requirements, giving less priority to character education in schools, hindering "the movement toward comprehensive character education and deliberate focus on climate and culture-based improvement and reform" (Sojourner, 2014, p. 70). There is little known about the impact of implementing character education on K-12 schools in general (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007); however, more attention is given to character education at the elementary school level than to character education in the middle and upper school levels (Hildebrandt & Zan, 2014). Therefore, it is important to investigate the key practices and processes needed for an effective character education implementation in elementary schools and to explore the general indicators for effectiveness as students transition from elementary into middle school.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study focused on key practices and processes used by educators for an effective implementation of character education and the indicators of an effectively implemented character education as students transition from elementary to middle school. Specifically, the research questions were

1. What are the key practices and processes employed by educators for an effective character education implementation?
2. What are the general indicators of an effective character education program as students transition from elementary to middle school?

Literature Review

Over the years, there have been multiple attempts to define character education. Lickona (1997) defined character education as "the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue" (p. 161). It has also been known as the *teaching of virtues*, or *ethical instruction* (Lucas, 2009). Howard, Berkowitz, and Schaeffer (2004) defined character education as "an attempt to prepare individuals to make ethical judgments and to act on them, that is, to do what one thinks ought to be done" (p. 189). Therefore, Howard et al. (2004) noted that character education significantly prepares our youth to make good decisions as they confront political issues and challenges in life. For Arthur (2014), what character education is ultimately about is the "kind of person a child will grow to be, and the early Greek idea of character suggests that moral goodness is essentially a prediction of persons and not acts" (p. 43).

Lickona (1991) pointed out that since the time of Aristotle and Socrates, character education has been an important part of young adolescents' teaching and training. Lickona (1991) added that character education became a significant mission in the American public schools with the beginning of the country. Titus (1994) stated, "Since the revolutionary era" (p. 3), important leaders of the country, such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, believed that the success of the nation depended greatly on transmitting democratic values to all citizens. During the 17th and the 18th centuries, character education remained an essential part of education with the *Holy Bible* being the main textbook that was taught on a daily basis in order for educators to reinforce the basic moral values and behaviors based on the Scriptures (Algera & Sink, 2002). As indicated by Howard et al. (2004), character education existed in schools and classrooms with the beginning of public schools in America. As free public schools began to develop and expand in America in the 1830s, it became important to reinforce home values in schools for all students, where "virtuous teachers" (p. 191) were the first source of moral education before textbooks. In the 19th century, elements of moral education were taught widely in schools and were included in the schools' curricula as children were learning virtues such as honesty, loyalty, and hard work, mostly through the "*McGuffey Reader* tales of heroism and virtue" (Sojourner, 2012, p. 3).

Titus (1994) indicated that with the beginning of the 20th century, a period characterized by social changes including immigration, urbanization, and technological changes (Leming, 1997), character education became a vital part of the educational program of all schools in America. That remained the case until the 1950s, before it was excluded from the schools' curricula in public schools due to the perception that teaching morals had become related to teaching religion (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). Wagner (2008) pointed out that in the period after the early 1960s to the 1980s, "there was an increased involvement of students and

proliferation of school-wide programs. This was the beginning of the current movement in character education" (pp. 5-6). However, bringing character education back into schools happened with the focus on helping students explain their different values rather than teaching values and ethics in a traditional manner.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, character education was included again after a noticeable decline in public education quality (Lickona, 1991). In discussing the reasons for the necessity of character education, Lickona (1996) stated:

> It is painfully clear that societies around the world suffer severe social and moral problems: the breakdown of the family, physical and sexual abuse of children, mounting violence, growing materialism, increasing dishonesty, the deterioration of civility in everyday life, drug and alcohol abuse, a rising tide of sleaze in the media, a plague of problems (such as teen pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, sexually transmitted disease, marital infidelity, and the destructive psychological consequences of sex without commitment) stemming from the breakdown of sexual morality and the loss of respect for human life represented by widespread abortion at one end of the developmental continuum and euthanasia at the other. (Introduction, para. 4)

