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A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ON THE PERCEPTION OF MIDDLE SCHOOL
STAKEHOLDERS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPORTANCE OF
CHARACTER EDUCATION IN THREE MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN AN INNER CITY
SCHOOL DISTRICT IN ALABAMA

by

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the graduate faculty of the University of Alabama at Birmingham,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2009

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EMEKA NZEOCHA

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand how middle school stakeholders viewed character education. Character education has been used to combat student disruptions. Young adolescents in the middle school setting present various challenges to school leaders, and this study sought to understand how the stakeholders in this setting viewed character education.

A qualitative design with a case study methodology was used to conduct this study. An Institutional Review Board approval was secured prior to commencing the research. Purposeful sampling was used to select the 46 participants in this study, which included students, parents, a school janitor, teachers, a school nurse, school counselors, a police officer, assistant principals, and principals. Additional data were collected through observations and analysis of various artifacts related to character education. After the interviews were transcribed, they were coded for emergent themes on the stakeholder's view of character education regarding its effectiveness and importance.

Ten themes emerged from the data. These themes included (a) indefinite definitions, (b) unfamiliarity with terminology, (c) a sense of urgency, (d) rotten in the middle, (e) rotten at home, (f) Informal character education, (g) unsure of immediate impacts, (h) huge emphasis on academic progress, (i) lack of buy-in (j), and a disconnect in practices.

The findings in this research indicated that middle school adult stakeholders believe in the effectiveness of character education. They agreed that their students' lack of performance and moral compass call for lessons geared towards improving the total student. However, they also concurred that despite the concerns they have regarding students' behavior, character education is not a priority at their schools studied. In most cases, the students could neither define nor identify what constitutes character education.

The outcome of this dissertation is a Character Awareness Promotion (CAP) and the Character Readiness, Enhancement, and Development (CRED) models, coupled with other recommendations for middle school stakeholders in any urban school setting to utilize as research data to improve their character education initiatives and maximize more of the (innate) positive qualities of our young students. In so doing, they will ensure a safe school, increase performance abilities of their students, and create an ethical and performance learning community.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the entire Nzeocha family. Since I was a kid, I knew that I had a calling to study and teach, and my family's presence has been there all along to support me. As the fifth member of a 16-member family to go into education, my family has always believed in me. From my late father, Gilbert O. Nzeocha, whose vague memory I carry with me and my late mother, Chief Mrs. Theresa O. Nzeocha, who never learned to read (but when she entered adult education at almost 60 years old always placed first among her peers at an adult education center), I could not have asked for a more solid cheer group.

Conceptually, this research has been envisioned as far back as 20 years ago, and the fruition could only have emanated at God's own schedule. To my late sister and brother, Margaret and Jude, may your souls rest in peace. My gratitude also goes to my biggest brother, Anthony Nzeocha (Ph.D), the most unassuming, kind, and unselfish human being on this planet. I know this journey took longer than you wished, brother, but WE did it. To our sister and "mother," Justina, may God continue to guard and bless you as you have always fervently guided me. Sisters Ngozi and Grace, I love you angels!

To Mary Love, who taught me that "Love" is an action word; you are forever in my heart. To my sweet, kind, and loving wife Nkeiru, and children: Chad (the Genius One/future MD), Megan (Sweetest One/future RN), Kaitlin (Fearless One/future veterinarian, and who helped write my "dishertashn"), and Austin (the Advisor/future Major League Slugger), I am so proud of you all.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

To educate a man, but teach him no morals makes him a menace to society.”
– *Teddy Roosevelt* (Brainyquote, n.d.)

Tragic events in schools all over the country like the 1997 school shooting at Paducah, Kentucky, and the 1999 school massacre at Columbine High School have left stakeholders wondering, “Could this happen at my school? Are we prepared? What are the warning signs that students may harm themselves or others” (Maxwell, 2007). In 2007, a middle school student brought a loaded revolver to a school in Alabama. After the shock faded, many administrators, faculty, and parents wondered what schools were doing to prevent tragic events from occurring in their schools. Perhaps lost in the pan-demonium of the potential danger the middle school student in Alabama could have wrought with the gun was the possible accolades due toward the other student who displayed good character and alerted school administrators to the deadly weapon on the school’s campus. In this case, “good” character represents a behavior that is laudable and courageous. Thus, that good (the action of informing school authorities) and appalling display (bringing the gun school to cause harm) and many such incidents in our school campuses today fuel the debate over character education.

Character education proponents extol the positive foundations that it could bring to students’ growth. Such positive behaviors include the 25 traits outlined by Alabama’s

Legislature: courage, patriotism, citizenship, honesty, fairness, respect for others, kindness, cooperation, self-respect, self-control, courtesy, compassion, tolerance, diligence, generosity, punctuality, cleanliness, cheerfulness, school pride, respect for the environment, patience, creativity, sportsmanship, loyalty, and perseverance (Alabama State Department of Education, 2008; Williams, 2000).

In addition, Shapiro (1999), in a study of morals among middle school students sees character education terms as helping young people become acquainted with virtues such as generosity, courage, honesty, and determination, and views the study of this pedagogy as “a valuable compliment to character education efforts” (p. 8).

Nevertheless, some have argued that, “character education’s single minded focus on virtues and moral exemplars is apt to leave young people wondering what one actually does to be honest or courageous or generous or determined” (Shapiro, 1999). Furthermore, Shapiro asked that when faced with moral choice, how does one actually resolve what constitutes a virtuous action? Yet, Damon (2005) asserted that every school, for better or worse, makes a choice regarding incorporating character education in their schools. The outcomes of the school’s choice or lack thereof may shed light into their character education initiatives. As Lickona (2004) inscribed:

Why is character important? Look around. Good character is the key to self-respect, to earning the respect of others, to positive relationships, to a sense of fulfillment, to achievements you can be proud of, to a happy marriage, to success in every area of life. But don’t take my word for it. Interview people who have lived most of their lives. Ask them: When they look back, what are they proud of? What gives them fulfillment? What would they do differently if they could live their lives over? (p. 2)

Using Lickona’s (2002) argument, character education proponents tend to associate good character with behavior that benefits the individual and those around him/her in

ways that are virtuous. The basic argument in their assertion could also be summed up in the notion that when people live and conduct themselves according to a set of norms established by society, those individuals are exhibiting good character traits.

The statistics today examining students' behavior are replete with findings that show they are engaged in all kinds of disruptive and violent activities in school. Fights are rampant, bullying (at school, online, or in the community), stabbings, and about 1.3 million criminal acts against teachers were recorded between 1997-2001 (Collins, 2003; School Violence Resource Center, 2003). The U.S Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools (2006) reported that from 2002-2003, school data showed that in Alabama, 53 students were expelled for bringing a gun to school. Ninety-one percent of Alabama school districts also reported at least one student possessing a weapon at school.

Therefore, to combat those situations, school leaders, and indeed many stakeholders have turned to some form of character, moral, or cultural education as a tool against escalating school violence (Collins, 2003). Increasingly, zero tolerance policies have been used to send serious messages against perceived or actual school violence. Programs that emphasize conflict resolution strategies, anger management, self/violence awareness issues; multicultural understanding, and civic pride are advocated and used in almost all states in the country to affect student behavior (Collins, 2003). Recent studies by Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006), and others (Heavey et al., 2002; Lockwood, 1994; Stott & Jackson, 2005) indicated that character education could help schools get a handle on disruption and violence in schools.

Statement of the Problem

In the 21st Century, many educators and parents question school practices or lack thereof relative to initiatives aimed at curbing school disruption and violence (Glasser, 2003). Recently, bullying, fights, rape, teacher assaults, drugs, weapons possessions, shootings, and other forms of school violence have become all too common in our middle schools today (Collins, 2003; National Council on Educational Statistics [NCES], 2002; Schwartz, 1996). Although there was some decline in school violence in the 1990s (NCES), any violence at school could still end in tragic results. Thus, school administrators and teachers now use character education, civic, and moral lessons to re-focus the students in order to achieve the purpose and missions of the school (Lickona, 2004).

Character education, moral teachings, and civic education aimed at instructing citizens of the State to do what is perceived as noble deeds have been in existence for hundreds of years. Ancient philosophers such as Confucius, Plato, Aristotle wrote about man's intrinsic worth, and Jesus used all his teachings and skills to endear humanity to God (Algera & Sink, 2002; Elias, 1989; Wynn & Ryann, 1997). Following the same beliefs in teaching character, the ancient Greeks and Romans also believed in the character traits of courage, perseverance, and others as they sought to raise children capable of not only defending their nations, but also expanding their empires (Algera & Sink).

Between 100 BC and 70 AD, Hebrew student education accentuated monotheism, righteousness, sound judgment, and individual virtues (Blake, 1961). Similarly, ancient

Athenian education emphasized a reverence to the gods, respect for elders, physical, intellectual, and moral stamina and harmony (Blake). In many instances, they employed various myths and mythological figures to drive home messages of great character and communion with the gods as a reward.

Historically, character education in America dates back to the arrival of the Puritans on the continent (Carr, 1999). They brought with them rigid codes and harsh penalties for students who do not conform. In the 21st Century, character education in its many forms continues to be touted as a tool to ameliorate or eradicate negative student behavior (Lockwood, 1994). Although there have been some empirical studies on the topic (Bannister, 1993; Glasser, 2003; Heavey, Meyers, Mozdren, & Warnake, 2002; Shappiro, 1999; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006), most of them presented inconclusive results and called for further studies on the topic. Current studies of character education have not adequately and critically focused on and relayed actual voices of middle school students in examining the topic, as this study intends to accomplish.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perception of middle school stakeholders concerning the importance and the effectiveness of character education in three middle schools in an urban school district in Alabama.

This case study addressed the stakeholders' perception of character education. A case methods design was used, which involved collecting in-depth qualitative data. Previous studies on character, moral, or civic education tend to be quantitative studies

(Finley, 2005; Heavey et al., 2002; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2006) that draw statistical correlations between character education and such variables as school violence, academic improvement, truancy, and so on. Qualitative studies on character education (Glasser, 2003; Shapiro, 1999) are few, especially in the middle school area. This study will add to the on-going discourse on the topic by focusing on middle school stakeholders to gauge their empirical opinions and voices regarding the effectiveness and importance of character education. Character education will be explored with middle school stakeholders at the three middle school sites selected for the study. The central question in this qualitative study will be: How do stakeholders in the middle school level view character education? It is imperative for curriculum and pedagogical purposes to seek the answer to that and other related questions. With continuing student disruption and disciplinary concerns, data gathered from the voices of these middle school stakeholders on the perceptions of character education is expected to illustrate practices, concerns, and expectations of hope regarding the topic. Equipped with that information, stakeholders could make additional decisions that impact character education at their respective schools.

Research Question

Central Qualitative Research Question

How do middle school stakeholders view character education?

Sub-questions.

1. How do stakeholders define character education?
2. Do stakeholders think character education should be the schools' responsibility?
3. How do stakeholders view results of their schools' character education programs?

Significance of the Study

For educators and other stakeholders, character education is seen as the best way to tackle the manner in which our middle school students, and indeed all levels of students, conduct themselves. More than ever, schools are being relied upon to provide our students with more than the "3 Rs." Just recently, the *New York Times* reported that a school district in Portland, Maine ignited a national stir when they voted to offer condoms to girls in middle schools after learning that 17 middle school students had become pregnant in the last 4 years, 7 of them in the 2006-2007 school year (Zezima, 2007). Although several behavior issues students deal with appear to fall under parental purviews, schools have either been relegated to act *in loco parentis*, or simply have no choice than to tackle those character issues to ensure positive learning environments and future for their stakeholders.

In Alabama, the topic of character education became a legislative issue in 1975 (see Ala. Code 16-45-5) when the state passed a law mandating the Pledge of Allegiance. In 1995, the legislature also passed Alabama ACT 95-313, which mandated all grades in

Alabama schools to devote at least 10 min of instruction time each day spotlighting 25-character traits. Those traits include courage, patriotism, citizenship, honesty, fairness, respect for others, kindness, cooperation, self-respect, self-control, courtesy, compassion, tolerance, diligence, generosity, punctuality, cleanliness, cheerfulness, school pride, respect for the environment, patience, creativity, sportsmanship, loyalty, and perseverance. In 1997, the State Board of Education Resolution followed Alabama State Legislator's lead and directed all Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to develop and implement a comprehensive character education program from k-12.

At the conclusion of this study, the information generated may help middle school stakeholders to critically analyze their character education programs to determine its role and effectiveness. The study may also help stakeholders to determine other benefits that could result from their character education initiatives based on needs of their school and community. Their voices may provide stakeholders with research data pertaining to how these programs are perceived, how well they work, and how the participants believe character education can be taught.

Assumptions of the Study

The following assumptions were present in this research:

1. Middle school students in general present unique disciplinary challenges.
2. Middle school students, especially those in urban schools, have a set of challenges that make their educational experiences more difficult.
3. Character education can improve the school climate and academic achievement of the students.

4. Stakeholders were very familiar with the practice of character education in their schools and could provide similar definitions.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations were present during the course of this research study:

1. It was evident through literature and conversations with those familiar with the topic that character education is a very broad term that encompasses several topics. The challenge was on whether to focus the study and data analysis on a particular moral aspect of character or behavior that may be prevalent at the sites studied.

2. The study was only conducted in three middle schools, and therefore may not be generalized outside of those participating sites.

3. Although the researcher has had professional working relationships with some of the participants and research sites in the study. Objectivity and rigor was maintained throughout the study.

4. Four of the recorded interviews were not transcribed due to technical issues after they were recorded. Although detailed notes taken during the interview were considered for the study, there actual quotes were not included in the reporting to avoid misquoting the participants.

Definition of Terms

Adolescence: Adolescence is the time when childhood is left behind and young teens begin to cross the long bridge that separates childhood and the adult world. It is also a time when most children begin to pull away from their families. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget contended that by age 12 years, a child develops more logical

structure to his thought processes and some capacity for abstract thought and reason (Pruitt, 1999).

Bullying: Entails the physical or mental harassment of one person by another wherein the victim is not able to defend him or herself (Fried & Fried, 2003). Rallis, Rossman, Cobb, Reagan, and Kuntz (2008), added that because bullying lacks a concrete definition, “the core elements of the definition focuses on repeated harmful behavior meted out from one individual, or a group, directed against another” (p. 91). Lickona (2008) prefers the term “peer cruelty” to describe the physical and mental harm involved in bullying.

Character Education: There is no specific definitions of character education, but it has been defined as the deliberate, proactive effort to develop good characteristics in kids - or, more simply, to teach children right from wrong. It assumes that right and wrong do exist, that there are objective moral standards that transcend individual choice - standards like respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness – and other virtues (Lickona, 2004).

Crime: Crime is usually defined as any violation of a statute, law, regulation, or any behavior that the government deems harmful to the individual or property. Crimes are divided into misdemeanors (lesser offences) and felonies (egregious offences) (Devoe et al., 2002).

Good: Good is used often in this study to describe student behavior. For purposes of this research, I would define Good as a general respect for other individuals and their opinion, and abiding by lawful school rules and regulations.

Middle School: Middle schools attempt to understand and plan for the complexity of the preadolescent or "transescent" age group, and facilitate a smooth transition between elementary school and high school (Tomlinson, 1994). Middle schools range from grades 6-8 or grades 7-9, comprising students between ages 10-14 years.

Stakeholder: Freeman is generally credited with popularizing the stakeholder concept, with his 1984 book *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. It refers to anyone who can and is impacted by a decision, or one who has a stake in an organization. However, it is often recognized that the word first appeared in management literature via an internal memo at the Stanford Research Institute in 1963 (Friedman & Miles, 2006, p. 19).

Virtue: Virtue encompasses the moral characteristics of honesty, fairness, kindness, humility, hard-work, and compassion. Also included are character traits such as self-discipline, responsibility, friendship, courage, perseverance, loyalty, and faith (Bennett, 1993).

Theoretical Framework

Case studies in research is a distinctive part of an ethnography where the researcher uses a broadening of perspectives to give voice to the participants and explore a "bounded system" such as an activity, an event, a process, or an individual (Creswell, 2005). The central phenomenon to be examined in this study is character education. The researcher's central question deals with how participants at the middle school levels view character education. To frame the phenomenon and the subsequent research question, the researcher posits a definition of the topic as such: Character education is defined as the schools' programs, activities, or lessons used to encourage acceptable behavior, academic

excellence, citizenship, and democratic principles. There exists many definitions of character education, but the standpoint of this researcher's definition will add to the reflections and reporting of how the participants define the topic.

Researcher's Viewpoint

Axiological assumptions in qualitative research embrace that "all research is value laden" (Creswell, 2007). In this study, Character education aligns with the axiological (role of values) aspects, assumptions, and discourse that may manifest on the topic. Character is about individual behavior and the values that propel their actions (Gibbs, 2002). In addition, the value systems of both the researcher and the participants will ultimately enhance the data that will emanate from the study. The central research question and subquestions dealt with character education's effectiveness (how well it works and how it should work) and importance (why it is needed).

In addition, the researcher will also assume a social constructivist paradigm/worldview in the research. In the social constructivist paradigm, individuals or researchers seek to understand the world in which they live or work (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). Furthermore, Marshall and Rossman (1999) posited that qualitative research takes a worldview that believes "knowledge is subjective rather than being the objective Truth," and that "the researcher learns from participants to understand the meaning of their lives" while maintaining a position of neutrality (Marshall & Rossman, p. 4). The quality and trustworthiness of this research was of paramount importance to the researcher. Adequate steps were also taken to gather data and ensure neutrality in the process. As data are collected and analyzed the questions will broaden, and the results of this study will be

given an added scrutiny because of the constructivist philosophical paradigm (Creswell, 2007).

The objective of this research was to reach particular conclusions regarding the participants' view on the topic. Data uncovered during the research will be presented to the community and may serve as a resource that will lead the participants, especially the staff at the research sites, to future actions regarding the topic of character education. The results of the study may aid administrators and other interested stakeholders in their implementation or changes pertaining to character education curriculum and programs.

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Background

“The child is to be not only a voter and a subject of law; he is also to be a member of a family, himself in turn responsible, in all probability, for rearing and training of future children, thereby maintaining the continuity of society”. – John Dewey (Dewey, 1959, p. 9).

