IMPLEMENTATION OF CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAMS BY HIGH SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS OF NATIONAL SCHOOLS OF CHARACTER

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Abstract

This study investigated the preliminary steps of high school administrators before implementing an effective character education program to achieve the National School of Character distinction. There is limited existing literature on character education in high schools. The researchers interviewed 12 current and former high school administrators from seven states in the United States. The main source of data was the interview transcripts. In this descriptive, qualitative study, the researchers used Microsoft Teams to record and transcribe the interviews and MAXQDA for coding. Data analysis involved coding the transcripts, categorizing the codes, and identifying themes. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: embedded character education, customized programs, staff commitment, and the cost of character education. Future administrators looking to implement the concepts of this study in a high school should also consider the time, strengths, and weaknesses of character education in the school, conduct needs assessments with stakeholders, and establish leadership teams.

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Character education has played an important role throughout history. As far back as 2,000 years ago, the value and impact of character education were documented in the work of Greek philosophers. Then, in the 1800s, President Theodore Roosevelt highlighted the importance of character education in America with the following quote, "To educate someone in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society" (Lickona, 1993, p. 6). The most recent education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), emphasized providing an environment to help students become good. Character education has played a role in developing students' character where future leaders of tomorrow are created.

Education traditionally has had two goals: to make people smart and good (Lickona, 1993; Schwartz, 2008). Some form of character education on moral values and societal beliefs was widely taught in American education until the 1960s when Supreme Court justices removed prayer and Bible reading from public schools (Lickona, 1993; Jeynes, 2017; Schwartz, 2008). The rulings led to the unintended consequence of eliminating character training in schools. Many educators wanted to teach some form of virtue or morals but were apprehensive about encroaching on Judeo-Christian values and became fearful of breaking laws (Jeynes, 2017). Instead of abandoning teaching character or morality, many school leaders adopted a values clarification model where the students defined their most important values (Sanderse, 2013). The results of this shift from teaching character and morality to the values clarification model negatively affected the morals of public school students (Sanderse, 2013). The declining morality of the 1960s and 1970s made citizens realize that something had to be done to combat the lack of morality displayed by students (Lickona, 1993).

Cooley (2008) analyzed legislation regarding character education passed in North Carolina and compared it to national trends in character education. Cooley (2008) claimed that the United States has always had a populace that deemed teaching values and ethics in schools important. Within the last 75 years, new ideas and philosophies were proposed for how moral and ethical education should take place. In early American history, religious values were the main vehicle for training students (Cooley, 2008). As society became more secular, humanistic ideas emerged. Moral development and values clarification theories were given as methods for teaching character, while religion was removed from the public sector (Cooley, 2008). Lawmakers viewed these changes as contributing to an "anything goes" mentality (Cooley, 2008). As drug use, teen pregnancy, and gang violence increased in the 1980s and 1990s, United States lawmakers rushed to develop and implement new forms of character education. However, Cooley (2008) claimed that the new forms of character education made numerous assumptions about the nation's cultures. The United States was a diverse nation, and applying the norms and customs of one culture to all others did not work (Cooley, 2008).

Theoretical Foundation

Quality Implementation Framework (QIF) was chosen as the theoretical framework for this research study. Meyers et al. (2012) found that implementation was more than a full or partial construct. Rather, implementation existed in degrees, and the QIF was created as an easy, communicable, organized set of ideas to help others identify high, medium, or low qualities of implementation. Due to the synthesis by Meyers et al. (2012), the QIF had 14 steps over four phases. The four phases were considerations of the host setting (Phase One), building a structure for implementation (Phase Two), ongoing structure after implementation started (Phase Three), and future applications based on evaluation (Phase Four).