Lickona (1996) argued that such community problems are usually reflected in young people and can lead to disastrous consequences among our youth. In the 1980s, the public expressed the need for schools to undertake their role in the character development of children; therefore, numerous school districts developed different programs of character education (Pearson & Nicholson, 2000). More recently, the Character Education Partnership, which was established in 1993 (Character Education Partnership [CEP], 2014b) and is known as a "nonprofit, nonpartisan national coalition committed to putting character development at the top of the nation's education agenda" (Sojourner, 2012, p. 5), indicated that character education can generally be agreed on, and teaching character has always been a significant goal in the first public schools of America. Therefore, CEP (2014a) presented the "Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education," which is a document that proposes a framework that outlines the planning of any effective character education program adopted and guides community leaders and educators to enhance the outcomes of character education effective implementation. The 11 principles included:

1. The school or district community promotes core ethical and performance values as the foundation of good character.
2. The school or district defines "character" comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and doing.
3. The school or district uses a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development.
4. The school or district creates a caring community.
5. The school or district provides students with opportunities of moral action.
6. The school or district offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character, and helps them to succeed.
7. The school or district fosters students' self-motivation.
8. The school or district staff is an ethical learning community that shares responsibility for character education and adheres to the same core values that guide the students.

9. The school or district fosters shared leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative.
10. The school or district engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort.
11. The school or district regularly assesses its culture and climate, the functioning of its staff as character educators, and the extent to which its students manifest good character.

Multiple studies have examined the need and impact of character education in schools. In a study that was conducted in one middle school in West Virginia, Lucas (2009) focused on teachers' perceptions of character education implementation in their school. The researcher found that all 12 teachers interviewed in her study agreed that character education is essential and declared the teachers' responsibility of exhibiting good role models. Lucas (2009) noted in her study that "teacher modeling" (p. 128) appeared to be the main method of character education implementation. One of the teachers indicated how vital character education is for middle school students, in particular, because school is a place for them to develop the sense of belonging in a family-like school climate.

In another more recent longitudinal study that examined the effects of character education implementation in middle school settings, Opuni, Washington, and Giddings (2012) discussed how multiple incidents of conflict in school such as fighting, suspensions, and bullying led to the implementation of character education. Character education "sought to improve student achievement by enhancing: (1) teacher levels of caring and fairness and (2) student levels of caring and honesty" (p. 1). The study took place in an urban school district in Houston, Texas, where "two cohorts of sixth-grade students from the two intervention schools and a comparable non-participating school were monitored over a two-year period" (Opuni et al., 2012, p. 1). Based on their findings, Opuni et al. (2012) pointed out that when compared to students from the nonparticipating school, monitored students from the schools of intervention showed a significant improvement in reading and math scores and character values.

In a non-experimental correlational study which involved 103 secondary school teachers, Jakubowski (2013) found that teachers were not acquainted with the available information regarding character education. The researcher added that most teachers believed that being prepared enriches their practices; they also believed in the teachers' role as "character educators" (p. 1); they often practiced character education in their classrooms, but did not frequently employ school-wide strategies for character education.

While those studies indicated the need for more focus on implementing effective character education in middle school settings in general, a few other studies focused on the long-term impact of effective character education in elementary schools as students transition into middle school years. In a series of evaluation studies conducted by the Developmental Studies Center (DSC) beginning of 1980s and over the span of 20 years, elementary students from numerous urban, suburban, and rural districts in California and other states were evaluated in terms of their sense of community. Eric Schaps (2009) who is the founder of the Developmental Studies Center (DSC) in Oakland, CA, pointed out one major finding from the DSC research; this finding concludes that "building a sense of community during elementary school years yields benefits that persist through middle school" (p. 10).