Character education is a concept that many parents, school administrators, teachers, and students have recognized as a tool to help students function in our society. Althof and Berkowitz (2006) and Cornet, Jeffrey, and Chant (2000), asserted that many educators believe positive civic virtue can and should be taught. Damon (2005) concluded that every school “for better or worse” makes a choice regarding incorporating character education in their schools. In addition, violence in schools and other disruptive problems are at the top of major concerns facing education (Elam, 1996).

During the Los Angeles riots of 1992, Rodney King, the man who was at the center of the controversy, espoused a passionate speech that reverberated around the country. In an attempt to add to the cooler-heads-should-prevail discourse, he asked, “Why can’t we all just get along?” For many of our young students, perceptions prevail that getting along with each other seems to be about drawing the strongest boundaries of intolerance, holding grudges, materialistic, disrespecting teachers and school administrators, and lack of consideration for consequences (Ellenwood, 2007).

The numbers depict that students are engaged in various violent activities in school. There are serious fights resulting in injuries, bullying (at school/online), stabbings, sexual harassment, teacher assaults, and murder are simply becoming an all too frequent aspect of school settings across the nation (Sanchez, 2005; Stein, 1996; You et al., 2008). In a 2002-2003 report, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools (2006) showed 53 students in Alabama from a total enrollment of 735,102 (0.072%) were expelled for bringing a gun to school. In addition, 91% of Alabama school districts also reported at least a student possessing a weapon at school.

To combat that situation, school leaders and politicians alike are turning to character and moral issues as a tool against school violence. Programs that emphasize conflict resolution strategies, anger management, self/violence awareness issues; multicultural understanding (National Conference for Community & Justice, 2006) and civic pride are now used in almost all states in the country. For everyone concerned about educational achievement, adding school violence in the mix compounds the issue even more. As Kirkpatrick (1992) pointed out, "In addition to the fact that Johnny still can't read, we are now faced with more serious problem that he can't tell right from wrong" (p. 87).

According to the Character Education Partnership (CEP; 2008) there does not appear to be a single pedagogy ascribed to character education. Thus, their view was that:

Character education is a national movement encouraging schools to create environments that foster ethical, responsible, and caring young people. It is the intentional, proactive effort by schools, districts, and states to instill in their students important core, ethical values that we all share such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for self and others. (CEP, 2008)

The pedagogical issue facing character education may not be how and whether schools should be involved in character education. Rather, the fight could be over the

perception of its implementation and relative acceptance of previous practices and enforcement.

Viewpoints on Early Character Education Practices

Education at its best should expand the mind and build character.

—Secretary Margaret Spellings (U.S. Dept. of Educ., 2009)

Many educators, researchers, and policy makers have tried to attribute a specific definition to character education; however, there seems to be several fitting characterizations. Robinson III, Jones, and Hayes (2000) maintained:

In a broad sense, the phrase ‘character education’ refers to almost anything that schools might try to provide outside of academics, especially when the purpose is to help children become good people....At the heart of character education is a belief that there are specific virtues that should be a part of education for all students. (p. 21)

The virtues entailed in character education, while broad in nature, provide a link from expectations of school administrators and other stakeholders to pedagogical effort necessary to realize address concerns over student behavior.

In providing a rationale for the funding of programs aimed at character education, the U. S. Department of Education website on character education (2007) noted:

Sadly, we live in a culture without role models, where millions of students are taught the wrong values -- or no values at all. This culture of callousness has led to a staggering achievement gap, poor health status, overweight students, crime, violence, teenage pregnancy, and tobacco and alcohol abuse....Good character is the product of good judgments made every day. (p. 1)

Although those issues appear broad and unattainable as goals of character education, there is widespread support for schools and wherever children are taught or raised to impart strong morals, values, and community norms.

Educators since Ancient Greece have emphasized good character, and contemporary students have always been expected to be well adjusted, genuine, persistent, and good citizens (Mayer & Cobb, 2000). Literature also revealed that although character education in America could be traced historically to the pre-colonial era (Bennett, 1989; Bryan, 2005; Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, 2007; Cuberly, 1934; Frey, 2002; Glanzer & Milson, 2006; Lerner, 2005; Lickona, 2004; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999) much of the culminating practices of the 21st century and present issues on the topic could be seen as a re-emergence of earlier character education practices, as the review showed (Reese, 2007).

Indeed the history of this topic spans centuries and covers a wide range of issues impacting American education and way of life. For purposes of this research, this rich history of character education will be condensed and reviewed to highlight the religious and socio-political angles viable to this study. An examination will be conducted with a background from the puritan's strong moral beliefs, influences of Horace Mann (who was known as the father of American public education system), to the current policies impacting demands for character education in America.

The Puritans have been credited with strong moral emphasis in their educational style after their arrival in the New Colony. Some of those schools were simply based on business/commercial enterprises that were founded as an extension of the churches to promulgate intrinsic worth and positive character traits, as well as their religious indoctrinations. Based on their strong religious beliefs, schools were run with strict rules, discipline and good character were emphasized, and there was no tolerance for unruly behavior or even the slightest criticism against this harsh religion (Hedgepeth, 1993). There was strict prohibition on students arguing their viewpoints or expressing themselves.

Students who did not conform were simply punished by various means including exclusion and whippings (Hlebowitsh, 2001). Massachusetts Bay Colony, considered most populated at that time, passed a law requiring families to teach their children to read; therefore, putting emphasis on parental involvement. It was in that mindset that the state of Massachusetts cemented a recognized character and moral based education mandate by passing what came to be known as the “Old Deluder Act.” This act was notable for the following: (a) Ignorance was deemed satanic – an affliction of “Old Deluder”; (b) every town with 50 families should hire a teacher for the students; (c) towns with 100 families or more should establish a grammar school; (d) it officially mandated the hiring and payment of teachers; and (e) towns that did not obey the law were fined (Boorstein, 1958; De Tocqueville, 2003).

Punishments at schools ran by the Puritans were swift and extremely harsh for those who dared misbehave, and beating the devil out of the students who ran afoul of school rules was seen as liberating them from the devil (old deluder)” (Cubberly, 1934). Reese (2007) found that there were also complaints regarding foul language and men with long hairs not being respectful to their elders. Even so, fiery sermons preached by one of their leaders, John Winthrop, to make their new settlement “the city upon a hill” was viewed as unattainable due to problems associated with the younger Puritans.

As a result of efforts to redirect the focus of education to be less dependent on religious tenets, many wealthy families and Catholics were upset over the presence of immigrants, middle and low-income families, and even the integration of girls into schools dominated by boys. They feared that the strict moral and religious mandates they believed in were being abandoned and that their own religion was being marginalized.

They shied away from public schools and instead opted to send their children to alternative schools that emphasized religious and moral lifestyles.

Understandably, dissensions towards character education as it was practiced by the Puritans began to surface. Many educational leaders influenced by philosophers like Karl Max and Charles Darwin's theories refused to accept ideas of a higher purpose of existence. These alternative ideologues argued that human behavior are results of circumstances (Lerner, 2005). Schools were relaxing their strict nature and were becoming protective heavens for innocent children and many of the immigrants who were deemed in need of nurturing and active living (Cunningham, 2005). Because of an increased immigration and pluralism character education as strictly enforced by the puritans was frowned upon and took on a less harsh role in its implementation (Lerner, 2005).

As the educational moral and religious stranglehold of the Puritans to faded, another shift on character education based on socio-political influences emerged. The American educator and philosopher, John Dewey, had defined education as "the process by which man becomes man" (Dewey, 2007, p. 81). Dewey went on to argue that man begins life immersed in nature and therefore not naturally gifted for the moral life because "nature furnishes only instinct and appetite" (p. 81). As a result, Dewey went on to affirm that "man has to create himself by his own voluntary efforts; he has to make himself a truly moral, rational, and free being" (p. 81).

At the end of the Revolutionary War and the 1783 Treaty of Paris, many Americans looked to government to emphasize citizenship. The *Blue Back Speller*, by Noah Webster became popular for spelling and pronunciation. Others, mostly elementary students read *McGuffey's Readers*, which extolled virtues and patriotism. Thus, the emer-

gence of substantiated and printed character education manuals had begun. In those writings, good Americans were described as courageous, honest, hardworking, and deeply religious (Frey, 2002). Building on the traits sought by Webster and McGuffey, the citizens looked for schools to rejuvenate the ideal of common goals because America was expanding culturally. To achieve that purpose, the system of free, compulsory education, which would be free of religion and strict moral codes, was proposed. In its place, schools were charged with teaching patriotism and building character, albeit less dependent on harsh religious codes. Following philosophical and other social advancements, Horace Mann (known as the founder of public schools) established the first public school, sometimes referred to as normal school in 1839.

Based on efforts to expand the framework of education, philosopher John Dewey called for an expansion of the progressive theory, which later became vocational education and life adjustment curriculum. Ellis (2004) posited that that progressive theory in education claims that effective learning takes place as a result of daily life interactions, especially during early-childhood and pre-teen years. Although John Dewey could not be directly credited or blamed for this eventual outcome, the whole-child approach to teaching character emerged with homerooms, hobby clubs, service organizations, etc., geared towards producing a wholesome school atmosphere and child (Cunningham, 2005).

The American society, facing social and patriotic challenges evidenced by issues like race riots, religious tensions, and “red scare” (fear of communists), and focus on personal development, turned public attention to pure academics (Cunningham, 2005) and nationalism, and away from virtues, morality and other character traits mentioned in *McGuffey’s Readers*. Burnett (2007) pointed out that the existence of fear of unpatriotic

Communists was blamed for riots across the country in the mid-20th Century. Schools became a hotbed of harassment of professors accused of sympathetic Communist ideologies. Rather than using any character education or conflict resolution strategies to tackle these issues, many resorted to other deadlier methods. The American Legion was formed and the phrase “Leave the Reds to the Legion” became a popular mantra. Forced deportations, arrests, and imprisonment pervaded the national consciousness during that time as Americans attempted to form a unified force against communism (Burnett, 2007; Kirvida & Sanchez, 1999). Clearly, one can imagine how a courageous dissenter against the treatment of Communist sympathizers at that time could have faced charges of treason. Indeed, that was one of the arguments regarding character education, which is that certain traits meant to maintain order in a democratic society could also be a contradiction of “character.”

However, as America rose to the race for space exploration, it put academic achievement in the math and sciences at the forefront once again, consigning character education to the background. On October 4, 1957 when the Russian’s *Ivestia Daily* proclaimed “We Were First”, following their successful launching of Sputnik, billions of dollars was poured into the American educational system to emphasize techno-scientific approach matching that achievement. All character education curriculums were relegated to the background (Whiteley & Yokota, 1988). Despite those efforts, criticism of the school system for failures to keep up in the academic chase heightened (Reese, 2007, p. 218)

As the Center for the 4th & 5th R’s noted regarding the philosophical view of character education:

Character education — instruction in virtue through edifying stories, the teacher's example, and discipline — remained a central part of the public school's mission until the middle part of the 20th century. It declined for several reasons: (a) The rise of logical positivism - "There is no moral truth, no objective right and wrong", and moral relativism - "All values are relative", (b) Personalism - "Each person should be free to choose his own values; who are we to impose our values?"; (c) Increasing pluralism - "Whose values should we teach?", and the secularizing of society and the fear that teaching morality in the schools would mean teaching religion. (Center for the 4th & 5th R's, 2007)

The factors often associated with a downward trend enumerated the challenges facing a democratic nation that aimed to excel in philosophical and socio-political identities as a powerful nation. It appeared that during that period dissenting ideologies were welcomed and theories espousing individual differences and choice were also deemed less harmful. In addition, a different shift towards academic achievement over emphasis on moral education was seen in the publication of a groundbreaking report, "A Nation at Risk." That report indicted America's public schools in the face of international scientific advancements and branded them as failures in their inability to produce well-rounded and competitive students in the world economy, saying:

Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, *and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them*. This report, the result of 18 months of study, seeks to generate reform of our educational system in fundamental ways and to renew the Nation's commitment to schools and colleges of high quality throughout the length and breadth of our land. (U.S. Department of Education, 1983, p. 1)

Springing to action, character education principles were endorsed by several groups of Americans at the Aspen Conference, hosted by the Josephson Institute of Ethics (Cornett & Chant, 2000). At that conference, Character Counts and the six ethical values or pillars governing the concept were constructed.

It remains logical to concur that America's public education system is beset with many perceived or real issues of school violence and continued charges of ineffective-

ness. Movements to use public funding for charter schools where stricter regulations and student discipline were less of an issue as a result of their selectiveness seem even more active (Bracey, 2001). In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which became the largest reform of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1965 (ESEA), was passed. Most importantly, this act now mandates schools to provide safe learning programs and environments (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), thus adding to the need for effective means of tackling student behaviors.

Writing on the penchant for school reforms by Americans who are in search of better students with positive character, Reese (2007) opined that there have been pro-school reformers from local politicians to business leaders. Recently, there have also been movies presenting heroic teachers with baseball bats or other weapons to the rescue of young students from the ills of public schools which character education attempts to cure (Reese). These movies and other portrayals attempt to depict the problems schools deal with and the frustration or courage that teachers and administrators exhibit as they deal with those issues.

However, questions still abound in the use of character education and civics education to promote character education. Murphy (2003) focused his study on the dichotomy and fracture of the American political spectrum in the debate over the best approach in civics and moral education. While liberals, circa early 20th century, extol the role of civics in enquiries towards the root causes of conflicts involving America, conservatives are perceived as “knee-jerk” reactionaries in their fervent patriotic stance towards conflicts (p. 70). In essence, not everyone concurs with a simplistic purpose attributes of

character education. Regardless, Murphy's contention understands, but disagrees with the role of schools as indispensable in the discourse of civics education at all grade levels.

Middle Schools, Character Education, and Conflict Resolution (CR) and Peer Mediation (PM) Programs

Conflict Resolution (CR) programs have seen a resurgence in schools across the nation. One of the major foundations engaged in the topic was The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. For about 2 decades, their foundation was very instrumental in funding and disseminating information regarding conflict resolution strategies around the globe. Kovic (2005), in a report that focused on the foundations strategies and achievements revealed that spanning more than 20 years, Hewlett's grant-making in the area of conflict resolution totaled more than \$160 million of support, through almost 900 grants to more than 320 organizations.

From their early support of environmental decision-making issues, improving public policy, family and community disputes, and involvement into the National Institute for Dispute Resolution (NIDR), the organization sought to ameliorate the contentious and often nonproductive conflict that have caused serious dysfunction in most facets of society. Aiming to build on the conflict-resolution (CR) programs such as the Community Relations Service (CRS) (which was created as part of the 1965 Civil Rights Act to infuse conflict resolution strategies in resolving civil rights issues in small communities across the nation), the foundation saw great potential in building on the program. In addition, the Neighborhood Justice Centers (NJS), which was created by the Carter Administration as substitutes for court actions, was another earlier CR program that the foundation pointed out in its continued effort in fostering similar CR goals.

Not long after, and based on its three-pronged strategy of Theory, Practice, and Infrastructure, the Hewlett Foundation, in conjunction with other organizations such as the Ford and MacArthur Foundations established the National Institute for Dispute Resolution (NIDR), which was tasked with developing strategies, promotion, and support of CR programs. Other organizations also had similar agendas, such as the Society for Professionals in Dispute Resolution (SPIDR), and in 1982, the first National Conference on Peace and Conflict Resolution (NCPCR) brought together academia and practitioners to engage in an inter-disciplinary dialogue about conflict resolution.

Eventually, the Hewlett Foundation developed and funded (to the tune of about \$21 million) Theory Centers on various campuses to generate scholarship on CR and other areas. Armed with strategies from those initiatives, the foundation continued its attention to schools because:

...beginning in the early 1990's, schools became one of the most important arenas for the integration of conflict resolution approaches. By the mid-1990s, conflict resolution education became one of the nation's primary strategies for addressing the problem of escalating school violence. (Kovic, 2005, pg. 41)

As many educational stakeholders seek ways of formulating positive character traits in students under the umbrella of character education, efforts such as those exhibited by the Hewlett Foundation continue to be built upon and studied.

Noting the rampant nature of violent and aggressive nature in schools, Smith, Daunic, Miller, and Robinson (2002) conducted a longitudinal quantitative study of CR and PM strategies in three middle schools in the rural counties of Florida. The purpose of their empirical study was to examine the relationships among student characteristics, conflict issues, and types of resolutions. They also examined "(a) whether the disputants be-

lieved that the mediation steps were followed and (b) were satisfied with the process” (Smith et al., 2002, p. 570).

Smith et al.’s (2002) 4-year study involved school populations totaling about 1,140 students and randomly selected cohort groups of 30 students matched evenly on SES, gender, and other social constructs. Using school-wide programs taught by the teachers, Smith et al. collected data that included all teachers and students, peer mediators and matched control samples, parents of peer mediators, and disputants. The participants in that study were given instruments that measured “use and satisfaction with the program” (Smith et al., p. 572). The surveys included measurements for students’ attitude, conflict resolution, school climate, peer mediator’s parent, and measurement of the disputants.

On the school-wide impact of the Conflict Resolution-Peer Mediation program, the results of the survey Smith et al. (2002) administered to over 1,800 students and 100 teachers “...indicated that the curriculum and mediation did not result in significant school-wide change in student attitudes toward conflict and communication or in teacher attitudes about school climate” (Smith et al., p. 575). There was a decrease in disciplinary referrals during the period of implementation of the Peer Mediation programs, and students used mediation in a total of 194 cases to adjudicate their disputes. Comparing data pertaining to attitude, the researchers found (among the control groups) that there were “no significant changes attributable to Peer Mediation training or experience for peer mediators as compared with their matched controls on most subscale scores of the Conflict Resolution Scale and the Student Attitudinal Survey” (Smith et al., 2002, p. 578). However, Smith et al. found that the mediators extolled positive opinions in post-

training sessions. In addition, the disputants were also more likely to indicate relative satisfaction after the process.