Literature Review

There were many studies on character education and its benefits (Farikah, 2019; Goss & Holt, 2014; Holtzapple et al., 2011; Marvul, 2012; Silverthorn et al., 2017), but limited research focused specifically on character education in secondary schools (Stephens & Wangaard, 2013). Existing studies, overwhelmingly at the elementary level, demonstrated the benefits of implementing a character education program, including academic, attendance, and disciplinary benefits for schools. School leadership was essential for character education programs to be successful. Several researchers studied the importance and steps needed for effective school leadership (Cansoy, 2019; Dunlap et al., 2015; Huff et al., 2018; Mombourquette, 2017; Sun et al., 2016; Webster & Litchka, 2020). Huff et al. (2018) discovered that school leaders' actions and routines had a huge impact on the success or failure of the schools, including the implementation of new programs.

While not universally defined, character education promotes good character development in schools (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009). Character education has been associated with a myriad of academic and behavioral benefits, including the prevention of bullying and other discipline problems, higher educational achievement, better student attendance and fewer dropouts, and improved school climate (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009; Berkowitz et al., 2012; Elias, 2010; Jeynes, 2017; Stephens & Waangard, 2016; Stiff-Williams, 2010). Williams et al. (2003) discovered that the benefits associated with character education, which were highly beneficial to students while in school, had lasting benefits for these students throughout their lives. Pala (2011) deemed character education as critical for successful schools.

Although there was research supporting the inclusion of character education in schools, the benefits were not realized without effective school leadership (Cansoy, 2019; Dunlap et al., 2015; Huff et al., 2018; Mombourquette, 2017; Sun et al., 2016; Thornton et al., 2019; Urick, 2020; Webster & Litchka, 2020). The need for and importance of effective school leadership was explored through the work of previous researchers that outlined several hallmarks of effective school leadership, including school vision, leading with data, consistent routines and practices, ethical leadership, and shared leadership. School vision emerged as one of the keystones of effective school leadership. Thornton et al. (2019) proposed that school vision should communicate the needed changes in a school and describe how these changes relate to system goals. School vision can be understood through several descriptors, as evidenced by what school leaders should do: communicate and be guided by an educational philosophy based upon sound research, provide leadership in keeping with the school's mission, engage all stakeholders in

areas for school improvement, ensure that all planning is based on the schools' culture, facilitate change and innovation, analyze a wide range of data to determine progress, and communicate and celebrate school accomplishments to inspire continuous growth (Mombourquette, 2017). Several researchers (Cansoy, 2019; Dunlap et al., 2015; Mombourquette, 2017; Thornton et al., 2019) noted the importance and beneficial outcomes when school leaders utilized a shared vision by emphasizing the implications for student learning, teacher satisfaction, and retention, and stakeholder engagement.

Leading with data had school-wide implications for student learning, goal setting, teacher feedback, and instructional practices (Huff et al., 2018; Mombourquette, 2017; Sun et al., 2016). The researchers found that leading with data was a requirement for school leaders of effective schools. Sun et al. (2016) noted that school leaders utilize data differently from classroom teachers. The data examined by principals included standardized test scores, attendance and behavioral data, teacher-generated formative assessments, students' demographic data, data outlining best practices, and teacher feedback data. School leaders should utilize these data to set goals, develop teachers' decision-making capacity, build a data-wise culture in schools, and improve instruction (Sun et al., 2016). Data use was instrumental in implementing and maintaining new programs (Huff et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2016).

The research emphasized the importance of consistent routines and practices by school leaders (Huff et al., 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020; Thornton et al., 2019). School leaders helped establish consistent routines and practices to buffer staff from distractions during their instructional work because the amount of quality instructional time strongly affected student learning (Leithwood et al., 2020).

In conjunction with consistency, ethical leadership was important for implementing new programs. Ethical leadership is defined as leading with integrity and fairness, doing what is right, and having a moral compass that allows the leader to determine and undertake the best action to serve the common good (Webster & Litchka, 2020). Several researchers (e.g., Cansoy, 2019; Webster & Litchka, 2020) studied the importance and relevance of ethical leadership for school administrators. These researchers noted the importance of ethical leadership and its effect on school climate, teacher retention and engagement, and teacher motivation.