Nucci and Narvaez (2008) noted that although 80% of the states have mandates related to character education, these seemingly supportive mandates are concealing the real controversy around what character education means and the appropriate practices used in the field of character education. Nucci and Narvaez (2008) further pointed out, "There is no single source that brings together research and scholarship on the diverse perspectives and approaches to moral and character education" (p. ix); therefore, it was not an easy task for educators and researchers to find effective practices and strategies for an effective character education.

Methodology

Using a qualitative case study as a research method, this study identified key practices and processes employed by educators for an effective character education implementation. The study also explored the general indicators of effective character education implementation as students transitioned from elementary to middle school. A case study may describe and analyze a bounded system (Merriman, 2009), and the school under study is a bounded entity where an effective character education program is being currently implemented. The researcher prepared interview questions that sought deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study, which in this case was the character education program being implemented in a particular National School of Character (NSOC) winner school in USA. It was an attempt to explore and provide a deeper understanding of the key practices and processes employed by educators for an effective implementation of character education. The study also provided a rich description of the indicators of effectiveness of that particular character education program.

The Unit of Analysis

In relation to the two main research questions, this research called for a single case study in which one NSOC winner school in America was selected. The school had two school divisions that comprised the West K-6 lower-school division and the East 7-12 middle- and upper-school division. The K-6 lower-school division was where character education, in a form of a home-grown program, was being successfully implemented and integrated into the school curriculum. This was evident by the school's recent designation as National School of Character (NSOC). The K-6 lower-school division feeds into the 7-12 middle- and upper-school division. According to the Character Education Partnership (CEP, 2016a), this is a designation that the NSOC school holds for five years, and is awarded based on a very rigorous and thorough evaluation of the impact of the character education being implemented in that school site. This evaluation took place within the framework of the 11 Principles of Effective Character Education. The school was given the name "Horizon of Excellence School (HES)" as a pseudonym.

Participants and Data Collection

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the key practices and processes employed by educators and indicators of effectiveness, participants were purposefully selected and formed a purposeful sample for data collection. The researcher collected data through interviews with the director of the lower school division and the director of the upper school division, interviews with the counselors of both the lower and the upper school divisions, interviews with three sixth-grade teachers, and interviews with four middle-school teachers. Two out of four middle-school participants were seventh-grade teachers, one was an eighth-grade teacher, and one was a teacher

of both seventh and eighth grades. The researcher also collected data through a focus group consisting of three lower-school participating teachers: two participants were first-grade teachers, and one participant was a third-grade teacher. Teachers who were interviewed were involved in teaching character education with an experience of two or more years in that same school. The interviews with the directors and the counselors were semi-structured in-depth interviews (Lichtman, 2013; Patton, 2015) where the largest part of the interview was guided by a list of flexibly used questions which opened the door for more discussion and richness in the information provided (Merriam, 2009). The interviews with sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade teachers at the school site were also semi-structured in-depth individual interviews.

The interview with first- and third-grade teachers in that same school site took the form of a focus group. The focus-group interview gave the participants the opportunity to interact with each other giving more depth to the conversation where they did not have to reach an agreement (Lichtman, 2013). Following the interviews, the lower-school counselor shared important documents pertinent to the study. As part of a case study, any relevant documents can be very valuable (Yin, 2009). Artifacts and documents pertaining to character education effective implementation, including the school website, the NSOC application, and a copy of the Character Education Partnership (CEP) evaluation report were reviewed and thoroughly analyzed. Audio taping took place with the consent of the participants. All interviews were transcribed, and transcriptions were shared with the participants as part of *respondent validation* (Thompson, 2004).

Protection of the Participants

All participants were individuals who were 18 years of age or older. The interviews and focus group were audio-taped for transcription purposes only, and notes were taken during the interviews and focus group. Sufficient and pass-coded devices were used for audio taping. All files, material, and documents will be kept secure in a locked file cabinet or in a pass-coded computer in the researcher's home and will be destroyed after three years.