Smith et al. (2002), therefore, found no evidence to the efficacy of the Conflict Resolution-Peer Mediation program within or across the schools. They attributed that outcome to the short duration of the study and the unplanned implementation of the programs. They noted that “the middle school students’ resolution often consisted of avoiding each other or of stopping the offending behavior” (Smith et al., p. 581), which was consistent with other studies reviewed by Smith et al. Further analysis of the students’ attitudes also found no significant changes as a result of the Peer Mediation-Conflict Resolution program. Instead, there was evidence of “consistent pre-training differences between peer mediators as compared with a matched control group” (Smith et al., p. 582). There was a significant attitudinal change in the mediators’ ratings of teacher communication following mediation-training courses.

Smith et al. (2002) advocated for a program that can improve from the process as well as outcomes, since the programs they initiated enabled students to negotiate their own conflicts in manners indicative of good character. Smith et al. opined that programs should have highly trained mediators that exhibit leadership skills, and students who feel alienated, in special programs, and those leaning towards or having behavioral problems may also be taught CR programs to become mediators as a way of learning new skills. They contend that the knowledge gained from implementing these processes “may enhance researchers’ understanding of how to help students successfully negotiate the inevitable conflicts that are part of everyday school life (Smith et al., p. 585).

Similarly, Daunic, Smith, Robinson, Miller, and Landry (2000) undertook an investigation on the effectiveness of school-wide CR and PM programs. They shared their experiences in a phenomenological qualitative study of three middle schools that practiced CR/PM programs.

As Daunic et al. (2000) pointed out:

As disruptive, aggressive, and violent behaviors appear to be more prevalent throughout the school population, school-wide approaches to discipline are critical to ensuring safety and increasing the appropriate student interactions. Classroom teachers often have few available options when faced with disruptive or aggressive students. (p. 95)

According to Carlsson-paige and Levin (as cited in Daunic et al., 2000), “CR programs typically include a curriculum designed to teach students to acknowledge individual differences, change win-loose situations to win-win solutions and use negotiation to resolve conflicts” (p. 95). For 3 years, Daunic et al. (2000) scrutinized these programs as applied in three middle schools in the southeast of the United States. They disclosed their findings to stakeholders aiming to forestall the rising tide of students negative character displays in the urban theatre. Their study was designed into three phases: (a) the justification for CR/PM; (b) a profile of CR/PM structure, factors that aid execution of CR/PM; and (c) how students could apply the programs.

Furthermore, Daunic et al. (2002) opined that CR/PM had its roots in psychological and social developmental theories, and concurred that students at the middle school level value peer relationships highly and are heavily influenced by them. Moreover, students entering adolescence have increasing independence and identity needs.

Daunic et al. (2000) highlighted the significant challenge for middle school students towards learning to resolve conflicts with their peers. Daunic et al. saw great possi-

bilities in the use of CR/PM strategies that provide challenges to students as well as the support they need to resolve conflicts. In addition, they see various reasons to buy into the efficacy of CR/PM programs as foundations for improved school climate.

Working on the notion that conflict is an inevitable aspect of school structure and using CR/PM programs can result in positive character changes, Daunic et al. (2000) initiated a program in three middle schools made up of a CR program for the entire school, and a PM program that uses trained peer mediators in the various school sites. They used instructions about conflicts, teacher training for the program implementation, and mediator disputant agreements. Leadership commitments were required from administrators and implementation teams. Consistency, monitoring, logistics, disputant follow-up, and publicity for the program were primary ingredients necessary for the success of the program.

What Daunic et al. (2000) discovered was that 6th graders comprised the majority of students who were sent to remediation. Qualitative interviews conducted with mediators and other themes from the study gave credence to the fact that girls preferred mediation more than the boys did. It seemed that boys perceived the discussions as emasculating. Just as in Smith et al.'s (2000) study, most of the referrals also involved verbal harassment. Daunic et al. saw that finding as evidence of future aggressive activity, which needed to be checked through CR/PM programs. The participants in that study reached a resolution 95% of the times as they made a decision to avoid escalating the conflicts and agreed to positive character behaviors and traits.

At the conclusion of their study, Daunic et al. (2000) concurred that schools with committed administrators, a good implementation team, a CR/PM schedule that enables

all participants to stay involved “CR/PM can alter student responses to conflict in positive ways” (p. 99). At schools where the program was implemented adequately, there was a reduction in disciplinary referrals, students learned to handle conflict better, and could transfer such skills to family and other issues that may arise outside of the school walls. More studies would be needed, according to Daunic, et al. “to determine the impact of the mediation process on the level of resolutions students reach and whether those resolutions result in lasting positive schools climate” (p. 99).

There is empirical evidence clarifying that conflict resolution and peer mediation strategies exist to improve student conduct, school climate, and achievement. Similarly, evidence suggested that character education in the middle school arena appears to be driven by the desire to extend strong morals (such as honesty, respect, hard work) and imbue life strengthening skills. These strategies take into consideration the adolescent nature of the students, school climate, SES, and environmental variables.

Urban Issues, Capitals/Factors, and Students’ Character

There is no denying the impact that an urban environment plays in the academic and behavioral development of students in those areas (Cucchiara; 2008; Ogbu, 1992; Woolley et al., 2008). Woolley et al. (2008) included capitals such as SE and neighborhood bonding as factors that affect the academic achievement of the urban student.

In a controversial paper published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), Rothstein (2008) emphasized that, “It’s no cop-out to acknowledge the effects of socio-economic disparities on student learning” (para. 1). Furthermore, Rothstein argued that poor students, such as those that populate the urban ar-

eas, often lack health insurance which initiates lack of preventive care. These children are more prone to asthma, sleeplessness, irritability, and lack of exercise. They experience low birth weight, more lead poisoning, iron deficiency, and anemia, which invariably lead to low cognitive ability and more behavior problems. As explained, “each of these disadvantages makes only a small contribution to the achievement gap, but cumulatively, they explain a lot” (Rothstein, 2008, para. 5).

Rothstein’s (2008) contention was that despite those hindrances experienced by poor students, they can still achieve high academic goals if placed in better schools.

Taking those who refute his logic as legitimizing victimization and racism in favor of classroom improvement, Rothstein (2008) argued that an ideal outlook for ensuring the success of disadvantaged students lies in advocating “both school and socioeconomic improvement simultaneously” (para 10). Among Rothstein’s (2008) proposal was that stakeholders “Fund after-school programs so that inner-city children spend fewer non-school hours in dangerous environments and, instead, develop their cultural, artistic, organizational, and athletic potential” (para. 19).

Perhaps in an attempt to balance the discourse on the topic of character education and the perception of urban students, researchers such as Lynn, Benigno, Williams, Park, and Mitchell (2006) have examined the Critical Theories (CT) in urban education that provide tangential understanding to total student and behavior. In lieu of the generalizations that had been made regarding the inner city youth and education, the authors aimed “...to show that critical theory provides a lens for interpreting what happens in the classroom” (Lynn et al., 2006, p. 17).

Lynn et al. (2006) examined the 1965 Moynihan Report (which literally blamed families for the downfall of students in the urban area), and the proponents of the “cultural deficit framework (which asserted that the urban student is responsible for his success based on his/her attitude and behavior; that their schooling was based on reactions against social disenfranchisement).

Using philosophical terms and other perspectives affecting the behavior of the urban students, Lynn et al. (2006) examined the theories of Karl Max and others. The theories espoused by Lynn et al. (2006) sought to “examine the ways in which public schools are connected to larger economic forces in society” (p. 19). It appeared from the reviews conducted regarding environmental theories that urban schools and how the students in those schools conduct themselves are pre-determined to reflect the hierarchical economic needs of the larger society. As Lynn et al. pointed out, “This theoretical framework can be used to understand how and why schools in urban areas strike a remarkable resemblance to both penal institutions and factories” (p. 19).

If that was the case, the question could be asked: Why do students behave the way they do and display behaviors that seem contrary to expectations. Basing her arguments on Ogbu’s (1992) theories, Lynn et al. (2006) responded, “Ogbu asserts that students in urban schools tend to develop an oppositional social identity, which begets negative attitudes and behaviors that are inconsistent with school norms” (Lynn et al., p. 25).

In terms of Critical Feminist Theories (CFT), Lynn et al. (2006) touched on the marginalization/gender equity issues raised by feminists and researchers. Liberals, who are defined as more interested with equality (Kymlicka, 1991), Black Feminists, and also “Womanist” theorists have raised alarms regarding the feminist struggle and the role that

schools play in preserving the status quo. They seem to enquire: “For example, in what ways do urban schools promote a White middle class masculinist norm that furthers patriarchy?” (Lynn et al., 2006, p. 20).

Furthermore, Lynn et al.’s (2006) paper posits the other CT issues that shed light on the pedagogies and other critical theories that impact the classroom and the views of students on themselves and the roles they are expected to play in society. It also examined the negative perception of students by teachers in urban areas. Lynn et al. (2006) wrote:

In a classic study of an urban kindergarten classroom, Ray Rist’s study yielded similar findings. He found that the poorest children in class were often relegated to the margins of classroom life. This contributed to a poor sense of self-efficacy in the students that translated into academic failure. (Lynn et al., 2006, p. 21)

Based on that construct and various theories espoused using the critical lens theories on character education and the behavior of students, Ogbu (1992) argued that it is inherently impossible to focus on the behavior alone, and not the effects of the background of the students. Lynn et al. (2006) concurred and added that:

before we can come to an adequate understanding of urban education, we must first begin to make sense of the social context in which urban schools are embedded....Teachers can engage in transformative teaching to prepare their students for an ever-changing society, helping student realize that they have choices, and are in control of their lives. (p. 23)

Clearly, the CT paradigm explored by Lynn et al. (2006) was from a philosophical lens that aimed to shine more light on students and other variables in their lives. To capture that viewpoint from current and former teachers, Smith and Smith (2006) sought to understand what current and former teachers thought of the urban school climate, students, and violent incidents in urban schools. In a qualitative ethnographic study, Smith and Smith set out to interview teachers and review documents. Their research questions

were as follows: “Why do teachers leave inner-city schools? To what extent and how can this leaving be linked with perceptions of violence?”(p. 34).

Citing the need for teachers, especially in urban areas, the authors argued that retention of current teachers should be a priority in order to increase stability and achievement. Smith and Smith (2006) claimed that rampant teacher shortages in urban areas often turn into a vicious circle since the positions of those teachers who left were often filled with novice teachers, and those teachers too end up leaving. Reasons urban teachers leave range from negative character display from students, the stress of teaching with extra duties, lack of mentoring, and curriculum demands.

Although Smith and Smith (2006) cited urban concerns for teacher shortages, Munson (2000) blamed colleges of education for their lack of curriculum offerings that could enable prospective teachers to grasp and impart concepts of character, morals, values, and virtue. These teachers are “...generally ill equipped to deal with the complex problems (social and behavioral) of today’s diversified students” (Munson, 2000, p. 4).

If indeed there exists correlations between violence and other dynamics in the community and violence at school, then the theorists as examined with Lynn et al. (2006) lend credibility to the demands of school administrators to advance pedagogies in character education that could alleviate such negative behavior displays. As Smith and Smith (2006) enumerated, poverty, race, community, school overpopulations, psycho-dynamics, current school failure issues, violence at home, alcoholisms, abuse, and even single parenthood were seen as variables that ultimately impact student behavior and the need for character education in school (Payne, 1996).

The qualitative methodology used in the study enabled Smith and Smith (2006) to interview former urban teachers. Although, they attempted to garner a balanced representation of respondents, the interviewees were nonetheless a reflection of those exiting the urban teaching theatre – mostly White, young, and female (Smith & Smith). There were eight female and four male former teachers. There was one Hispanic participant, and the rest were White. They had all left the profession within the past 5 years. The participants also ranged from the various levels of education: elementary (seven), middle (one), and high school (four).

In their study, Smith and Smith (2006) found that when asked to give accounts of their teaching experiences, many of the respondents recounted stories that involved violence in urban schools. There were stories they recounted that they heard second-hand. Others involved stories about gang fights, “lock-downs,” riot police with helicopters swooping in to break up fights, and racial dissension prevalent on their campuses. In addition, they feared the community where they taught. Citing one of those accounts, Smith and Smith wrote that, “Mr. Spring noted that the public expected violence in urban schools” (p. 39); however, they perceived violence as an aberration when it occurs in suburban schools. In the end, “... and, though the abundance of stories told about the inner city involved violence, it wasn’t always clear how much of a stressor it played in teachers’ daily lives in the urban schools” (p. 40).

Nevertheless, Smith and Smith (2006) opined that the news media seem to aid the stereotype of urban schools. They concluded that most of the shocking stories recounted by the respondents were actually second-hand narratives and not experiences. There was also evidence of great distrust of the communities where those schools were located. The

respondents did not feel completely safe in those communities, and viewed them as dysfunctional, in comparison to their middle class environments. Regardless, the importance of their views could not be understated because, “One of the first steps to reducing attrition and violence in urban schools is to reduce the acceptance and normalization of the violence without overreacting to the situation” (p. 41).

In the same vein as Smith and Smith’s (2007) study, Love and Kruger (2005) undertook a study titled: *Teacher Beliefs and Student Achievement in Urban Schools Serving African American Students*. The purpose of the study was to develop a measure of teachers’ beliefs regarding culture and how those cultural issues diverge or merge with student achievement. Citing the struggle by educators and researchers to define the best learning environment for African Americans, Love and Kruger (2005; Payne, 1999) pointed out that a more personal and family oriented environment might be best for the success of African American students. They enumerated various studies that indicated that teachers who have success at teaching African American students extract from their culture and history, highlight the student within the context of their history and culture, help them with new knowledge drawn from life experiences, and view knowledge as a joint venture between teachers and students.

Furthermore, Love and Kruger (2005) discussed and painted a vivid picture of school climates or classrooms that successfully taught African American students. Such schools collaborated on all facets of their teaching activities within a cultural and historical sense. Teachers in those schools do not make assumptions about the students, there were high expectations in such school climates, and students were treated as extended family. Boykin (1985, as cited in Love & Kruger, 2005) identified some dimensions

relevant to African American culture. Some were spirituality, affect, communalism, and individualism (p. 88), as it relates to collaborative, peaceful, and helpful nature of the individuals.

Using those dimensions, Love and Kruger (2005) conducted their descriptive, correlational, quantitative study at predominantly low-income African American schools in the Southeastern United States. Among the participants were 244 teachers ranging from new teachers to those with 35 years of experience. Forty-eight percent of those teachers studied were African Americans, 42% were Caucasian, and the rest were of other races. Using a 48-question survey, the authors gauged the cultural perceptions of the participants.

What Love and Kruger (2005) found were relative to their hypothesis. On one such question regarding knowledge (*what I learn from my students is as important as what they learn from me*) they found that 95% of the participants agreed with that statement. On students' race, ethnicity, and culture, the participants agreed that race, culture, and ethnicity are important in teaching African American students. On social relations in and beyond the classroom, the findings were not conclusive "on how accountable they (teachers) should hold their students for peers' successful achievement" (p. 93). Although most of the participants answered in the affirmative on the question of race perception (2.6 – *I don't see children of color in my classroom; I just see children*), Love and Kruger believed that political correctness might have skewed that particular answer. Love and Kruger found that teachers who attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) believed that they could connect with their students. In addition, Love and Kruger pointed out that "only statements from the dimension on social relations that

show the most consistent endorsements are those regarding the use of peer-learning strategies to support understanding and the importance of parent involvement” (p. 96).

From the evidence presented by Love and Kruger (2005) and depicted in other studies (Benigno et al., 2006) that dealt with Critical Race issues, understanding the total student is central in deducing the rationale behind their actions. Love and Kruger proved that not only does the pedagogy of teachers make a huge difference, but their beliefs (and to some extent politics), view of race and culture, in addition to their pedagogy sustains a positive school climate. In turn, the African American students situated in the urban theatre will practice positive character traits and have a greater chance of learning in a safe environment.

Gallien and Jackson (2006) also examined urban issues in their paper titled: *Character development from African-American perspectives: toward a counter narrative approach*. They reiterated the same arguments proposed by other researchers (see Love & Kruger, 2005; McKinney et al., 2005; Osborne & Walker, 2006) that trying to educate the urban youth while negating the historical journeys surrounding his existence had been and would continue to be a mistake that should not be repeated. As they explained it, their study looked in particular at the cultural “counternarratives” informing traditions of character formation in African American communities, and argues that these can provide a basis for successful character education. As explained by Gallien and Jackson,

by grounding character education in the history, literature, and cultural and religious values of African-Americans, we are more likely to integrate the psychological, spiritual, and academic development of the next generation of African-American youth. (p. 129)

The convergence of history and the urban community experiences, and also the infusion of pedagogies and curriculum that mold character seemed more effective from Gallien

and Jackson's perspective. Molding positive behavior, it seemed, would require not just affecting the student's behavior at school, but instilling life changing skills based on understanding gathered from his/her "history."

Citing the commitment by the U.S Government to make character education a priority, and the belief that it stood to make the most revolutionary impact in educating the American student, Gallien and Jackson (2006) simply asked that character education initiatives be grounded in the culture and philosophies that had guided the African American community for decades. Those values were steeped in the West African roots of African Americans. However, those values are counteracted by the capitalism, rugged-individualism, meritocracy, competition, and other values esteemed by the American culture (Gallien & Jackson).

Appending opinions to cultural bases for character education, Boykin (1985) and Gordon (2003) contributed that in the advent of slavery, most African Americans coalesced around the ideals of their fore-fathers and have since been attempting to regain their footing by instilling the character traits that encouraged family, spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, oral tradition, and social time perspective. Gallien and Jackson (2006) promoted the opinion by writing that, "Further, by utilizing African American perspectives on character issues, combined with culturally responsive pedagogy, educators can have a positive impact on character education programs in urban areas (p. 131).

To begin the process of incorporating the African American experiences and values in character education, Gallien and Jackson (2006) called for an awareness of the pedagogy and philosophical underpinnings that have supported the African American

community. If such pedagogy is applied, Gallien and Jackson believed that it should pave way for including the views and perceptions of the “developmentally appropriate framework for the interventions” (p.136).

In addition, Gallien and Jackson (2006) maintained that the prevalent violent hip hop culture value must be exposed to the younger members of the community so that they could be re-educated on the initial merits and functions of the movement. Also, the same commercial bases for most of those products flung into the community contribute to the eventual decay and character debasement of African American or urban communities (also see Hudd, 2005).