Shared leadership was a keystone feature of effective school leaders. Urick (2020) defined shared leadership as teachers' influence over important school decisions. Another description of shared leadership involves sharing the leadership function among several individuals while several leaders (Berkovich & Bogler, 2021) complete tasks. Urick (2020) indicated that teachers were more likely to stay in their current positions if they perceived more frequent principal and shared leadership.

Implementing a productive character education program involves the teachers' role in character education, student outcomes, and stakeholder and community involvement. Teachers are role models and trainers in character education. The teacher is the key figure in character education, and how the students are taught is critical to success (Anderson, 2000). Sanderse (2013) purported that teachers should be role models of good character for students.

The next subtheme related to implementing a productive character education program was desirable student outcomes. First, researchers (e.g., Dixson, 2021; Malin et al., 2017; McGrath et al., 2022; Seider, Gilbert et al., 2013; Seider et al., 2017; Zurqoni et al., 2018) collectively identified a list of desirable traits in students, which included responsibility, honesty,

respect, fairness, trustworthiness, kindness, empathy, self-discipline, and courage. Second, researchers displayed a plethora of successful performance outcomes after conducting character education research (Akbas, 2012; Flynn & LaFrance, 2019; Hermino & Arifin, 2020; Holtzapple et al., 2011; Marvul, 2012; Seider, Novick, et al., 2013). Although a definitive list of traits was not created, the researchers listed and gave implications for developing specific character traits in students, including decreased disciplinary problems and improved attendance, which positively affect high schools.

The final subtheme related to implementing a productive character education program was stakeholder and community involvement. Pala (2011) argued that character education must include the whole community, especially parents because parents are their children's primary and most important moral educators. Pala noted that for any school-based character education program to be effective, it should include broad-based support from all stakeholders in the community, including educators, parents, community leaders, youth service groups, businesses, and faith and charitable groups.

Problem Statement / Purpose

It was unknown what steps administrators of high schools with accomplished character education programs took before implementing them in secondary schools. Most research on character education existed at the elementary school level, and very little research has been conducted at the high school level. As a result, the researchers of this study sought to discover what steps or actions high school administrators took with students, faculty, and community stakeholders of schools recognized as National Schools of Character before implementing a character education program. This research outlined the steps administrators of successful schools with character education programs took to create guidelines and parameters for the future implementation of character education programs in high schools. While character education was important at all levels of schooling, the researchers focused specifically on high schools during this study as little research had been conducted on high schools. In particular, the researchers examined how the administrator prepared and trained the school staff, students, and stakeholders and how this preparation allowed for the successful implementation and national recognition of the character education program.

Methods

Sample

The study participants included 12 high school administrators in the United States who successfully implemented character education programs and were recognized as National Schools of Character by Character.org. Purposive sampling was used for this study, as the participants were chosen based on efforts to facilitate a successful character education initiative. A list of the 2020, 2021, and 2022 National Schools and Districts of Character from Character.org's website was used to randomly select high school administrators of National Schools of Character to participate in the study.

Data Sources, Collection, Analysis

The primary data source for this study was one-on-one, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with 12 high school administrators of National Schools of Character in the United States. The researchers composed the interview questions from the first two phases of the QIF. The administrators were involved in implementing the school's character education program. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and recorded for analysis with the participants' permission. The interviews were an average of 45 minutes long and had 12 scripted questions about implementing character education.

Qualitative data was collected via interviews. The researchers obtained approval to conduct research at the district level in writing after completing the Institutional Review Board application process. Then, the researchers recruited administrators, received written informed consent, and set up interviews via email. Participants were asked to answer 12 scripted questions over Microsoft Teams, with follow-up questions as needed. The questions were related to implementing an effective character education program and how the administrators prepared the school, staff, and stakeholders for a successful program implementation.