Data Analysis

Data analysis started with "preliminary exploratory analysis" (Creswell, 2008, p. 243) where the researcher develops a general understanding of the data, followed by coding and categorizing emerging themes. In this study, collected data were organized by type, i.e. interviews and artifacts, into file folders or computer files to avoid any confusion that might emerge out of the extensive amount of information. Duplicate copies were kept for reference. In order to begin deeper data analysis, all collected data, which included interview transcripts, notes, and documentation, were compiled (McMillan, 2004). Afterward, information was edited, and redundancies were excluded in order to make the case record ready for access "either chronologically and/or topically" (Merriam, 2009, p. 203).

Using deductive and inductive data analysis, data were coded simultaneously with the interview process as well as after each interview in order to make sense out of the data and for the emerging codes to be used and categorized in the findings section of this study (Creswell, 2008. Using a set of priori codes (Saldana, 2013) derived from the research discussed in the literature review, the researcher incorporated deductive analysis of the data by creating a set of themes derived from the literature before beginning analysis. Emerging codes and sub-codes were analyzed, discussed subsequently, and categorized into main themes.

Limitations

Student/teacher ratio and small class size in the school under study might limit the applicability of findings to schools of similar context. Additionally, students in the school under study were selected for the school through an admission screening process that focused not only on students' academic standing, but also on their character traits. Findings may be different for schools of different student/teacher ratio, larger class size, or a different admission process. What may seem as a limitation, may be a factor of success in that particular school or any other school of similar context.

Findings

The themes that emerged from analysis of the data included key practices and processes for effective implementation and indicators of effective implementation of a character education program. These practices included practices of teachers, practices of school administrators, practices of school counselors, and some shared practices in HES. Indicators of effectiveness were basically presented based on educators' responses and within the framework of the CEP's 11 Principles of Effective Character Education. These indicators were highlighted within that same framework in the NSOC application. Challenges in the way of character education's effective implementation were also identified.

Research Question 1: What are the key practices and processes employed by educators for an effective character implementation?

Based on the collected data in this study, there was a distinction between the different employed practices based on the different roles of educators at Horizon of Excellence School (HES). Teachers, administrators, and counselors expressed different methods used to help effectively implement character education and sustain a positive impact as students transition from elementary into middle school. However, shared key practices were found to be in practice as well. Key practices and processes were established as follows:

Teachers' key practices. Based on the interviews conducted with lower- and middle-school teachers, all participants agreed that their role as character educators included four main key practices. These practices included:

Building a Community of Caring. Teachers in Horizon of Excellence School (HES) work toward building a Community of Caring at school through multiple approaches. Primary approaches include, weekly class meetings, service learning opportunities, classroom collaborative group work, incorporating steps of conflict resolution, and assemblies as indicated by most participants in both lower and middle schools of HES.

Integration into the school curriculum. The collected data including interviews, focus group, the school's website, the NSOC application, and the CEP evaluation report clearly indicated a strong integration of character education into the school's curriculum. In the NSOC application, it is stated, "We combine academic rigor with character education in order to cultivate effective students whose self-awareness and empathy impel them to think creatively and act ethically." This integration was represented in multiple methods employed through direct

and indirect character-based instruction. These methods included selection of character-related study content, daily school creed reciting the school's core values, individualization of character education implementation methods reflecting the nature of children as they move into a new stage of development, and middle-school class of human development that is "designed to provide an environment in which Middle Division students can openly learn, reflect upon, and discuss ideas pertinent to their development as human beings" as indicated in the school's official website.

Middle-school advisory program. In an attempt to incorporate character development and expand on the character education of the lower division of HES, the middle school division has the Advisory Program as indicated by all middle school participants. As stated in the school's website, the Advisory Program "allows students to develop connections with faculty members who are available to support students throughout their seventh and eighth Grade experience."