Finally, Gallien and Jackson (2006) called for a pipeline into the medium from which the youth communicate today. Citing a change of influence from the community from the families, the churches, and the school, to now the home, friends, and television, Gallien and Jackson called for the use of technological advances such as blogs and instant messages to bridge the gap and outreach to improve the character of the young students.

As those perceptions as recounted by Smith and Smith (2006) and Love and Kruger’s (2005) participants depicted, the negative character display of students in the urban areas is causing an experiential drain on the teaching force. In a qualitative case study by McKinney et al. (2005), it was again revealed that, “Managing student behavior can be one of the greatest concerns and laborious enterprise for prospective teachers in urban schools” (p. 16). McKinney et al. (2005) cited similar concerns such as poverty, high crime rates, and the inability to retain teachers as problems plaguing the overall development of the inner city student.

McKinney et al.'s (2006) qualitative case study of a middle school (6-grade students) highlighted a program called Positive Behavior Support. The program had been highly recommended and seemed to be used in special education classrooms, but it was also discovered that it helped other students as well. According to McKinney et al., the program had many interconnected and systematic steps that had to be followed. A functional behavioral analysis had to be performed regarding the student. Follow-up steps were then identified, which showed that "An ABC (antecedent, behavior, and consequence) analysis is performed to determine not only the behavior that needs to be adapted, but also the events surrounding the behaviors" (p. 16).

Notably, the Positive Behavior Support program called for critical theories and understanding of students' character and the surrounding relationships, and then plans were drawn to tackle those character issues. As McKinney et al. (2005) discussed, "multiple opportunities to learn about the roots of their (teachers') social realities and beliefs and those of their students must be provided to all teachers" (p. 17).

In their study, McKinney et al. (2005) examined the case of a young man who had many of the characteristics the disruptive urban student faces. He was described as living in a single family home, had little contact with the father, and was the oldest of five children. In addition, his mother worked late, he was often in the streets, and he was indeed considered street smart. The Positive Behavior Support program called for disruptive students who exhibited such characteristics to be treated with respect and understanding. The view of such students as disadvantaged, slow, and simply unreachable only add to the defensive stance of the teacher against those kinds of character display. Such stance

often engineers various classroom management behaviors that may be counterproductive, thereby encouraging the negative character display.

McKinney et al. (2005) called for the urban teachers to,

respond to the needs of their students by creating culturally responsible classrooms that spotlight a variety of instructional practices, methodologies, and behavior interventions in an effort to reduce the risks of behavior problems and school failure. (p. 18)

As McKinney et al. wrote, when students display negative character behaviors, it leaves school leaders wondering about the cause(s) of the problem and what could be done to avoid a repeat. Batiuk, Boland, and Wilcox (2004) studied another program called Project Trust. Project Trust involved middle school students and teachers, and the goal of the camp was to break down barriers between known groups or cliques that operated within the campus. The hypothesis behind the study was that engaging student leaders in activities with a view on improving character in collaboration and breaking down barriers, they would become more amenable to cooperating with members of other “cliques” (Batiuk et al.). In addition, Batiuk et al. theorized that students who participated in Project Trust’s weekend activities would gain increased self-esteem.

The Batiuk et al. (2004) quantitative study in that middle school involved identifying the groups that existed there. Teachers and school administrators identified 24 cliques ranging from the *preps*, *dorks* to a group identified as *dirtyies*. The researchers then created a treatment and comparison group during the camp to examine their hypothesis.

To set up the program, the researchers used college professors to train the middle school teachers in group process and team building. When the participants reached the camp, students and teachers were placed into mixed groups of 8 to 10 members. Students

were encouraged to assume all leadership and decision-making roles during the retreat; however, they had to be cognizant of and use negotiations to navigate their ways. “During the course of the weekend (Friday evening through Sunday afternoon) student family groups take part in discussions, cooperative tasks, and team building and survival exercises” (Batiuk et al., 2004, p. 533).

In assessing the program, Batiuk et al. (2004) used the Borgadus (as cited in Batiuk et al., 2004) Social Distance Scale. Also, they administered Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale to the treatment and non-treatment groups. A statistical *t*-test analysis was performed, comparing the pre-test mean scores of the treatment group of 298 participants and the comparison group (non-campers) of 215 participants. When a paired sample *t*-test was performed for the treatment ($n = 216$) and comparison group ($n = 80$), the “greatest” findings in the study for the participants were in their views of the *dirtyies*, “moving an average of 1.55 points on the 7-point scale” (p. 535). A statistically significant movement also occurred for the *preps* (pretest $M = 3.18$, $SD = 2.23$; posttest $M = 2.74$, $SD = 2.37$). “In all other instances there were no statistically significant changes. However, there were two instances, for *dorks* and African Americans, in which social distance scores actually regressed” (Batiuk et al., 2004, p. 535)

Based on that study, it was evident that some character education goals were achieved. Batiuk et al. (2004) believed that middle school character education programs that incorporate “peace education and conflict resolution hold potential for reducing divisive student cliques built around differences, mistrust, and exclusion” (p. 537) which obviously generate some of the violence that many schools encounter on their campuses.

Assuming a different stance in the discussion regarding urban students, Osborne and Walker (2006) tackled the issue of domain identification and student success in a longitudinal qualitative study titled, *Stereotype Threat, Identification with Academics, and Withdrawal from School: Why the most successful students of colour might be most likely to withdraw*. The Osborne and Walker (2006) study set out to develop the arguments that identification with academics should be linked to motivation to achieve (success) in that domain, measure the effects of stereotype threat on withdrawal from school, and to test the link between identification with academics and stereotype threat.

As Osborne and Walker (2006) elucidated, there are various research evidence to support the fact that in all facets of life, those who closely identify with particular domains tend to do very well in that arena. Those individuals seem more likely to be motivated, enthused, dedicated, and more successful, as measured in that domain/area. “According to this model, outcomes in a domain will only affect an individual’s global self-esteem to the extent that an individual is identified with that domain” (p. 564). Transposing that theory, those who identify strongly with family, work, and school tend to put effort that is more positive in those domains.

However, in their report, Osborne and Walker (2006) clearly walked a cautious line as they argued that for students of “color,” strong identification with academics could actually hurt them the most and lead to increased withdrawal from school because they could suffer from the stereotypical stigma on ineffectual intellect. Using a hypothesis developed by Claude Steele (as cited in Osborne & Walker, 2006), the authors opined that their hypothesis was based on the fact that:

when there are negative stereotypes about an intellectual capacity of certain (stigmatized) groups, members of that group suffer aversive consequences; group

members who are most strongly identified with the stigmatized domain in question (e.g., intellectual or academic ability) are those most likely to suffer the effects of stereotype threat. (p. 563)

While they agree on the strong evidence of correlation between identification with academics and academic outcomes, Osborne and Walker referred to the 1999 NCES statistics that showed that early withdrawal continues to be a “critical issue” for all educational stakeholders. Also citing the 1997 work of Finn and Rock, Osborne and Walker (2006) pointed out that issues of punctuality, preparedness for class, and the amount of effort invested, or the depiction of negative characters such as absenteeism, truancy, disruption, and delinquency very clearly pointed to signs of withdrawal from school.

To test their hypothesis on the links between identification and withdrawal, Osborne and Walker (2006) used and tracked a ninth-grade freshmen class at a struggling high school in the Midwest for 2 years. The school had a majority African American composition of 39%, Caucasian (33%), Asian (3%), Hispanic (18%), and Native American (6%) student demographics. The total number of participants in their study was listed as 131 students. However, the participant population of that study notably changed demographics to Caucasians (46%), and African Americans (11%). Osborne and Walker conducted statistical computations using a School Perceptions Questionnaire (SPQ) and the Identification with School Questionnaire (ISQ) to examine possible correlations to participants’ GPAs, number of absences from school, and disciplinary referrals.

As hypothesized, Osborne and Walker (2006) found that there were significant correlations between Identification Academics (IA) and ninth grade GPA, ($r = .28, p < .02$), IA and absenteeism in ninth grade ($r = -.21, p < .05$), and that higher IA among high school students were clearly related to the attainment of higher GPAs, lower absen-

teism, and fewer behavior referrals. On the major theory of race compared to IA, Osborne and Walker (2006) noted that the results clearly supported their stance on the fact that the IA increase on Caucasians was related to a decrease in their negative character displays and “decreasing probability of withdrawal”, but the reverse is true for students of color” (p. 571). Statistical evidence from the study showed that among the students of color, (the stigmatized group) “those who withdraw from school generally had substantial higher IA than those who did not withdraw” (Osborne & Walker, p. 572). Hence, the supported hypothesis called for stakeholders understanding that since evidence showed that the natural tendency to eliminate oneself from aversive situations held true, stakeholders must then provide clear opportunity or models of success to enable students of color overcome the hurdles that await them in their academic lives (Osborne & Walker, 2006).

Correspondingly, Gordon (2003) examined the issue of what he perceived as “urbanicity.” Gordon argued that for decades, the issues affecting urban residents were seen as problems engineered by immigration, industrialization, and population density. Although urban influences are permeating the mainstream culture via technologies, they “have great potential for affecting human development” (p. 189). However, Gordon (2003) strongly disagreed with equating urban education with low SES.

Tracing the eventual population coagulation into urban areas, Gordon (2003) asserted that from the human quest to hunt together, to the Industrial Revolution, the “range of features associated with the condition of urbanicity can now be identified” (p. 190). Urbanicity, (directly or indirectly) and its similar characteristics affect the lives and experiences of most people. Citing Cohen’s 1974 anthropological studies, Gordon (2003)

maintained that society is generally moving towards urbanization, and in that context all stakeholders in education must take note of the issues surrounding urbanicity and urban students in order to effect the most positive development and interactions among students.

As a result, Gordon (2003) argued that the implications for educators revolve around issues of “human diversity, human mobility, and human and institutional rigidity” (p. 193) which must be considered when dealing with members of society in lieu of the diversity we possess. As educators become aware of gender, cultural, or language differences, it should be integrated into the educational process to produce successful students. Gordon claimed that where the student population increased, the call and challenge for diversity seemed to increase as well. Remarkably, Gordon unequivocally believed that the same urban community that could “provide more resources for dealing with diversity” seems to be “less supportive of tolerance” (p.195). Gordon also seemed to take offence at the notion that others had mentioned genetic inferiority as a reason for lack of academic performance in urban schools, instead of explaining the relationship between environmental exposure and manifestation of intellectual behaviors.

Furthermore, Gordon (2003) believed that programs that targeted those connections have fallen short of their objectives:

Several interesting conclusions have emerged from compensatory education models and programs that sought to address the problems of minority education. There is convincing evidence that programs that combine effective instructional approaches, learning experiences, curriculum materials, and assessment and monitoring devices have a positive impact on student performance. However, evaluation of these programs over the past 40 years has yielded inconsistent findings. (p. 195)

As a result of those inadequacies, Gordon (2003) asked that any planned intervention strategy for urban students should be cognizant of its effectiveness, determine the degree or quality of the planned treatment, establish correlations between control and treatment groups, and document any findings adequately. Understanding urban students entails understanding the complexity within the groups. Gordon further wrote that the urban community essentially forces those within the community to play by the rule of collectivity – a compelling nature of identifying with and by groups. The urban school/institutions are also exemplified by stronger adherence to the status quo, rather than an easy movement towards change. In addition, designing the educational or any intervention programs for the urban group must take into consideration the mobile and diverse nature of the population, and “these differences have major implications for the ways in which educational opportunities are designed and delivered” (Gordon, p. 203).

The arguments posited by these researchers provide a window into the intricate composition of urban schools and students. As Gordon (2003) pointed out, constructing effective intervention via character education would not be feasible if environmental factors affecting student advancement and conduct were not considered within the curriculum and pedagogy. Although there are state and federal mandate, such as the NCLB, aimed at strengthening student achievement and behavior, actual implementation and close supervision play vital roles in the success of those programs in the urban schools.

The Middle School Concept and Character Education

The middle school concept could be traced back as early as 1910-1915 and was often referred to as junior high. The idea was that middle schools should target the pre-

adolescents' special needs in learning and behavior (Caskey & Anfara, 2007). In the 1960's the middle school movement began incorporating team teaching, flexible scheduling, and other interdisciplinary practices in the curriculum (Wiles & Bondi, 2001). The National Middle School Association (NMSA) was formed in 1973 to advocate for middle schools and as "a voice for those committed to the educational and developmental needs of young adolescents" (NMSA, 2008).

According to Market Data Retrieval ([MDR], 2008), there are 11,511 public middle schools, 119 Catholic middle schools, and an additional 120 private middle schools in America. Dickinson and Butler (2001) argued that the concept of middle schools remains valid in its attempt to target the developmental needs of young adolescents. Today, the structure of middle schools has mostly remained within team teaching concepts, exploratory teams, advisor-advisee programs, and homerooms (Flowers et al., 2000). In addition, research of the middle school concept point to the transitional difficulties experienced in the middle levels by both junior high schools converting to pure middle schools, and transitional difficulties for the individual students themselves (Mullins & Irvin, 2000). Dickinson and Butler (2001) argued that while the middle school plan is more than structural in nature, the initial concept "has been hacked to pieces; torn asunder; mutilated" (p. 4). Also, proponents of separate grade level structures have not found significant differences in achievement based on grade structures (Renchler, 1997).

However, the discussions on the middle school philosophy also question its reliability in capturing the ideals from which it was founded. Lack of proper training for middle school teachers has been cited as one element in the dialogue (Flowers et al., 2005). Examining teacher qualifications for middle level instruction, Flowers et al.

pointed out that, “Advocates of the middle school movement have argued for many years that specialized pre-service education, culminating in a middle grades certification, is essential to adequately preparing teachers of young adolescents” (p. 56). In addition, the inability to organize constructive curriculum aimed at understanding the adolescent or pre-teens’ needs, and a lack of vision by administrators to effectively promote the middle school teaming and other concepts have been cited as issues facing middle school success (Dickenson & Butler, 2001). Flowers et al. found that high levels of teaming implementation in middle schools result in increased achievement and that, “Team size, amount of common planning time, and length of time together as a team influence classroom instruction” (p. 7).

Literature review on this topic revealed a lack of adequate empirical/lived experience/research in the area of character education, especially as it pertains to middle school students. Most studies on the middle grades have been targeted towards developmental stages, academic curriculum designs, student behavior, middle grade dynamics (Adams, 2008; Brown & Canniff, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2008; Juvonen & Ho, 2008; Parker & Nueharth-Pritchett, 2008). Although, in a dissertation measuring the perceptions of stakeholders on school violence in an urban setting in Alabama, Finley (2005) concluded:

The lack of significant difference in the perception of elementary and middle (6-8) school teachers and the significant difference between these teachers and elementary teachers shows a need for continued close supervision in middle school (Grades 6-8). (p. 71)

Heavey, Meyers, Mozdren, and Warnake (2002) also published a dissertation/study in which they described a program that advanced character education using school goals like responsibility and respect. They used actual school curriculum such as journaling, novels and songs, book buddies, and communication labs in their study of a

population comprising of elementary and middle school 6th-grade class. At the conclusion of their research, the authors found a decrease in inappropriate talking, increase in respecting other's property, general classroom composure, and "being good" (Heavey et al., 2002; Stott & Jackson, 2005). Despite the limitations experienced in the use of regular school curriculum for this project, the authors felt the students responded well, looked forward to class, made connections with the characters; raised their level of understanding, used character vocabularies, and were anxious to be rewarded for good behavior (p. 75-81).

Similarly, Glaeser (2003) conducted a study examining the various classroom management styles employed by teachers following a disruptive behavior. The study revealed that teachers should 'name' students as they are reprimanded; avoid using 'ordering' on elective, honors, or standard level classes; however, the authors agreed that their research raised more questions about how and why certain methods of character education or corrective measures are used (p. 65).

In a paper released by the U.S Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (June, 2007), it identified character education as "a fairly new and rapidly evolving topic for curriculum intervention" (p. 1). The document identified 93 studies of 41 different programs nationwide and rated them. Of those, 18 studies of 13 programs met the standards required by Institute of Education Sciences. Seven of those programs were highly regarded, while 11 programs retained hints of skepticism.

Perhaps providing an empirical glimpse of the in-depth nature of this study subject, three of the programs were each statistically weighted on several dependent variables that included academic achievement, knowledge, attitudes, values; predispositions,

and feelings, which concentrated on moral and ethical reasoning. The study revealed that the average improvement index ranged from +0 to +16 percentile points on average academic achievement.

In a slight contrast, Bannister (1993) evaluated character education violence prevention programs in four New York City middle schools. The study took a different approach from U.S. Department of Education (2007) study, which examined 41 programs, by juxtaposing limited versus broad based programs in those four studies. However, a closer review and comparison of the two studies revealed that none of the programs Bannister (1993) studied was featured in the U. S. Department of Education (2007) program review, adding to the notion that there exists a plethora of programs aimed at character education and many of these programs remain unevaluated (see Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006).

Nevertheless, a study by Whiteley and Yokota (1988) undertook a 4-year examination of the character education practices concept among college freshman. That study was not conducted on middle school students, but it added to empirical discussion on the topic based on the formation and stage of the research participants. The study delved into the formation of character and its progression from late adolescents to young adulthood. Whitley and Yokota , citing the 1897 work of philosopher John Dewey, asserted that it seems ordinary to mention that developing character is “the ultimate end” of schoolwork (function) and that the hard part of it is felt in the disposition of such (character education) ideas (p. 121). Hence, Whitley and Yokota concluded that instilling good moral character in students was more difficult than once assumed.

Likewise, Walters (1997) in an article to encourage research and practice into this pedagogy in middle school students elaborated on a California study that examined 50 participants from kindergarten through eighth-grade students. The author asserted,

Experts warn against overblown expectations (in character education) and they said there is no such thing as a quick-fix. But with substantial effort, children can start to assimilate values taught in school and begin applying them to their lives. (p. 14)

Scott and Jackson (2005) made the same conclusions in their study. Instead, using a different approach in tackling middle school issues, Scott and Jackson (2005), introduced a concept of *Service Learning*. They argued that,

classes taught by professional middle school counselors and teachers can help middle school students meet comprehensive guidance program goals related to academic/learning development, life/career development, personal/social development, and multicultural/global citizenship. (p. 1)

It is apparent that effective dissemination of character education programs in middle schools is an ongoing process and there is documentation of support for such pedagogy. Perhaps one of the most extensive studies in this area was an empirical study conducted by Welsh, Jenkins, and Greene and published in 1998. Their research explored school culture and climate, and their effects on school disorder, violence, and academic performance in the 42 middle schools in Philadelphia. All 255 schools in the system were eventually studied at the macro level to collect effective data.