The researchers obtained 12 interview transcripts through Microsoft Teams. Upon completing each interview, the researchers emailed each participant a copy of the transcripts to member-check for accuracy and clarification. Once the participants emailed the changes, the researchers listened to the interviews and compiled all transcripts into folders. Transcripts were uploaded to the raw data into MAXQDA, a qualitative software program for coding purposes.

Data were organized with the aid of MAXQDA software. All interview transcripts were uploaded and coded using a complete coding approach (Braun & Clark, 2013). Transcription of the interviews was presented to participants for member checking. Next, the researchers coded all interviews independently, and then the coded transcripts were merged into one file with 54 final codes. Once the coded transcripts were incorporated, the researchers identified and rectified any code overlap or discrepancy. The MAXQDA software tabulated the frequency for each code. The researchers then created 11 categories for all similar and overlapping codes to help create themes. Four themes developed during the data analysis process were embedded character education, tailored programs, staff commitment, and the cost of character education. All codes, categories, and themes were generated about the general research question: What steps did high school administrators of National Schools of Character take before implementing an effective character education program?

Results

Participants

The 12 participants, seven females, and five males, were all part of secondary school administrative teams working as current or former principals, assistant principals, and athletic directors in National High Schools of Character. Four participants held doctoral degrees. The study participants were contacted by email and telephone. Participants A, H, I, and J were from Missouri. Participants B, F, K, and L were from New Jersey. Participant C was from Pennsylvania, participant D was from Michigan, participant E was from Kansas, and participant G was from North Carolina. Table 1 shows the demographics of each participant.

Table 1

Demographic Data of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity
A	female	47	Caucasian
B	female	60	Caucasian
C	male	70	Caucasian
D	female	64	Caucasian
E	female	51	Caucasian
F	male	57	Caucasian
G	female	57	African American
H	male	49	Caucasian
I	female	50	Caucasian
J	male	35	Caucasian
K	female	54	Caucasian
L	male	52	Caucasian

All participants engaged in an interview with 12 open-ended questions that lasted between 19 and 46 minutes. The combined time of all the interviews amounted to 399 minutes, with an average interview time of 33.25 minutes. The researchers had 262 single-spaced transcripts in 11-point Calibri font, an average of 22 pages per interview.

Results

After the interviews and coding processes were completed, the researchers discovered four overarching themes in the results: embedded character education, tailored programs, staff commitment, and the cost of character education.

Theme 1: Embedded Character Education

Ten codes were categorized into the first theme, which examined how school administrators must embed character education into everything in the school. This theme includes the academic curriculum, athletics, fine arts, technical education, clubs, and every other aspect of the school. High school administrators in this study shared that character education was not contained in a specific class or period. One participant stated, "I realized, well, we build character all the time. First, you know, that's part of our culture and climate, and I'm very big into rituals and presentations." Another participant stated, "Character education is so embedded in everything that we do." The goal was to embed character education in everything associated with the school. The participants recognized that character education was embedded into many aspects of their schools at high levels in the host settings as referenced in the QIF.

Theme 2: Tailored Programs

The second theme combined two categories using eight different codes. This theme examined how school administrators tailored the character education program to the school's needs. The researchers found that high school administrators of National Schools of Character did not use a specific program. The participants tailored the program to the school's particular needs. None of the participants utilized a named character education program to fidelity. All participants took ideas from other programs, books, schools, and the needs in their schools. Each administrator developed character education teams in their schools to aid the program's planning

and implementation. One participant stated, "I don't feel like we are implementing a program. I feel like we're doing some specific things. I do feel like we adopted a set of building-wide core values. And I think we intentionally did some different programs." From the QIF, the participants recognized what was in the host setting by evaluating aspects of their buildings that applied to character education.