Character-related training and professional development. All participating teachers indicated that teachers usually feel the responsibility for attending character-related professional development opportunities that might not be offered at school by the schools' administration. However, it could be approved and funded by the school's administration depending on the need. In addition to the recommended professional development opportunities offered for teachers, most teachers indicated that mandatory in-service week takes place at the beginning at the end of the school year. No students attend during in-service week, and the main focus would be on character-based and social-emotional issues besides academic issues.

Administrators' key practices. In their discussion, lower- and middle-school directors discussed six key practices. Administrators' key practices included the following:

Setting expectations. For Mr. Kevin, director of elementary division**,** teachers are expected to weave in character education lessons above and beyond community of caring at every single opportunity they have; try to use the core values in their language when they're dealing with teachable moments with the students which makes it more real for the students; and partner with parents to help students stay to the school standards**.**

In addition to setting expectations of teachers, setting expectations of students is made clear through the admissions screening process. As stated by the middle-school counselor, Dr. Christopher, the screening process that is conducted prior to enrolling students in HES gives priority to students in relation to character as well as academic standing**.** Focusing on the fact that smart is not necessarily good; Dr. Christopher indicated that HES screening helps bring in students who will probably be of good influence to others.

Presiding assemblies. In regards to character education implementation, both HES directors of lower and middle divisions described their role in presiding assemblies held on campus. Mr. Kevin indicated that along with his supervision of staff in general, he brings guest speakers for assemblies held on campus. Middle-school director, Ms. Myers, stated:

We use assemblies quite a bit to bring in new ideas. Once we have an assembly, and it might be on social media or it might be on how to keep your locker area clean and organized and be thoughtful of people around you and clean up, the program runs the gamut, and then we support that [concept] a lot with advisory conversation.

Providing adequate professional development. Providing essential character-related professional development opportunities and taking care of the related expenses is a vital part of the role of administration at HES. Lower-school teachers who participated in the focus group discussion indicated that the school administration takes care of all expenses related to professional development opportunities concerning character-based instruction that teachers may choose to attend and that are not offered by the school administration itself. However, choosing the right professional development opportunity is very essential as well. In this regard, Mr. Kevin clarified:

Much of what we do is organic, and it's been developed here; and so, while I'm sure it [professional development opportunities] is perfectly great, it might not be the same language, and we want everybody, all educators here, speaking the same character education language.

As part of character-related professional development, lower-school counselor, Ms. Watson, mentioned that key guest speakers are often invited to speak to all educators about issues of character development and emotional intelligence. She remarked, "It's important to note that [name of head of school] also brings in speakers to educate and share their expertise with the entire faculty."

Providing resources and financial support. Mr. Kevin pointed out the significance of providing the needed funds and resources for an adequate implementation of character education. He was attributing the availability of abundant opportunities for faculty professional development, character-related service learning opportunities, weekly meetings, and many other ways of character-based instruction to being able to provide the needed funding and resources. Mr. Kevin stated:

The amount of time and money we spend on buses sending the students to things is a luxury that [our] school has. We're fully aware of how privileged we are in that way; but, it makes me proud as the administrator that resources are dedicated to that.

In addition, the abundance of resources and financial support makes it possible to afford small class size and more teachers in every classroom as explained by Mr. Kevin.

Promoting family involvement. The first step in parents' involvement was explaining what Mr. Kevin has described as the school's "three excellences" that include academic excellence, character development, and emotional intelligence. Introducing these excellences to new families is a responsibility implemented effectively by HES admissions as indicated by Mr. Kevin. In Mr. Kevin's point of view, for faculty and families to know and understand what the three excellences of school are is key to the success of the character education program. In order to maintain a close relationship between parents and the school, HES created a Parents

Association. According to the school's website, Parents Association opens the door for parents to be part of the school community as a valuable resource to teachers, community service programs, and many more school events and programs. All parents become members of the association upon enrollment of their children in the school.   In addition, the CEP evaluation report pointed out the noticeable involvement of parents as part of the character education program implemented in the elementary division of HES. The report stated, "parents [at the lower school] are engaged, supportive, and a major part of the successful character education program."