While finding that a consensus on the empirical effects of character education on middle school students require further research, several studies (Finley, 2005; Walter, 1997; Welsh et al., 1998), argue that evidence points to an agreement towards an undeniable need for foci aimed at strengthening the positive perceptions and effects that may arise from studies on topic of character education.

To some researchers (Lockwood, 1994), schools need to revert to storytelling and the return to classical curriculum to endear school children to moral issues. They contend that new pedagogies should be explored to turn the tide towards success in these initiatives and claim that our students' characters are in serious question. The argument posited by some researchers who make that claim (Bryan, 2005) point to the fact that despite millions of dollars spent on various programs, the "packaged" character education programs seem to continue producing more "characters" than students "with character" (p. 3).

On the other hand, in a longitudinal, empirical, quantitative character education study conducted by Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006), the authors noted the lack of comparative studies of character education programs. Skaggs and Bodenhorn opined that many of the character education programs available for school administrators use internal evaluators, remain un-scrutinized, evaluated through a biased process provided by vendors, or simply "unevaluated" (p. 82).

The purpose of Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) study was to explore the results of implementing character education programs in general and the impact of implementation levels. The research questions provided in the study sought to explore the relationship between the presence of character education programs and perceptions of stakeholders as it pertains to school achievement. They also questioned the relationship between the degrees of implementation of character education and measures of perception among stakeholders on student achievement (p. 85).

Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) used a wide sample of examination that comprised of five school districts, and a total of 22 middle schools amongst the various districts and independent variables comprising of character education (CE) schools and non-character

education (non-CE) schools. The sample covered a cross section of urban, rural, middle class, ex-urban, and low SES areas. The programs employed in those areas encompassed notable character education programs such as: Educating for Character, Character Education Institution, Community of Caring, and Character Counts!. Skaggs and Bodenhorn also pointed out a variety of administrative structures that monitor the character education programs. These groupings included monitoring by central office, School Improvement teams, a committee of parents, students and staff; and school staff trained by the Josephson Institute, a major proponent of character education programs.

Spanning 5 years (1996-2000), this longitudinal study collected data from controlled groups of program participants and non-participants. The data, responses to survey on perceived character education, behavioral indicator data, and school-level achievement information from the State Department, were analyzed. The participating schools then completed the Schools as Caring Community Profile (SCCP) instrument each year.

In that study, Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) compiled a 4-year review and a final Cohen's *d* effect sizes in standard deviation units ranged from 0.12 – 0.48, all within failures to reject influences in with an alpha of .05. Staff behavior was found to be “substantially more character-based than student behavior” (p.93).

Pertinent to middle school level students, Skaggs and Bodenhorn's (2006) data revealed that the researches uncovered “perceptions of elementary behavior were much more positive than those of secondary school (*middle and high schools*) behavior, a difference that approached a full standard deviation” (p. 95). The authors attributed the difference to other studies (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2004) that indicate middle and high schools were more difficult to manage. Suspension rates were

also “higher in middle and secondary schools” (p. 97). However, the study also revealed that schools with character education programs had higher achievement than non-character education schools (p. 102), but “...the overall conclusion from these analysis is that there was little relationship between school achievement and the presence of a character education program due to small group differentials” (p. 104).

Another conclusion from Skaggs and Bodenhorn’s (2006) study was that there was a “demonstrable relationship between character education and behavioral perceptions, mixed results for behavioral indicators, and no relationship with student achievement” (p. 107). They concluded that those findings warranted further research.

The success of wide-ranging character education programs seem to be “implied” rather than substantiated as Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) were also clear on drawing distinctions between their overall study of character education programs and specific character education programs that target areas such as bullying or conflict resolution. For these programs, their measurement outcomes are usually clearly stated (p. 107).

An additional study, compiled in 2006 by the U.S. Department of Education: Indicators of School Crime and Safety, analyzed 2003-2004 school data collected from the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS). This study examined the practice of inculcating parents in preventing and reducing violence, safety and security procedures, and various disciplinary policies. The conclusion of the U.S Department of Education’s Institute of Educational Sciences, What Works Clearing House (2006) study was that “schools implemented a variety of violence prevention and reduction practices,” though some were more commonly implemented than others (p. 3).

Furthermore, the study found that while elementary schools were more likely to train parents to deal with students' behaviors, 72% of high schools and 64% of middle schools had security officers or police present at school on a regular basis. The study also found that 59% of middle schools allowed removal of a student from school for at least the remainder of the year, and those schools with 50% or more minority students were more likely to have parental involvement in their efforts to reduce school disruptions.

The U. S. Department of Education also conducted various research projects aimed at determining the effectiveness of specific character education programs. In a 2006 quantitative analysis and report of one of the programs (as conducted by Schultz, Barr, & Selman, 2001), the U. S. Department of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences, What Works Clearing House (2006) pointed out that the authors studied 346 eighth-grade public school students. The racial make-up of the participants comprised 62% White, 6% Black, 3.5% Hispanic, 23% mixed/other, and 5.5% not reporting their ethnicity students.

Using a varied SES population in a northeastern town, Schultz et al. (2001) examined 14 middle school classes of eight-graders over a 10-week period. The program used readings, movies, guest speakers, and student writings to from *Facing History and Ourselves* resource materials to explore morality, justice and caring for others. The study compared two groups comprising a total of 346 students who were in 22 classrooms taught by five public school teachers in different schools. Instruments used in this study included surveys and tests.

For that particular character education study, Schultz et al. (2001) sought to determine the effectiveness of that program with dependent variables equaling students' be-

havior and knowledge, attitudes, and values. At the conclusion of the study, a sample of the overall result as shown in the dependent variable report on “self-reported fighting” group 1 of those middle school students scored a 2.24 mean outcome and a standard deviation of 2.41. Group 2 scored a mean outcome of 2.24 and a standard deviation of 3.75, a mean difference of 0.60. Conclusively, the study maintained that there were no discernible or affirmative evidence of effects on the dependent variables (behavior, knowledge, attitudes, and values) measured in the program.

Another empirical study assessed by U. S. Department of Education’s, Institute of Education Sciences What Works Clearing House (2006; Eisen, Zellman, & Murray, 2003), Skills for Adolescence, included issues of school climate, parent and family involvement, and community involvement. Similar to Skaggs and Bodenhorn’s (2006) study, the Skills for Adolescents program was also tailored towards students in grades 6-8 and lasted anywhere from 9 weeks to 3 years.

The large participants in this study comprised of 7,426 who were tracked from their sixth through eighth-grade years in 34 middle schools among four school districts in Long Beach, California, Wayne County, Detroit, and Baltimore, Maryland. The teachers taught the programs within a 1-semester schedule in Spanish and English. At least 8 of the 40 sessions in the programs had to be covered, and each session lasted between 35 to 45 min. Two controlled groups of those student participants received their regular character education on drugs programs and a different group received different programs including school assemblies, teacher-devised classroom curricular, and exposure to Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program.

A sample measurement of this study on students “binge drinking in the last 30 days” revealed that among eighth graders and a sample size of 5,078 to 5,359 students from 34 middle schools, the mean outcome for the skills for adolescence group was 73.00, and the comparison group score was 63.00. The mean difference was recorded at 10.00, and an effect size of 0.28. At an alpha of 0.05, that was rated “statistically significant” with an improvement index of +11. Based on those findings, the U. S. Department of Education’s, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearing House (2007) concluded that middle school program on character education was found to have potentially positive effects on students’ behavior. However, they also warned that while character education is establishing a research base, it was still evolving.

Analogous to Skills for Adolescence, the study of *Lessons in Character is another* empirical examination of a program by the U. S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearing House (2007) that uses weekly stories, writing activities, and class projects to enumerate character education themes. Originally researched by Dietsch, Bayha, and Zheng (2005), the purpose of that program was to “promote middle school students’ knowledge about core character education values, and through that knowledge, shape children’s positive behaviors and support academic success” (p. 1).

The U. S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearing House (2007) review of the Skills for Adolescence study showed it involved over 400 students in three southern states and encompassed two different studies, which generated mixed results. While Dietsch et al. (2005) conducted one of the empirical studies, DeVargas (1998) used an experimental design on the subsequent practical

study. Dietsch et al.'s (2005) study involved 372 fourth grade students in eight Louisiana and Florida schools, comparing students in 11 randomly selected classrooms against a controlled group, and DeVargas's (1998) research used 61 fifth-grade participants from nine schools in Fort-Worth Texas.

For their study, Dietsch et al. (2005) selected schools located in rural, poor, low-performing, and ethnic diverse communities. Two teachers from each of the eight schools were randomly assigned to the controlled group. Other teachers conducted their classes as usual and did not incorporate any character education programs in those classes. Likewise, DeVargas's (1998) study used nine schools, 21 classrooms, and 31 students in the intervention group, and six schools, 17 classrooms, and 30 students in the comparison group. Moral judgment was the dependent variable measured in that study.

The conclusion for both studies indicated that the Skills for Adolescents had prospective valuable effects relative to academic achievement. However, there were no remarkable consequences in the behavior, knowledge, attitudes, and values of the students. Although both empirical studies used elementary students and delved into the effects of character education, it raised questions pertaining to character education's broad perspectives on academic achievement.

In addition, Voices-Literature and Character Education, formerly referred to as Voices of Love and Freedom (LACE) program, conducted by Demetriades-Guyette (2002) and also reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education's, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearing House (2007) added to the studies aimed at elevating the discourse on character education. The program focused on k-12 students to promote positive character and citizenship values, literacy, and social skills. Students elaborated on

readings regarding daily life conflicts, role-play, and discussions were encouraged at school and at home. The program also emphasized positive teacher and student interactions.

The participants in that study included 100 middle school students (6th grade and 7th grade) equally split between males and females in the Cambridge Public Schools, Massachusetts. However, the intervention group participants comprised 77% minority students, compared to the 57% in the comparison group. At the end of a 12-week curriculum, the program's assessment was conducted. However, the study was deemed ineffective on knowledge, attitudes, and values indicators, using a statistical significance set at an alpha of .05.

According to the opinions of the publishers of these research studies and the U. S. Department of Education (2006), character education is entering a research phase. Understanding character education practices in middle schools through empirical studies should enable stakeholders and policy makers to select effective programs or examine their current middle school character education initiatives for their schools, since several programs that purport their success were marred in few proof of success (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006).

Continuing the debate on character education, the NCES (1994) conducted a qualitative study that involved four national figures in the realm of character education. NCES wanted to "explore the complexity of the character education debate," and they used a "broad perspective" and explanations to delve into the topic (p. 1). The study noted that good character was a noble aspiration that did not engender criticism from a majority of individuals, regardless of some controversies it had garnered. The authors

then asked the questions: Why was character education so controversial; why was the full story that surrounded efforts to educate for character much more complicated, and what was the history of character education movement, and how might that influence the present debate? Subquestions included issues pertaining to how schools should educate for character.

The first in generating answers to the question was a participant described as “a long time authority on school reform,” a college professor, and an author of several books. Immediately, the author described his assessment stating that he viewed “good character as pornography: difficult to define, but easy to recognize” (NCES, 1994, p. 5). He went on to describe the various dynamics that were prevalent in any school setting – the presence of good conscientious kids, and also those that could not be trusted. He gave anecdotes regarding various schools he had visited and the many displays of courage, empathy, and other traits of good character that students had displayed. That participant lamented the significant apathy of stakeholders in pushing for strong emphasis on character education. Perhaps echoing the historical findings of Reese (2007), he criticized the overemphasis on standards, while little attention was paid to “the implications of producing a civic-minded decent population” (p. 5).

Clearly, that participant faulted the schools pedagogical structure for character education issues. In addition, he raised the axiological challenges and themes regarding the importance schools have placed on curriculum versus extra-curricular activities and practices in sports (contradiction), and various issues prevalent in college applications (lies) that clearly counteract character education goals. He compared dysfunctional

schools to dysfunctional families and touched on the fear that some have of injecting religion into character education as a “red herring” (NCES, 1994, p. 6).

To answer the question of the definition of character education, decisions regarding whose value should prevail, and how the curriculum effectiveness was measured, NCES (1994) researchers interviewed another participant described as the “Director of the Center for the advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University” (NCES, p. 10). The organization worked to familiarize teachers and educators with character education issues. He was also described as an author on several issues on the topic of character education.

The opinion of the Director was that the disenchantment with public schools stemmed from the fact that public schools had abandoned their moral principles. Even so, the Director found hope in the curriculum based on the renewed interest of the public in character education. He also revealed that character education originated from the Greek word ‘to engrave.’ In lieu of that, the author believed that children were “plastic around issues of right and wrong – and that places a moral imperative on schools to shape values and events” (NCES, 1994, p. 12).

Notably, the NCES (1994) study also found that teachers were sometimes reluctant to engage in moral discussions. That ambivalence in the belief and pedagogy of character education began from the political leanings of most stakeholders. As he noted:

In earlier periods, although schools were imperfect and mistakes abounded, they were a moral presence in the life of a child; they provided answers. Now, increasingly the teacher says: ‘That’s not my job’. According to a survey I read in the Wall Street Journal two years ago, 32% of teachers said teaching standards of right and wrong was not one of their jobs. (NCES, 1994, p. 12)

In that comment, the Director highlighted one of the major differences revealed in literature regarding educators in the 21st century and educators during the Puritan era. Students who attended school during the Puritan era had a “moral presence” that represented every adult in a child’s life from ordinary members in the community to the teacher that the child spends a considerable amount of time with daily.

The third participant in the NCES (1994) study, a college professor, added insight to the resurgence of character education. The subquestions answered included the following:

Could educators learn from the character education programs of the past; what did the current proponents of character education hope to achieve; what barriers existed to their goals, and was sufficient evidence present to support the effectiveness of character education?

As a noted professor, writer, and scholar on character education and social issues, the professor used history to indicate the ebb and flow of interest in character education. He claimed that during periods of national crisis or intense debates, such as women’s vote issues, Bolshevik Revolution, or World War 1, people became concerned about shared values and national identity. Hence, issues of character education rose as the public turned to the youth in search of answers to societal issues. “The public naturally turns to young people and thinks there is something wrong with their education, that there is need to return to our traditional values” (NCES, p. 14).

As the NCES (1994) study showed, character education looks to the future and aims to arm the youth with metaphorical oars to navigate the rough waters that may be in the future. However, character education proponents continue to track the trend of declines in SAT scores, increase in teen suicide, teenage pregnancies, and other societal issues that remain the foci of character education programs. Although, because of the ex-

pertise required on this topic, the extensive amount of time and resources, and the experimental nature of any actual social science research involved, empirical studies on the topic suffers (NCES, 1994). In addition:

Schools today are held accountable for standards. We test kids to death, and most of those tests deal with standards set by state and national assessment programs. The priorities of superintendents and building principals are to have their students do well on standardized tests, get Nation Merit Scholarships winners. (NCES, p. 15)

On whether important lessons from previous national efforts can affect the topic of character education in its current implementation, the Professor illuminated efforts such as homerooms, codes, and clubs that were meant to place an adult with children in non-academic frame so that character and related questions could be answered. Unfortunately, the need for academic improvements and time constraints has actually caused the lack of emphasis on character education (NCES, 1994).

According to the conclusions posited by NCES (1994), the belief in character education as a cure for the ills of the youth remained strong among its proponents. However, NCES conclusions disagreed that character education was the route that should be taken in correcting those negative behavior trends of students. NCES contended that the issues our students deal with are complex in nature, that character education does not even have a concrete definition, and that there exists contention on what values to teach.

Instead, NCES (1994) called for opportunities for kids to talk about their problems, and develop problem-solving skills such as mediation, which they could apply in and out of school. Regardless of the foci on teaching values, a pressing issue for the authors of CE programs would be in training faculty and staff to implement the changes necessary in correcting student behavior. NCES argued that curriculum and pedagogical

“emphasis on conflict prevention, intervention, and resolution”, when coupled with the staff’s understanding of their professional beliefs will aid in managing change in student behavior and in successfully educating children (NCES, p. 16).

As researchers continue to delve in to what constitutes a good character education program, Boulter (2007) conducted a 6-week character education impact study to measure the effectiveness of peer-led Fetal Alcoholic Syndrome (FAS) prevention in middle schools, using 642 participants. That quantitative study was conducted in five middle schools and one high school in the Southeast. All participants in this study were 7th graders, split almost evenly with 267 males and 279 females, and a 9th grade women’s Health/PE class. For this study, a control group was not used because the goals of the study were to pilot a FAS prevention program for adolescents.

Boulter (2007) embarked on the character education study in the middle school grades using materials provided by the United Way organization, PowerPoint slides of questionnaires, video information about FAS, displays of normal and abnormal FAS infant dolls, and a follow up assessment of 10 multiple choice questions. That study was particularly poignant because it delved into the risk behavior patterns of middle school students as enumerated in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2006) studies which stated that the percentage of students who reported lifetime alcohol use did not change significantly during 1991-1999 (81.6%-81.0%) and then decreased during 1999-2005 (81.0%-74.3%), the percentage of students who reported current alcohol use did not change significantly during 1991-1999 (50.8%-50.0%) and then decreased during 1999-2005 (50.0%-43.3%), and the percentage of students who reported episodic heavy

drinking did not change significantly during 1991-1997 (31.3%-33.4%) and then decreased during 1997-2005 (33.4%-25.5%).

That CDC (2006) study (as cited by Boulter, 2007) detailed that although there were slight decreases in alcohol use among students, the percentage of those who consume alcohol still remains troubling. Combine those CDC numbers on alcohol with the rate of teenage pregnancy that revealed:

Nationwide, 46.8% of students had had sexual intercourse during their life. The prevalence of having had sexual intercourse was higher among Black male (74.6%) and Hispanic male (57.6%) than Black female (61.2%) and Hispanic female (44.4%) students, respectively, and higher among 9th grade male (39.3%) than 9th grade female (29.3%) students. Overall, the prevalence of having had sexual intercourse was higher among Black (67.6%) than White (43.0%) and Hispanic (51.0%) students; higher among Hispanic (51.0%) than White (43.0%) students; higher among Black female (61.2%) than White female (43.7%) and Hispanic female (44.4%) students; higher among Black male (74.6%) than White male (42.2%) and Hispanic male (57.6%) students; and higher among Hispanic male (57.6%) than White male (42.2%) students. (p. 28)

Based on these risk factors, Boulter (2007) embarked on the implementation and evaluation of the FAS character education program in the middle school.