Theme 3: Staff Commitment

The third theme was that all school staff must be committed to character education. The participants all stressed that one person cannot successfully implement character education and make a beneficial impact alone. All participants in this study consistently shared and emphasized this theme. One administrator shared that a school should not even consider implementing a character education program without the commitment and buy-in from the staff. That administrator said, "The number one thing that you have to have is buy-in from your teachers to be able to do this because they're the ones that are doing it." The participants recognized that staff buy-in was crucial for building a structure for implementing a character education program, which connect to a step in the QIF.

Theme 4: The Cost of Character Education

The fourth theme is related to the cost of character education. Character education did not have to cost a lot financially, but it did take a major investment in time and relationship-building with the school staff, students, parents, community members, and all other stakeholders. Participants spent very little money on the initiative but noted other costs. All administrators said that time was the biggest investment as each administrator spent countless hours planning, training, sharing, and reflecting on the character education program in the school. The program could be administered with minimal funds but took a huge commitment of time—the true cost of implementing an effective character education program involved time and relationship-building rather than money. One participant stated, "It really didn't cost much money at all. I mean, there really wasn't much cost to it." Participants looked at the cost as part of the setting for implementing character education programs as referenced in the QIF.

Discussion, Implications, and Future Avenues

This descriptive, qualitative study sought to understand what steps high school administrators took before implementing an effective character education program to gain the distinction of being a National School of Character. Before implementing a character education program in a high school, an administrator should apply several ideas discovered during this research. First, the administrator should set aside much time for planning and research. The participants in this study emphasized the importance of time. High school administrators should examine the school and look for strengths and weaknesses related to character education. As noted by the participants of this study, all schools are already doing some form of character education, even though it might not be labeled as such.

Two themes emerged during this study that are closely related: administrators should embed and tailor the character education program to fit the needs of their school. As the QIF states, administrators should conduct a needs and fit assessment for any character initiative before implementation. School administrators should develop a character education team of teachers, students, and parents. This team will be instrumental in successfully implementing a

character education program. The team should work together to find ways to tailor and embed the program into their school. For example, a program can be extremely effective when stakeholders develop character in students (Farikah, 2019). All members should be valued and should contribute to the plan. Several participants of this study shared that the best teams comprised volunteers. High school administrators should ask for volunteers to create the most effective team. Berkowitz et al. (2017) stressed the importance of community and stakeholder involvement and voice being heard throughout the implementation process. This team will be instrumental in developing and executing the character development plan.

The development of a leadership team will aid in the commitment and buy-in of the school staff. All leadership team members must contribute to developing and sharing a positive message related to character education. Staff buy-in should be a priority of the team before implementing the program. For example, Mombourquette (2017) found that engaging stakeholders and obtaining support only strengthened the school's goals and vision. Many of these ideas were mentioned and evident in the participant interviews. These ideas can collectively influence the successful implementation of a high school character education program.

Limitations

A limitation of the study was the use of Microsoft Teams for transcripts. The researchers and participants had to go back and correct errors during the transcription process. While no transcription service is perfect, Microsoft Teams was sufficient with audio and video of each candidate. Other transcription services cost money to use but may be more accurate. Another limitation was that many participants declined to participate. Few high schools of character existed, and the number of people who refused to participate limited the variability of the sample. Using a qualitative design could have led to potential biases of the researchers. The last limitation was using an electronic format to conduct interviews. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, appointments are virtual; however, face-to-face interaction is normally the best way to build trust and be more interactive. During the interview process, technological issues with the camera prohibited the researchers from seeing the faces of some participants.

Future Research

The researchers recommend the following avenues for future research: include more stakeholders in the high school setting (such as faculty, staff, parents, students, and community members) to describe why character education in the high school setting is scarce and link character education strategies in elementary and middle schools to character education strategies in the high school. Another area of future research could reveal why few or no National High Schools of Character existed in certain portions of the United States of America. A final recommendation would be to investigate the connection and impact of character education in the high school setting on academic achievement, climate, and culture.

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