Conducting regular informal reports. These are reports from all administrators to the head of school about the incorporation of the three excellences of the school; the expected academic excellence, improvement of character education implementation and incorporation, and emotional intelligence incorporation. Mr. Kevin stated, "The head of school actually holds the division directors responsible in a way. We don't get in trouble for not doing it, but, at least once a month, he'll want us to report out" basically by giving examples of how the three excellences are being met by educators.

Counselor's key practices. Based on the collected data, both lower- and middle-school counselors agreed that the main counselor's key practice is providing adequate individual and small-group counseling to all students, faculty, and even parents whenever needed. Dr. Christopher, middle school counselor and psychologist, asserted that his job mainly includes counseling for students, teachers and families. For Dr. Christopher, it is imperative "to support our team so we can support the students."
In addition to providing adequate counseling to students, faculty, and parents, Ms. Watson is the main person in charge of the implementation of HES character-education program in the lower division. In her role not only as the lower-school counselor but also as the character education coordinator, Ms. Watson facilitates the character education orientation, presents an explicit timeline plan that makes the focus on morality, ethics and values clear, and provides steps of conflict resolution that are posted in every classroom to be incorporated appropriately based on age and grade level.

Shared practices and processes. In addition to teachers', administrators', and counselors' unique key practices, findings revealed four shared practices and processes employed by all educators alike. These shared practices and processes included setting time aside for character education, role modeling, instilling the Golden Rule and constant dialogue, and collaborative team work and open communication.

Research Question 2: What are the general indicators of an effective character education program as students transition from elementary to middle school?

Findings revealed indicators of effective character education implementation from two data sources: (1) the National Schools of Character (NSOC) application, and (2) participants' responses to the interview questions. Indicators of effectiveness were concluded in the implementation of the 11 Principles of Effective Character Education as reported in the NSOC application that was submitted to the Character Education Partnership (CEP) by Horizon of Excellence lower-school administration. Based on participants' responses, indicators also

encompassed school-wide language and communication, student behavioral improvement, disciplinary office referrals, school as a safe place, and character education as a bridge.

Implementation of the 11 principles of effective character education. In the NSOC application, the lower-school division was given the opportunity to provide evidence of effective character education implementation. Based on a self-assessment CEP provided to be taken by multiple school stakeholders, many indicators of effective implementation were documented and included in the NSOC application. The school administration listed these indicators within the framework of the 11 Principles of Effective Character Education.

The following indicators of effective character education implementation are based primarily on the responses of all participants. These indicators included the following:

School-wide language and communication. Most teachers emphasized the seven school-wide core values to be the general language spoken throughout the whole school. Using the language of the core values by students and educators indicated a common understanding of these concepts. First-grade teacher, Ms. Emma, emphasized the importance of using the school's common language that is based on the core values. She explained that listening to students using this language demonstrates an understanding and deep internalization of these school-wide core values. Referring to commonly used language among students, Mr. Jordan commented, "There is a sophistication [and] complexity that these students possess that I hadn't seen in previous teaching assignments. I think it's due to the character development of the school." Sixth-grade teacher, Mr. James, reported that Community of Caring character education program helped him as a teacher to know his students better, which indicated a strong relationship between teachers and students.

In addition, there was a stronger rapport between middle-school teachers and students through replacing punitive actions with more "restorative" ones as middle school teacher, Ms. Matthews explained. For Dr. Christopher, the automatic communication between students and teachers is mainly based on "love and care." Middle school director, Ms. Myers, explained that resolving academic issues involves caring about students' character development as well.

On the other hand, seventh- and eighth-grade teacher, Mr. Karner, implied that the constant focus on the core values has created some resistance among some students especially among those who transitioned from the lower division of HES. The resistance some students may express is not meant to demonstrate any negative behavior, but to show that they "already know this… [and] would never treat anyone poorly" wondering why it's been taught to them constantly. Mr. Karner also added that educators' consistency is key in dealing with students' resistance to teaching character.