After the 6-week intervention, the Boulter (2007) study found that middle school students who were pregnant or expected to be pregnant continue to consume alcohol. Boulter's findings also suggested there was increased retention of the FAS curriculum after the posttest period. Students were more aware of terms related to drinking. Girls, rather than boys, also seemed to be more interested in the topic, presenting a gender disparity. Boulter recommended a combination of the FAS program and other character education programs instituted by schools to combat the risky behaviors of the middle school students.

Many believe that at the core of character education is the need to improve the student behavior, thereby successfully influencing the overall school academic functions. To examine that notion Finck, Hansen, and Jenson (2003) conducted a study on improving student achievement through character education. The authors began to examine a literature-based character education program after collecting data on student disciplinary referrals, breakdown in communications at the school level, media reports of violence in schools, and interviews that indicated there was a lack of discipline in the middle schools in a middle class suburb in Chicago, Illinois, and teachers and other stakeholders expressed serious concerns regarding student display of disruptive and other negative behavior (Heavey et al., 2002).

Finck et al. (2003) described several character education programs including: Character Counts, Building Esteem in Students Today (BEST) Character Development Program (CDP), Community Caring, PM program, and mentoring. Participants in that study included 120 seventh graders and 100 eight-grade students from the same middle school. Comparable to other studies (Lockwood, 1994), Finck et al.'s (2003) study involved the students' use of literature and character analysis within the literature to compare and contrast their own characters/behavior. Observations were also used in the study to gain more insight into the students' behavior. After the implementation, Finck et al. (2003) noticed a dramatic change in the number of demerits (or referrals) the students received.

In a comparison figure showing the changes in one class, the number of students not receiving demerits rose from 46% to 60%. Of those, 12% of the students received one demerit before and after the implementation of the study. Additionally, 10% of the stu-

dents received two demerits pre-implementation compared to 8% postimplementation (a 2% drop). Finally, 10% of the students also received three demerits preimplementation and postimplementation. Therefore, Finck et al. (2003) concluded that the majority of the students involved in the study received less demerits or referrals after the implementation of the character education program.

For Wiley and Jones (2003), understanding what impact teachers make in character education pedagogy is essential in advancing the curriculum (also see NCES, 1994). Their qualitative study of six teachers was aimed at getting to the core of teachers' ideas, intentions, and methods relative to the topic of character education.

The ethnographic interpretations of data were used to arrive at conclusions for the study. Wiley and Jones's (2003) data showed that the view of character education was subjective in nature. Second, modeling good character traits was seen as the best route for teachers to impart character to their students. Teachers cited various instances where the students overstepped the boundaries of decent behavior and they had to step in to model or use that situation as a "teachable moment" (Wiley & Jones p.153; also see Shapiro, 1999). Third, critical thinking was seen as essential in helping the students define issues of personal moral issues. Nevertheless, the participants concurred that allowing for self-realization and development of positive moral strength comes with acceptance and tolerance of the view of others. Finally, the fourth theme from the study exposed the difficulties in reigning in variables that teachers feel they could not control in tackling character education issues. Teachers cited the limited amount of time with students, strong negative cultural influences such as bigotry, sexism, and homophobia, and the individual differ-

ences that have to be accounted for pertinent to how each student chooses to resist counterproductive influences.

In support of more empirical studies on the topic of character education, Wiley and Jones (2003) affirmed that, “Also, a study of students’ responses to their teachers efforts might also prove valuable to a better understanding of character development in high school classrooms” (Wiley & Jones, p. 155). That conclusion considerably concurs with the same findings reached by Shapiro (1999) in their study of methods used by teachers to reaffirm character traits and correct student behavior in resolving various classroom and school disciplinary issues.

The Middle School Concept and Adolescents

In conjunction with issues regarding impact of character education on school safety and achievement of middle school students, the middle school concept has received scrutiny on overall effectiveness. There have been studies examining the middle school philosophy. Studies reviewed by the NMSA were found to deal primarily with instructional pedagogical frameworks (Mertens & Anfara 2006; Mertens & Flowers 2003).

The notion of the middle school concept has existed for almost 50 years now, although they are still considered a new phenomenon (Mooney, 1999), which was aimed at realigning the understanding of young adolescents as a developmental sub-group. The middle school draft required school districts to identify those students in the middle grades who were at high risk of dropping out of high school and to provide intensive supports for these students.

As many researchers have identified, middle school adolescents are in the beginning stages of adulthood. Hart and Carlo (2005) researched adolescents and their moral developments and opined that although other researchers and opinions have identified them as “rude,” “irresponsible,” and their future questioned, understanding their development at that stage and modifying them, their adult stage of moral actions could be positively directed. Furthermore, Hart and Carlo’s (2005) research uncovered opinions that point to the fact that adolescents who depict good character traits were bound to exhibit those same qualities as adults, ensuring better relationships with family, friends, and civic responsibilities. Hart and Carlo also found that adolescents were more likely to spend more time away from parents; therefore, peer influences would account for a significant factor in their moral judgments.

Adolescents, it seemed, display a moral developmental stage independent of their childhood experiences, but Hart and Carlo (2005) contend that there had to be a connection because, “refinements in skills permit adolescents to engage in moral life more effectively than is typically possible for children” (Hart & Carlo, p. 3). However, adolescents’ engagements in those moral decisions would assume more importance and exigency, because the decisions the adolescents make at that stage such as: friends, sexual activities, gang affiliations, academic decisions, and many other choices they make “exposes them to personally significant situations with far reaching implications about who they are as a moral agent” (Hart & Carlo, p. 8). The adolescent makes a choice, directly or influenced by peers. However, character education makes it clear those choices have to be made in full understanding of any consequences that may arise for the adolescent.

Adding to the dynamic research on adolescent character, moral, or civic, development, Ferguson et al. (2001) studied the moral development of adolescents, relative to countries that had experienced political upheavals. With Northern Ireland and Nigeria as the sites of the study, Ferguson et al. (2001) noted the plague of decades of ethnic and religious strife in those two nations. The theory behind the research was that children growing up in countries where there is prevalence in political turmoil and violence tend to experience delayed or decline in moral reasoning. Although Ferguson, et al. noted the different dynamics in the nature of those conflicts, they acknowledged that the conflict in Nigeria was worse than that of Northern Ireland, and that variable possibly impacted results of the study. Ferguson et al.'s study used 10 -11 year old participants ($n = 537$) and similar aged children from Northern Ireland as comparison group ($n = 548$) used the Socio-moral Reflection Measure (SRM) to gauge the cross-cultural effects of violence on adolescent moral development.

Ferguson et al. (2001) found that the Nigerian participants scored significantly lower on the SRM, when compared to their Northern Ireland counterparts. That conclusion lent credence to the strong nature of violence and strict religious or social factors/structures which impacted the Nigerian participants, relative to their views of law and the legal system. The adolescents in Nigeria saw the interactions within society and the legal structure more suspiciously than the adolescents in Ireland.

The clamor over adolescent behavior at times could simply be dependent on the management of such perspectives and behavior. In the development of adolescents, Lawrence Kohlberg (1994), the psychologist and proponent credited with the theory of moral development, outlined the three dimensions and six stages of moral development. Level 1

was the Preconventional Morality. The first stage on this level was the *obedience and punishment orientation*. In that stage, the adolescent believes that the establishment or system sets fixed rules that must be obeyed. On the second stage of this level, *individualism and exchange*, the adolescent distinguishes that a plurality of what is right may exist, the authority's powers are demystified, and that others may see issues differently. Therefore, adolescents may make decisions and choices that may well be selfish.

Level two dealt with CM. Stage 3 of that level, *Good Interpersonal Relationships* depicted the adolescent's ability to perceive the complications in morals, as they enter teenage years. They begin to reason within societal expectations. At stage 4, *Preserving the Collective Arrangement*, the adolescent method of thinking functions toward respecting close relatives and obeying societal rules. At level 3, the postconventional morality level's stage 5 illuminates the *Social Contract and Individual Rights* moral developmental stage. At this stage, the adolescent recognizes the need for a society that operates efficiently, though it may not be conducive for everyone. Stage 6 is the *Universal Principles* stage. Those who operate on this level are concerned with the greater community. The need for a democratic society is highlighted and its flaws are often understood.

According to Kohlberg (1994), the adolescent has to not only acquire these character traits and skills, but will also have to develop them to function in a positive society. The levels and dimensions exist to cover as more human interactions on the topic of one's character as possible. Kohlberg had argued that his theories were not necessarily triggered sequentially as adolescents and individuals mature. Furthermore, those periods could not possibly be serially developed through a curriculum by teachers, or conditioned by parents. Rather, those stages formulate as individuals reason and deliberate on moral

challenges. Agreeing to Kohlberg's claims, other researchers have argued that although individual behaviors are impacted by interaction with others and society in general, the moral and virtuous development occurs as mental process continues to be challenged (Crain, 1985).

Those who attempt to pinpoint what constitutes a virtuous action have signaled the works of Kant and other Utilitarian principles as models. Utilitarianism, concerned with the common good, enjoins the individual to make decisions based on the best interest of the group. However, Shapiro (1999) pointed out that approaching character education from philosophical paradigms could be difficult for adolescents because of their maturity level: "One of the presumed strengths of character education, after all, is that children find it readily accessible" (Shapiro, p. 3). Hence, pedagogies in character, moral, and other virtue discussions should be tailored appropriately to sync with the adolescent consumers in the middle school levels.

Further research indicated that during the early nineteenth century, the philosophical discussion on character education divided the nation into those who still harbored the Puritan's view of moral education (Old Calvinist or Orthodox) and the reformers (New Light Calvinist or Liberals) who espoused secular views regarding human behavior (Balch, 1993). It was that period that ushered theories by John Locke and Horace Mann, known as the Father of public education. Their philosophies saw the human mind as a "blank slate" capable of being filled with virtuous character traits conducive for the nation (Balch). Those philosophies paved the way for educators to assume the roles of nation builders, while the debate continues regarding axiological and pedagogical questions on how best to address character issues among our nation's adolescents and students.

National and State of Alabama Laws Governing Student Behavior

To further delve into the topic of character education, it is important to understand how it has been legislatively approached. The 1647 Old Deluder Act squarely put moral/character legislation on the governments list of responsibilities. The law, enacted to stamp ignorance as an official devilish manifestation called for the education of the country's young people under strict moral codes. Although its landmark effects included the preparation of young men for literacy, the establishment of "grammar schools," knowledge of God through education, teacher salaries, and the eventual entrance into Harvard, it was the sheer audacity of the law to tackle the influence of the devil that made it a unique character/moral legislation (Balch, 1993; Wikipedia, 2008).

In 1965, the nation saw the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, giving birth to Title 1. This portion of the act helps fund school districts in low-income areas. It also covers Head Start, which offers nutrition and other health programs for poor 3-4 year olds.

1972 Title IX, Educational Amendment Act

Often seen as a workplace law, included in the Title IX, Educational Amendment Act of 1972 are provisions that make it possible for students in all levels of education to seek grievances against acts deemed sexually harassing in nature. Such acts may be directly or indirectly offensive.

In 1983, a groundbreaking report, "A Nation at Risk" was published. This report indicted America's public schools in the face of international scientific advancements and

branded them as failures in their inability to produce well-rounded and competitive students in the world economy, (U.S Department of Education, 1983) saying:

Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them. This report, the result of 18 months of study, seeks to generate reform of our educational system in fundamental ways and to renew the Nation's commitment to schools and colleges of high quality throughout the length and breadth of our land.

Such wide condemnation of the educational system put public schools and educators on the defense and challenged them to re-evaluate academic strategies, emphasis, and the total student (Ginsberg & Lyche, 2008; Spring, 2001). Meanwhile, opponents of public schools used the report as evidence of the failed policies and functions of America's public schools. The condemnations gave rise to more demand for private/charter schools and vouchers so that parents could send their kids to religious schools devoid of the ills of public education (Spring).

Springing to action in 1992, character education principles were endorsed by several groups of Americans at the Aspen Conference, hosted by the Josephson Institute of Ethics (Cornett & Chant, 2000). At that conference, Character Counts and the six ethical values governing it were constructed.

Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994

The Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 (GFSA) was reauthorized by Section 4141 of the ESEA as amended by the NCLB (Public Law 107-110). Essentially, it bans all weapons on school property and enjoins the local school leader to ban the student from attending school in that system for 1 year.

Alabama's Legislative Impact on Character Education

In Alabama, the Legislature has been active in promulgating laws aimed not just at preventing negative behavior from students, but also the pedagogy of character education. Under Section 16-1-24.1, the Alabama Legislature made a commitment to ensure a safe and drug free zone for all students and school employees. It also enjoined schools to enact a “comprehensive” policy that establishes uniform minimum standards for classes of offences and stipulates penalties for those offences, such as illegal drugs, alcohol, and weapons in school. Again, Section 16-6B-5 of the Alabama law mandated school systems to provide quality instruction and be accountable for compliance with statutes and regulations regarding school safety and discipline. Each year, before the first day in August, school systems will receive any new regulations from the State, which pertain to school safety and discipline.

Reminiscent of the Puritans, Alabama law Section 16-28-17, mandated the attendance officer, probation officer or other officer authorized to execute writs of arrest to take into custody without warrant any child required to attend school or tutoring. This will happen when the child is found away from home during school hours and without a parent/guardian during school hours.

To further tackle student disruption the Alabama Legislature issued a rejoinder in Section 16-28A-1 that the people of Alabama have two simple expectations of their public schools: The students are to learn in a safe classroom setting where order and discipline are maintained; and students learn at the level of their capabilities and achieve accordingly. Every child in Alabama is entitled to the right to learn in a nondisruptive environment. No student has a right to be unruly in his or her classroom to the extent that

such disruption denies fellow students of their right to learn. Furthermore, the teacher in each classroom is expected to maintain order and discipline. Teachers have the authority and responsibility to use appropriate means of discipline, including corporal punishment, within school policy. Any teacher who follows policy in carrying out his duties is immune from civil or criminal liability.

To officially recognize character education, Act 95-313 clearly read as follows: Character Education Plan: Legal Interpretation-Legislature requires that instruction in Character Education occurs daily, no less than 10 min per day. Each plan shall include the Pledge of Allegiance to the American Flag.

It is evident through these laws that both the national Congress and the Alabama Legislature intended to illustrate the seriousness of school disruption, violence, truancy, drugs; weapons possessions, and take legislative steps to safeguard the school environments. Testifying at the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families Committee on School Violence, Dr. Stephens (1998) was skeptical, as were Glanzer and Milson (2006) regarding the effectiveness of many laws against school violence and morality. In essence, Glanzer and Milson did not see evidence of how effectively we can expect to legislate morality, behavior, and school safety (Reese, 2007; Stephens, 1998). They added that for all the easy talk about fixing school violence and problems, all institutions may have problems, but “it’s particularly difficult to change the inner life of a typical school” (Reese, p. 218). Glanzer and Milson contended that state laws may be contradicting the same principles they seek to enhance in character education programs by attempting to legislate “the good” (or students’ morals). Perhaps, that assertion reflects Dr. Stephen’s extensive work with schools and young adolescents.

Paradigm Shift Toward Performance Character and Moral Character

A new paradigm shift emphasizing a merger between (academic) performance and moral behavior at all levels of the school organization has emerged in the discourse of character education termed performance character and moral character. Using their Smart and Good Schools model, Davidson, Lickona and Khemelkov (2007) emphasized that historically and across cultures, the goal of education has been to help students become smart and good individuals, and character is needed for both. Davidson (2008) acknowledged that two categories of challenges facing educators today ask questions that dealt with how to get students to treat each other with respect and care and how can students do their best work? "Conceptualizing character to include both performance character and moral character enables us to more effectively address the question, 'what's the connection between character and academics?'" (Davidson et al., 2007). As essential as it is to follow Theodore Roosevelt's motto of educating the mind and morals, Davidson and Lickona (2007) agreed that a reversal of that philosophy encourages the education of the total individual. "To educate a person in morals and not in mind is to educate, if not a menace, at least a detriment to society. Who wants an honest but incompetent doctor lawyer, or mechanic?" (p. 25). However, the principle of performance as a variable in character education is not totally new. "We did not discover performance character, we rediscovered it" as an essential component of a successful school (Davidson, 2008).

Performance character emphasizes effort (work ethic), goal setting, perseverance, self-confidence, organization, adaptability, resourcefulness, and resilience. On the other hand, moral character affirms respect, honesty, compassion, dependability, fairness, moral courage, and humility. Thus, performance character highlights performing the best

in one's duties (to do our best work), and moral character exemplifies being the best in interpersonal relationships (to be our best selves) (Abourjilie, 2008a; Balamore, 2008; Catania, 2008; Davidson, 2008; Lickona, 2008; Parisi, 2008). According to Speers (2008), performance character plants seeds of ability and moral character plants seeds of goodness.

In an era of high stakes accountability, the desire to emphasize academics over moral teachings is a real concern to educator at all levels. As Dr. Kevin Ryan of Boston University was quoted as saying, "Character education is not one more thing to add to your plate - it IS the plate" (Abourjilie, 2008a). Proponents of moral and performance character argue that purposefully merging the concepts create an integrated effort (*The Power of 1*) which ensures a win-win situation in academic excellence and student behavior (Catania, 2008; Davidson, 2008; Lickona, 2008; Parisi, 2008).

In his book titled: *An ethic of excellence: Building culture of craftsmanship with students*, Ron Berger, used project based learning to illustrate how moral and performance character could be fostered to optimize the power of character education. Berger (2006) advocated that schools should be steeped in cultures of critique and excellence. A culture of critique encourages students to present their work to peers and teachers and for feedback in order to heighten their responsibility for doing their best work and bringing out the best in each other. A culture of excellence encourages school work that matters, models of excellence, a culture of critique as enumerated previously, a norm or multiple revisions, and opportunities to make a student's work public. Berger believed that, "The key to excellence is this: it's born from a culture. When children enter a family culture, a community or a school culture that demands and supports excellence, they work to fit in

(p. 2). Berger claimed that once those students see they are capable of excellence, they are never quite satisfied with less academic performance.