Students' behavioral improvement. All sixth-grade teachers indicated that by the time students are in sixth grade, they demonstrate a deep understanding of how to manage their conflicts. Ms. Watson indicated that students learn how to resolve their conflicts with peers based on a deep internalization of the six steps of conflict resolution by the time they reach sixth grade. As Mr. Kevin explained it, this internalization of the six steps of conflict resolution "could be measure of success in a way." Describing the general behavior of transitioning lower-school students, Ms. Matthews, who is a seventh-grade teacher and service learning coordinator in the middle school, pointed out:

Lower school students have a strong understanding of our core values and what's expected in terms of what it means to be a proper student. That includes homework, how they get along with each other, [and] family approach to the internet [and] social media.

Rare disciplinary office referrals. Most educators indicated that office referrals in regards to disciplinary issues are rare in HES. School directors Mr. Kevin and Ms. Myers pointed out that disciplinary office referrals are rare in their schools, and the rate of incidents related to behavior issues is very low. Mr. Kevin indicated that if students were sent to his office once every two months or so, it would less likely be for any disciplinary issues of misbehavior.

School as a safe place. Based on the responses of lower-school teachers who participated in the study, they all highlighted the role of Community of Caring in turning the school into safe place for children. As reported in the NSOC application, 95 percent of the students who completed a climate survey at school in 2014 reported that they feel safe at their school. Ninety eight percent of them reported that they respect each other. Sixth-grade teacher associate, Ms. Amber, indicated that with teacher consistency in delivering character-based education, students feel safer to trust their educators.

Character education as a bridge. In discussing the long-term influence of effective character education, participants' responses in regards to students' transition from elementary into middle school, emphasized the significance of effective character education in elementary school for students' character development as they move to higher grade levels**.** Mr. James, stated, "I think that they hold themselves to a standard of character, and so, I feel like the same relationship that they develop with their teachers here, they want to continue that." Middle school teacher, Mr. Karner, indicated that lower-school students come to middle school with some understanding of the core values. However, teaching the core values in middle school is enhanced through an integration into the middle school curriculum primarily through the Advisory Program and Human Development class. Mr. Karner further emphasized the significance of teaching character early in life as something that they will keep and remember as they transition into higher grade levels. Focusing on the continuity of character education into middle school, Ms. Dayna indicated that carrying on with character education in the middle school helps reduce the negative consequences that may emerge out of the lack of an effective character education.

All educators who participated in this study agreed that character education creates a bridge that facilitates students' transition from elementary into middle school. Most middle school teachers indicated the difficulty of recognizing students who come from the lower division of the school and others who come from other different locations. However, students who come from the HES lower school do stand out with their character in relation to the Community of Caring program and the school-wide core values. Dr. Christopher who is the middle school counselor and psychologist as mentioned earlier, stated that he is able to recognize those students and that they show very well internalization of the school-wide core values through their language and daily interactions with adults and students around them. Additionally, discussing students' advocacy, educators in the middle school agreed that students who come from the lower division of HES act as advocates for their colleagues.

Discussion

The findings of this study were found to be similar to findings of previous studies. Some of the strategies Berkowitz and Bier (2005b) suggested for an effective implementation of character education included providing professional development, presenting an explicit agenda that makes the focus on morality, ethics, and values clear, promoting family involvement, providing mentors and role models, and integrating character education into the school curriculum. Key practices found in this study reflect Berkowitz and Bier's suggested strategies of implementation.

Additionally, Pearson and Nicholson (2000) suggested some strategies to be employed by school teachers, administrators, and counselors based on their distinct roles in order to provide a comprehensive character education program that meets the needs of every student. Adapted from Pearson and Nicholson's focus on the significance of these educational roles, the findings of this study showed differentiated key practices that were employed by the school teachers, directors, and counselors for an effective character education program. The findings also presented shared practices employed by all educators alike. The similarities between previous findings and the findings of this study in terms of key practices for an effective implementation of character education indicate the significance of such key practices as they would generate substantial indicators of an effective implementation of character education based on a thorough evaluation of outcomes.

All participating educators with no exceptions, agreed that time is the biggest challenge in the face of effective implementation of character education. In regards to technology and social media, there was a consensus among most educators that social media is an increasing challenge since it is among the least controlled trends within the school setting. Dr. Christopher also pointed out that dealing with the growing diversity now is becoming a huge challenge for educators. It adds to the time and effort educators need to understand each student's unique culture and needs on an individual basis. As opposed to parents being viewed as an essential part of their children's character education as indicated in the school's official website, lower-school director, Mr. Kevin, and middle-school teacher, Ms. Matthews, on the other hand, indicated that parents may be the challenge at times. As Ms. Matthews stated it, "The other piece that I would say is a challenge, it's across the United States, is the parents. Not all parents discipline their children or hold them accountable for a set expectation of character or behavior." Overcoming such challenges is possible with commitment and consistency of delivery as most of the participants emphasized.

Conclusion

Based on the thorough discussion of findings, one major theme stands clear in this case study: The effective implementation of quality character education programs during elementary school years creates a bridge that facilitates students transition from elementary into middle school by promoting better decision-making and conflict management skills. Stressing the undisputable significant role of teachers in particular, it is imperative for all educators to effectively implement a quality character education program at schools during elementary-school years. Doing so will have a profound long-term impact as students transition into middle school years. Consistent with the participants' input, quality character education forms a strong foundation for young adolescents on which they will maintain a solid reference that they will

constantly refer to as they grow into good citizens and productive members of their communities. Therefore, three overall conclusions support that major theme: First, it is significant to employ age- and grade-level appropriate key practices in order to build that solid foundation through an effective character education program; second, keeping a constant evaluation of the indicators of effectiveness opens the door for further recommendations and improvement; and finally, it is imperative to face emerging challenges by maintaining a consistent delivery of quality character education throughout the school.

Recommendations for Further Study

The robust character education foundation forms a strong and steady bridge that facilitates student transition from elementary into middle school years. This strong foundation helps students make better and healthier decisions. It also equips them with adequate conflict management skills needed for healthier daily interactions. Hence, this transition bridge should be built on a healthy and effective character education program that adequately addresses students' social-emotional needs and helps them grow into not only academically and professionally successful individuals, but also into good and productive citizens starting early in life. Therefore, it should be mandated that every elementary school integrates an effective character education program directly and indirectly into the school day. In addition, schools should consider providing adequate professional development opportunities for educators in order for them to be well prepared to teach and model good character. With an effective character education expanding through the middle school years, young adolescents will be well equipped for life and positioned for success.

The findings in this case study were based primarily on a thorough analysis of educators' perspectives including administrators, counselors, and teachers. However, there is always room for further research in the field of character education. It would be helpful and more enlightening if further research studies focused on students' and parents' perspectives around character education. How parents, families, and communities view a specific character education program is extremely significant. This significance stems from the fact that character education programs should consider community values as well as familial various convictions and, therefore, develop accordingly.

This case study revealed a unique context of HES such as small class size, different student/teacher ratio, ample resources, and financial support. This context is absolutely a huge factor that contributed to the success of character education in HES; however, it might be a limitation when it comes to other schools of different contexts. Schools might consider overcoming such limitations by creating some change in their contexts as needed if possible. It is strongly recommended that all schools rearrange their list of priorities and put quality character education programs on top of the list. It is also beneficial to redirect efforts and funding sources towards quality character education programs for all students and character-related professional development opportunities for all staff and faculty members. Therefore, further studies of ways that schools are doing this are recommended.

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