Reminding educators not to confuse activity with performance, Lickona and Davidson (2008) proposed integrating character education and school performance so as to render character education relevant to their stakeholders. On what he referred to as a “parallel track problem,” Davidson (2008) pointed out that's the old paradigm has one track for character education and another track for school/classroom challenges. "Find a way to connect character education to acute particular challenges(s) facing your school (Davidson, 2008). The 4 Keys to maximize the effectiveness of any character education is an essential component of performance and moral character. The 4 Keys included the Ethical Learning Community (ELC), self-study (assessment of the school), other studies (relevant to the school's needs), and public presentation (for constructive criticism of ideas). This component enjoins integration of performance and ethics in the ELC of faculty and staff, students, parents, and the wider community. An ELC requires collective responsibility of supporting and challenging others to do their best work and to treat people with respect and care. That synergy reflects how educators shape their school culture, and culture in turn shapes character.

Charlie Abourjilie, the former State Director for Character Education, and now the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Character, and Teacher Development at Veritas Sports Academy in Greensboro, North Carolina pointed out the three things that motivate all children as: an empowering and caring relationship, someone who expects something positive/high from them, and someone who gives them hope (Abourjilie, 2008b). In addition to modeling for children and forming a cohesive Professional Ethical

Learning Community (PELC), "If we want to unlock the full power of character education, we must conceive of it as the integration of doing our best work and doing the right thing in every phase of school life - from classroom learning to Friday night football game" (Davidson et al., 2008).

Lickona (2008) argued that developing performance character promotes academic achievement for all students, fosters an ethic of excellence, not just higher test scores; reduces dropouts, and produces a competitive workforce. Simultaneously, developing moral character creates a safe and caring learning environment, decreases discipline problems, reduces cheating, fosters a social and emotional skills, develops ethical thinkers, and produces public-spirited citizens.

Borrowing from classical philosophy, cross-cultural wisdom, positive psychology, and grounded theory research, Lickona and Davidson (2008) explained that the definition of performance and moral character was defined relative to the Eight Strengths of Character, assets that enable us to lead productive, ethical, and fulfilling lives. Those strengths encouraged lifelong learning and critical thinking, diligent performance, social and emotional skills, ethical thinking, respect and responsibility, self discipline and pursuit of healthy lifestyles, contributing community member and democratic citizen, and being a spiritual person engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose. "Without moral character, performance character easily runs amuck" because one could easily become a courageous terrorist who harms and kills innocents, or an ingenious CEO who cooks the books, or maybe a brilliant valedictorian only out for themselves (Lickona, 2008).

In a sense, it appears the PELC added an administrative variable in infusing a performance and moral character. PELC reinforces the option that caring teachers teach

well, enjoy the respect of their students, make subjects meaningful, and they listen to their students to gauge their concerns. Urban (2008a; also see Urban, 2008b) the author of *Lessons from the classroom: 20 things good teachers do*, also argued that, "Teachers can do simple things to help kids feel as though they belong, that they are accepted, and that they count. It all begins with literally reaching out to them at the beginning of each class or school day" (p. 37). In addition, Urban (2008a) opined that a teacher's relationship with students enhances the students' performance and moral character because, "If you can reach them, you can teach them". Quite possibly, there could be other reasons absent of a PELC why a school may experience problems in teacher morale, parental disinterest, student misbehavior, and low academic performance. Regardless, Catania (2008) captured the view more succinctly and opined that, "When there are problems in schools, usually the adults are to blame". Popov (2008) added that "Virtues lie in every child. It is our task, as teachers and parents, to draw them out (p. 3). The Smart and Good Schools Initiative clarified that a school is generally defined by its sense of purpose. Its sense of community is most powerful when it is based on the shared commitment to excellence and ethics.

Perhaps the juxtaposition of performance and moral character at all educational levels may not be an entirely new paradigm in discussion circles regarding character education. However, the principle called for a new pedagogy in delivering character education curriculum. Whereas studies have tended to focus on correlations of character education and student achievement, the paradigm that interlocks performance and moral character presents a forceful foci on the topic.

Summary of Review

As a glimpse into the ontology of character education was revealed through literature, character education is as old as informal education in early civilization and formal education in America today. From Ancient Egypt, Persia, China, to Hebrew, strict adherence to legal provisions of the Hammurabic Codes in Persia; righteousness, social justice, and individual virtue obtained from the Ancient Hebrews have given us the cornerstone of civilization Blake (1961). The puritans believed in the efficacy of a favorable learning environment for the mind and for the soul. They instilled, albeit harshly, the notion in their students that good moral character is tantamount to the overall success of the individual.

As America matured and expanded in technology, education, size, and strength, many scholars questioned the reliance on strict moral and character codes to affect the wholesomeness of the individual. Advocates of techniques and methods of education and discipline devoid of the harshness embedded in the era of Puritanism emerged with humanistic theories, and garnered criticisms of their own. Yet, axiological advocates of character education retained various levels of influence in the implementation of the practice. Simultaneously, school expansion and legal mandates regarding formation of the educational system continued with the efforts of Horace Mann and previously the failed efforts of Thomas Jefferson. Additionally, other philosophers such as John Dewey weighed in to illuminate the essence of the adolescent mindset and character traits.

Dewey (1959) argued that:

To pick out one of the many social relations which the child bears, and to define the work of the school by that alone, is like instituting a vast and complicated system of physical exercise which would have for its object simply the development of the lungs and the power of breathing, independent of other organs and func-

tions. The child is an organic whole, intellectually, socially, and morally, as well as physically. (p. 8)

Despite the racial, gender, and various internal and international struggles that beset America in the 20th Century, the need for character, moral, or civic education as some prefer to equate the pedagogy ebbed and surged with advent of issues considered more pressing than the character of our students. Through the earliest violence perpetrated on students by students (or outsiders), to the seemingly rampant news-breaking and heart-breaking events of yet another massacre at our schools, all educational stakeholders continue to search for the understanding of the disruptive and violent phenomenon at our schools. The character education pedagogy to combat what was once dubbed the influence of “Old Deluder” and restore the state of affairs in our middle schools remains under scrutiny.

While some stakeholders may clamor for a quick fix of our middle school students (and indeed all students’ behavior) evidence from literature showed that may not be possible. There were often many other mitigating factors and variables that impact a student before he gets to school, what happens at school, his/her views of the pedagogy and feelings regarding the adults, and what happens when that child exits the campus on the way back to his/her home.

As also evidenced by the literature, there does not seem to be a conclusive agreement on the definition of character education, its effect, and its importance. As stated earlier in this review and argued by researchers on the topic, understanding character education practices in middle schools through empirical studies will enable stakeholders and policy makers to select effective programs. It equally enables them to examine their current middle school character education initiatives for their schools, since several pro-

grams that purport their success were marred in few proof of success (Skaggs and Bodenhorn, 2006). Kristjansson (2006) while referring to the use of role-modeling in character education correctly identified questions that using role models and other facets of the program could answer. Those questions include “empirical” questions of why the specific method is needed; a “methodological” issue of how students are to be inspired to that program; and a “substantive moral problem” regarding “what precisely” the programs should be impacting to the students (Kristjansson, p. 1).

When examined in totality, the CDC (2006) study involving alcohol consumption among teenagers and sexual activity is alarming. So also is the CDC (2008) report that detailed that 26% of U.S teenagers are carriers of sexually transmitted diseases, especially among African Americans. Thus, the literature presents a clear and pressing need for continued implementation or study of curriculums aimed at preventing risky behaviors and inculcating admirable character in our adolescents.

In addition, few of the studies accounted for the voices of the students themselves. This research gathered qualitative data and used the opinions and voices of the middle school students in this study to generate a broader understanding of the topic. More studies could only enhance the effectiveness of the pedagogy and enable other aspects of school goals and missions to flourish.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

“Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.” — Abraham Lincoln, 16th U.S. president (PBS, n.d.).

Qualitative Research

Qualitative Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine the perceptions of middle school stakeholders on the effectiveness and importance of character education in three middle schools in an urban school district in Alabama.

Research Question

Central Qualitative Research Question

How do middle school stakeholders view character education?

Subquestions.

1. How do stakeholders define character education?
2. Do stakeholders think character education should be the schools' responsibility? (Importance)
3. How do stakeholders view results of their schools' character education programs? (Effectiveness)

This research design is based on the need to completely delve into the topic from the stakeholders' viewpoints and generate themes. A review of the literature revealed a paucity of qualitative studies on the topic of character education in the middle school theatre. A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study because "qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11). By using this methodology in the research, empirical views of middle school participants were explored and presented. Explaining this type of study, Creswell (2007) opined that:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores... (a 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)

This research fully involved the strategies mentioned by Creswell (2007) in exploring the topic. Data gathered during the research were presented in rich details to completely express the views of the participants in their own words. The three schools studied (MS-1, MS-2, and MS-3) presented a great opportunity to research the topic because of their similarities in demographics and location.

District Demographics

MS-1, MS-2, and MS-3 are located in the heart of one of Alabama's most populous cities. U.S Census Bureau (2003) available data at time of research estimated the population of the city at 236,620. African Americans made up 73.5% of the entire population. Population for persons under 18 years old in 2000 was noted at 25%. Also, the

population with a Bachelor's degree or higher of those over 25 years of age was 18.5 %, which matched the state of Alabama's average of 19%. The median household income was estimated (based on 1999 figures) at \$26,735, well below the state of Alabama's average of \$34,135. There are 12 middle schools serving the school district.

Rationale for Site Selection and Access

This research was conducted in three middle schools, code-named MS-1, MS-2, and MS-3. MS-1 and MS-2 are located within 4 miles of each other and share the same demographics of SES, and virtually similar stakeholder representation on all other areas, such as urban location, racial composition, and free and reduced lunch status. MS-3 is located about 10 miles away, with a slightly higher SES and academic achievement, as measured by the Alabama State Board of Education. The three schools were chosen due because of their locations, official approval of the site by the school administrators, and convenience to the researcher; hence, the use of convenience sampling for the study (Creswell, 2007).

MS-1 and MS-2 also presented similar responses in the most current Pride Surveys conducted by their school district (see Table 1). Pride Surveys are used nationwide to measure conduct on several fundamental topics that can affect learning, such as family, discipline, safety, activities, gangs, and more (Pride Surveys, 2008).

Middle School 1 (MS-1)

MS-1, according to the Alabama State Department of Education's 2006-2007 Report Card listed an Average Daily Membership (ADM) of 293.4 total students. From the

ADM, 87.3% of the students were also listed as receiving free or reduced price meals, an “indicator of poverty.” Additionally, 94.3% of students at MS-1 attend school daily. At MS-1, there are 23 teachers, 1 counselor, 1 librarian, 2 administrators, 3 instructional assistants, and 9 support staff members. Of those employed by MS-1, 12.5% of the staff at MS-1 possess a 6-year post-masters (Class AA) through doctorate degrees; 29.2% have a master’s degree (Class A); and 54.2% of the staff has a bachelor’s degree (Class B) certifications. During the 2006-2007 Report Card, MS-1 reported their disciplinary problem as one Weapon Related incident that resulted in a suspension. There were no bomb threats, drug related incidents, and assaults reported to the State Department. Regarding teacher qualifications, a total of 14 teachers at MS-1 are classified as “highly qualified” in their elementary and secondary areas, during the 2006-2007 school year.

On the State’s Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Status for the 2007-2008, which is based on the previous year’s academic data, MS-1 met 16 AYP goals out of 17 (94.12%). The State’s AYP accountability is based on NCLB, which shows whether a school performed well academically to meet its annual accountability goals. These goals were disaggregated in terms of gender and race. The State’s data showed that all students met the goals in reading and mathematics, except in attendance where the school scored a 94% during the first 40 days of the school year. MS-1 needed a 95% attendance rate to meet AYP standards because school funding is tied to the first 40 days of the previous year’s ADM. MS-1 “Did Not Make AYP” for the 2006-2007 school year, and was not placed on a “School Improvement” mandate.

Middle School 2 (MS-2)

MS-2 is listed by the Alabama State Department of Education as a k-8 school. During the 2004-2005 school year, the enrollment at MS-2 was at 642.5. Two years later (2006-2007), the enrollment stood at 531.1 students. The average daily attendance was at 93.6% and 95.6% of those students are eligible for free and reduced price meals. There were 40 teachers, 1 counselor, 1 librarian, 3 administrators, 3 instructional assistants, and 13 support staff members at MS-2 during the 2006-2007 school year. Of those, 5.1% had a 6-year (Class AA) through doctorate level certification; 41% had a master's degree, and 46.2% had bachelor's degrees. The school reported one disciplinary suspension action involving an assault; two drug related suspensions, and four suspensions as a result of weapons possessions.

For the 2006-2007 school year, MS-2 boasted of 71.9% of its teachers as highly qualified. During the same school year it met 16 goals of 17 (94.12) AYP. At 94.12%, MS-2's AYP status was classified as "Did Not Make AYP." MS-2 was not placed on School Improvement mandate. Of the 95% threshold of academic progress required by the Alabama State Department of Education in reading, 98% of all students at MS-2 participated in the assessment process and met that AYP goal. Of which, 97% of the special education students, 98% of the Black students, and 98% of students classified as qualifying for free and reduced lunches met the goals. In mathematics, 95% of Black students participated and made AYP goals, same as 95% of their special education students, and 97% of those eligible for free and reduced lunches.

Middle School 3 (MS-3)

MS-3 did better than MS-1 and MS-2 on the State's Report Card. For 4 consecutive years, MS-3 has remained on the list of schools that achieved 100% AYP status. With a 392.9 ADM during the 2006-2007 school year, the school averaged 96.5% in daily attendance. In comparison, MS-3's school system averaged 96.2%, and the State of Alabama's average during the same period was 95.1%. Additionally, 78.3% of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunches. Approximately, 20% of the teachers at MS-3 had a 6-year through doctorate degree; 55% had master's degrees, and 25% of the teachers had a bachelor's degree. There were 22 teachers, 1 counselor, 1 librarian, 2 administrators, 1 instructional assistant, and 9 support staff members. Seventy-one percent of MS-3 teachers were highly qualified during the 2006-2007 school calendar.

State of Alabama disciplinary reports showed that MS-3 had one drug related incident that resulted in the student being sent to an alternative school setting. There were three weapons oriented cases. One student was expelled, and two were sent to the alternative school.

Pride Survey Data for Selected Sites

Each year, schools within the research school district take the Pride survey. The survey measures students use and attitude regarding many issues. Those issues include alcohol, tobacco, and gun possessions in and out of school. Notably, the data revealed that more students come in contact or use alcohol, tobacco, and firearms away from school, at a friend's house, and less on school grounds (Table 1).

Table 1

Pride Survey Data

Category	School Sites		
	MS-1 (n=146)	MS-2 (n = 153)	MS-3 (n = 346)*
Use and Availability			
Annual tobacco use	11.3%	11.30%	**
Annual alcohol use	35.2%	33.3%	**
Annual marijuana use	12.90%	12.9%	**
Average age when started tobacco use	11.70	11.42	10
Average age when started alcohol use	11.40	11.26	10
Average age when started marijuana use	12	11.16	11
Perceive availability of tobacco	21.10%	17.4%	**
Perceive availability of alcohol	27.90%	30.2%	**
Perceive availability of marijuana	19.30%	16.1%	**
Violence Indicators			
Threatened a fellow student	69	68	137
Have gotten in trouble with the police	39	48	91
Have been hurt at school	32	27	-
Have participated in gang activities	22	26	47
Afraid at school	18	20	36
Carried a gun outside of school	17	16	14
Carried a gun to school	12	7	12
Thought a lot or often about suicide	10	7	13
School and Community Safety/Not feeling safe in			
Parking lot	59.8%	69.9%	**
Playground	53.8%	64.9%	**
School events (ballgames, etc.)	53.4%	55.0%	**
School bus	52.3%	68.5%	**
Bathroom	47.7%	61.5%	**
Gymnasium	43.3%	53.4%	**
Cafeteria	41.4%	52.2%	**
Classroom	26.3%	35.8%	**
Halls	49.6%	61.5%	**

Note: *Only 2004-2005 data ** Contained ordinal data with ranges from Never – always

According to the Pride Survey from 2004 to 2007 school years, most students use tobacco, alcohol, and possess weapons away from school than do so at school. The survey indicated that students used illicit alcohol, drugs, and engaged in weapons possessions at a friend's house, in a car, then followed by possession within school grounds. MS-3 did not have available data for the previous school years.

Demographic Relevance to the Study

The concept for this research was developed from my experiences as a stakeholder in the educational system of this community. It is important for any audience of this study to get a glimpse of the composition and various attributes of this community. This demographic data clearly depicts a community beset with the critical race issues identified in the literature review. It is a minority, poor, urban, community that deals with the challenges that manifest themselves in how the students who live in this environment interact, their view of education, and the need, impact, and implementation strategies of any character education initiative. For most of the urban students targeted for this study, there is indeed a battle with the streets for their lives. Too often, the streets engulf them in gun-fires, drugs and alcohol, and other unwarranted activities. In 2008, CQ Press, a unit of Congressional Quarterly Inc., named the city chosen for this research number six on America's most dangerous city (CNN, 2008). The findings in this study reflected those challenges, attitudes, any impacts, and the general perception of the stakeholders regarding the topic of character education.

Convenience and Purposeful Sampling Strategy

Convenience sampling methodology was applied in the selection of sites and participants. Creswell (2005) explained that, “Convenience sampling is a sampling selection based on the willingness of the participants to be studied, and the samples can provide information for answering questions and hypothesis” (p. 149). The purpose of a convenience sampling for this study stemmed from the available pool of potential and accessible participants. A methodical and purposeful approach was used in convenience sampling through discussions with school leaders at the research sites. These leaders identified participants who will provide data for the study.

Patton (2002) explained that convenience and purposeful sampling involves strategically and purposefully selecting participants with rich information. The choice of participants and the number eventually selected depends on the availability, purpose of the study, and the researcher’s resources. The term “purposeful sampling” is derived from the richness of the information from participants from which the researcher can receive adequate data about the issues that are central to the purpose of the study (Merriam, 2002).

During that process, initial data gathering was also occurring as discussions took place regarding the selectees’ potentials to add data to the study. This researcher’s ultimate goal in convenience sampling was to tap into the knowledge base of the participants, and one of the best ways to achieve that aim was to have these conversations with leaders/gatekeepers at the research sites. It was through these conversations that not only participants with valuable data were selected, but also recognizing that “the researcher needs individuals who are not hesitant to speak and share ideas” (Creswell, 2007). In ad-

dition to the convenience sampling, a “snowball sampling” method was used to recruit and engage more participants in the study. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued that in snowball sampling additional sampling continues as events or incidents dictate during the study and, “persons, sites, and documents simply provide the means to obtain these data” (p. 215). Similarly, Strauss and Corbin added that “Sampling tends to become more purposeful and focused as the research progresses” (p. 215). That assertion was evident in the large number of participants (46) used in this study, as more participants with potential data were identified and added to the study.

The participants at the research sites were comprised of students, faculty and staff, and parents/community members; a school nurse, a former MP (military officer), who is currently a police officer with the city. Other participants not initially listed became involved as identified during the course of the research. These participants were directly affected by character education programs or lack thereof at their schools, and provided important data on the topic, using their words and experiences.

Data collection for this study occurred in concurrent phases, using multiple data collection methods. These methods included interviews of participants, observations at the research sites, collection of identified artifacts or materials relevant to the topic of character education, and lastly a focus group was convened as needed. The focus group brought together participants to act as a review group for findings of the study.

During the interview phase, preselected participants at both sites were interviewed initially, as depicted in Table 2, based on their direct middle school association or implementation of character education programs at their schools. The interviews began with the principals, then the assistant principals, and the counselors (one from each school)

Table 2

Initial Participant Sampling List

Participant/Position	School			Total
	MS-1	MS-2	MS-3	
Principal	1	1	1	3
Assistant Principal	1	2	1	4
Counselor	1	1	1	3
Social studies/other Teacher	4	4	3	11
Number of student par- ticipants	6	6	6	18
Number of par- ent/community member participants	2	2	3	7

were interviewed. The next group of participants interviewed was the social studies and other teachers. The social studies teachers are often charged with directly implementing the character education programs to the students. There is one social studies teacher for six, seven, and eighth grades, respectively, for a combined total of six social studies teachers.

Following the convenience sampling strategy, a “snowball” sampling method, another convenience sampling strategy, was employed where the researcher asked initial participants to refer and generate other participants that provided valuable data for the study (Creswell, 2005). At this juncture (as Table 2 shows), the initial participants at the sites, principals, assistant principals, counselors, and the social studies teachers, lead the researcher to other stakeholders such as parents, other teachers, a school nurse, janitor, and a resource officer. Most importantly, they helped provide a list of students that was interviewed for the study. Criteria for selecting that phase of participants were based on their experience/involvement in middle school and character education. All lists of rec-

ommended participants were discussed with the school/site leaders to generate purposeful data about the participants' contributions of rich data to the study. Marshall and Rossman (1999) explained that in convenience sampling, "researchers' site selections and sampling begins with accessible sites (convenience sampling) and builds on insights and connections from that early data collection (snowball sampling)" (p. 77)

Selected participants were interviewed in the following order: School leaders (such as other administrators within the district), other selected teachers, students, and then parents/community members. These participants were (in the case of parents/community members) invited and interviewed at their respective schools.

The participants were asked about their views regarding character education. The interviews lasted approximately 45 min to 1 hr. When necessary, re-interviews were conducted via telephone to gather more data and to add or clarify a previous response.

The next phase involved gathering data using a general observation of the sites to ascertain the actual practice and experiences involving character education. Observation data was gathered at areas of the sites where access is permitted, such as classrooms, school events, or school-wide events involving character education. During that phase, stakeholders' practices relative to the topic were noted. Observation data included how stakeholders involved character education in their daily activities.

In literature, the core pillars of conducting a successful character education program are often attributed to Drs. Thomas Lickona and Mathew Davidson. Dr. Lickona and Davidson are both educators and pioneers in the field of character education. They are founding members of the CEP, and the Founder/Director and Research Director, respectively, of the Center for the 4th & 5th R's (Figure 1) They also developed the

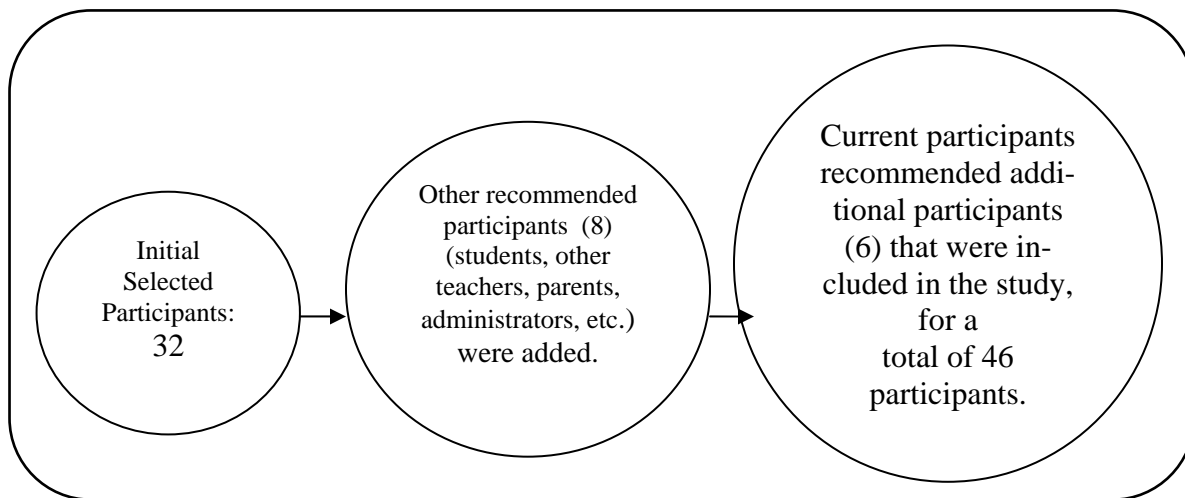


Figure 1. Snowball sampling strategy.

widely-accepted Eleven Principles of Character Education (Character Education Partnership, 1998; Lickona, 1996;). In the Eleven Principles of Character Education, an effective character education program or initiative incorporates elements that included school administrative, parental various stakeholder activities.

During the observation phase of this research, attention was paid to how these principles are exhibited and possibly used in daily promotion of character education at the research sites, and whether they are applied in conjunction, differently, or completely absent in the schools' own programs. How stakeholders interact with one another in accordance with positive character displays was noted during this observation phase. The observation matrix (Appendix C) was also used to tally/document evidence of the principles as they were practiced at the three sites studied for this research.

During the next phase of this study, documents and materials related to the study were collected. Those documents included assignments on character education, pamphlets, book readings, video tape materials, sample awards to stakeholders, and other documents and pertinent artifacts. In addition, school records regarding disciplinary actions were reviewed. When necessary, those materials were borrowed from the participants and returned to them after data analysis was completed. These documents included secondary data that shed light on the topic of character education. According to Johnson and Turner (2003), "Secondary data (sometimes called 'existing or available data' are data that were originally recorded or 'left behind' or collected at an earlier time....Secondary data may be used with other data for corroboration" (p. 314). In conjunction with other data, relevant information from the secondary data added immense information and provided a broader understanding of character education as perceived by the stakeholders

at the three research sites. The documents collected were scanned or photographed if necessary. The pictures were uploaded into Nvivo 8 and coded for data.

In addition to the previous phases, a focus group was convened. Members of the focus group acted as validation or a member checking group. Creswell (2005) pointed out that, “Member checking is a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account” (p. 252). This process involved presenting the findings and themes to the focus group for clarifications and if necessary more ideas for the study. The focus group also became initial audience for the research and presented challenges or acceptance of the results as enumerated by the researcher. At the three schools studied, those who participated in the focus group were given a chance to review and make additions to preliminary findings in the study. There were no additional data resulting from the focus groups conducted. Although they were given every opportunity to add, dissent, and express themselves at will, the members concurred with the themes generated for this study.

Convening the focus group could have been the last phase; however, this phase ran concurrently as data becomes available or was presented to the researcher. Collecting qualitative data on character education demands spending time where the participants are and collecting extensive data on the topic. The different phases, as a process, were ultimately a microcosm of the total study, and each phase eventually led to a thematic understanding of the topic of character education. As Figure 2 depicts, the different phases will each yield different forms of data that will be analyzed to fully understand the views of the participants regarding character education.

Phase	Action	Qualitative Materials	Time Frame/ research approach
Phase I Interviewed participants	Organized participant list using a snowball or similar approach so as to establish direct or indirect linkages. Developed interview protocol. In-depth face to face interviews and possible follow-ups. Began coding for themes.	In this phase, priority was placed on interviewing participants.	May - December, 2008 Concurrent data collection and analysis was taking place so as to synergize data as they were collected.
Phase II Observation	Visited research sites for observations in various areas of the site. Continued coding for themes.	Evidence came from classroom and other site observations. Used an observation sheet to check for the presence of lesson plans, pedagogy, and stakeholder actions.	May - December, 2008. Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently.
Phase III Collected materials, records, and other evidence for review.	Gathered evidence of practices or lack thereof as recorded.	Obtained permission prior to removing such data from school. Videos, recorded materials, maintained list of school role models. The <i>Pride survey</i> was also used to explore the topic.	May - December, 2008
IV Convened focus groups as needed.	Discussed, added data/member check collected data and synthesize.	Presented information, data, etc to the focus group for more discussion and clarification. More data emerge at this time.	May, 2008 – Jan. 2009

Figure 2. Data collection phases.

As data were collected, initial coding was taking place. Coding, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998) consists of conceptualizing and reducing the data, elaborating categories in terms of their properties and dimensions, and relating through statements. Creswell (2005) opined that “Coding is the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data” (p. 237). This process involved open coding and axial coding analysis of data. Open coding, as described by Straus and Corbin (1998) is “the analytical process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data” (p. 101). Axial coding involves relating categories to their subcategories because coding is shaped around the affiliation (axis) of a category. As Strauss and Corbin further explained, these two processes do not run sequentially; rather “they proceed quite naturally together” (p. 136).

All data gathered from participants was collected and transcribed. All transcribed materials were inserted to software and coded for themes using Qualitative Solutions and Research (QSR) software NVIVO-8, the most current version (Bazeley, 2007; Lewins & Silver, 2007). The qualitative process ensured that the voices of the participants were heard and documented regarding their views on the topic of character education (Greene, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Subquestions that emerged from data collection during that process were also analyzed.

A holistic analysis of all the data collected was applied in this research. Gibbs (2002; also see Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p.3; Yin, 1994, p. 41) argued that qualitative research methods tend to be based on interpretive philosophy, and that these researchers “take a holistic view of what they are investigating” so as to interpret and imbue it with meaning. “The holistic approach of qualitative analysis follows from this phi-

losophical position...the proper understanding or interpretation of people's words and actions can only be achieved if these are related to wider context in which they have been used or happened" (Gibbs, p. 2). As a result, description of the case will emerge that will enable the researcher to elaborate on "such aspects (of the case) as the history of the case, the chronology of events, or a day-by-day rendering of the activities of the case" (Creswell, 2007, p. 75). The planned interview, observation, document acquisition, and focus group phases of this study ensured that the research was approached systematically and in accordance with qualitative research data gathering methodology. The phases complemented and interlocked with each other as participants shared their views on the topic. Consequently, initial coding of data commenced as the process continued, because qualitative research involves an emerging process where questions (or phases) will change as the research progresses based on the participants' responses (Creswell, 2005). For clarity, emergent themes from this study were coded and classified under the roles of the participants such as administrators, teachers, students, and community members. The aim of such reporting was to streamline the emergent themes, and enable the audience to stay focused on the data while keeping track of the participants and their comments.

Gaining Access to Research Site

After dissertation committee approval, an official letter of request for permission was sent to school leaders at the schools seeking permission to use the selected sites for this research. Those letters were used to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. A formal meeting was also held with the administrators to outline the process and answer or ask pertinent questions. An interview procedure was compiled and addressed

with the school administrators and counselors. The school counselors and assistant principals served as gatekeepers during the process. The interview sessions were conducted in areas approved by the school administrators. At that time, preliminary and unofficial permission had already been granted by the site administrators to conduct the study.

Data Collection/Research Timeline

This research took place during the fall 2008 semester. This timeline allowed for in-depth study of pertinent data, and the need to explore deeper into the topic. An extensive log was maintained that detailed actions conducted during each phase of the study and the timeline of the inquiry.

The interviews were taped using an Olympus WS-100 digital voice recorder. The device was chosen for the interviews because of its clarity and easy-to-use features, especially during playback and transcriptions. It was also not as intrusive as a microphone would be in interview settings. All recorded and transcribed materials stayed securely stored and locked in metal filing cabinets, with the researcher possessing sole access to the materials and data.

Although preliminary notations and analysis were taking place as data was being collected, full data analysis of interviews and focus groups commenced after all data has been collected and coded for themes. After illustrating on the emergent themes, revisions were conducted to ensure that proper attention was given to both the results and the analysis. The participants in this study provided extensive information on the topic, and analysis was conducted by examining the themes that emerged in the study and their relationships to the topic.

Interview Protocol and Methodology

For the interviews, I used an interview protocol (Appendix F) to guide the questioning. These questions were designed after a broad review of literature and consultations with my committee members. Though the questions were designed to flow conversationally, I made prompt changes to adjust to the participants pace and comfort. Before the interview and also during the sessions, I carried conversations with the participants to put them at ease. I began with asking them to tell me about themselves. That question was designed to gather descriptive data about the participants and as an ice-breaker.

On several occasions when I sensed an unwillingness and doubt regarding answers they wanted to give, I reassured them that their answers were just their own opinions which were worth a million dollars, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that their information was not an indictment of their particular schools, but their perceptions. At times, I had to discuss the topic or actions schools engage in pertaining to character education as prompts to what schools were already doing.

There were also few issues that arose during the study. During audio transfer for transcription, two of the recorded interviews were inadvertently merged. In place of transcribing the audio interviews, detailed notes taken during the two interview sessions were used for data analysis. During that stage in the data gathering process, it was clearly evident to the researcher that similar comments appeared to be emerging during the process, and the researcher believes that minimal data lost as a result were augmented by using other participants' similar sentiments on the topic.

Furthermore, five of the participants received written questionnaires' instead of a face-to-face or sit-down interview (Appendix D). The researcher deemed it necessary to

collect data from these participants, which were followed up with brief meetings and phone calls for clarifications. The fact is that most school personnel operate on hectic schedules, and asking them to sit down for interviews appeared to affect those schedules. Rather, the determination was made to let them use reflective times on their schedule to give their insight and reflect on their views regarding the topic of character education. Nevertheless, they provided detailed data that was very useful to the themes generated in this study.

Validity and Rigor of Qualitative Data

In qualitative studies, maintaining validity and conducting a rigorous study ensures the credibility of the researcher and the results of the study. For this study, the researcher took steps to comply with all required IRB and case study qualitative research methodologies.

Yin (1994) opined that the best way to approach reliability issue in research is to “make as many steps as operational as possible and to conduct research as if someone were always looking over your shoulder” (p. 37). In qualitative research, the focus is to gather authentic data from the lived experiences of the participants (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Creswell (2007) argued that though qualitative studies appear not to have endings, but more questions, and validations strategies are employed because, “We seek to have our accounts resonate with the participants, to be an accurate reflection of what they said” (p. 45). However, results from qualitative studies cannot be generalized, and can only be transferable to similar contexts and settings. Marshall and Rossman (1999) opined that the strength of any qualitative study that examines a problem, a setting, a

process, a social group, or a style of interaction stands on the study's validity. Onwuegbuzie and Johnson further explained that researchers have identified areas that will be of great concern to the validity of any qualitative study. These areas include: the factual accuracy of the events (descriptive validity), the interpretation of the data that will be collected relative to group interpretations (interpretive validity), the connection of the data collected to the theories to be espoused (theoretical validity), the extent of applying critical findings to the cases, and the extent to which the researcher can apply findings to a similar situation, context, or population.

This study met all the criteria and adhered to these validity steps in order to present the themes in an accurate manner. The researcher made sure to present descriptions and representations detailed in the study as accurately as possible. Attention was given to the participants' words and actions during the process. First hand observation data was also used in this study to validate some of the representations made by the participants. This study was conducted in such a realistic manner that will present similar findings if the same process is used to replicate this study and accurately reflects the voices of the participants.

Trustworthiness

Johnson and Turner (2003) pointed out that researchers should be aware that every component and stage of the research can be scrutinized for trustworthiness. In this study, trustworthiness relates to how the researcher persuaded the audience that the findings of the study deserve the respect and attention worthy of an academic endeavor. The researcher set out to conduct a high level and quality study worthy of descriptive, inter-

pretive, and theoretical strength. The researcher confirmed the trustworthiness of the study through transferability, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking.

Transferability

Transferability is a validation method that points to the fact that a qualitative research study will be able to be generalized in its usefulness, with similar questions, group, settings, and context. The results of this study will withstand academic scrutiny and replication. The researcher included rich, thick descriptions of the participants' voices and expressions during the interview and observation sessions. Rich data emanated not only from what the participants said, but also from the subtle non-verbal communications that they depict, such as gestures, their emotions, and the various ties they share with others in the same environment of study. Capturing these data ensured the strong points and focus of this study. During the interview process, I paid attention to the participants tone, their mannerisms or body language. I was able to detect when they were trying to avoid the question, or when they were holding back data. The researcher captured these data by focusing on the demeanor of the participants during the interview process and those behaviors were recorded as part of the data.

Triangulation

Triangulation involves the use of multiple data sources to arrive at valid themes. For this study, the researcher collected data that was used in triangulation during the various phases of interviews, observations, and collection of artifacts. These data were converted into valid themes on the topic of character education. Marshall and Rossman

(1999) pointed out that triangulation is derived from navigational science and now applied to the social sciences where researchers bring “...more than one source of data to bear on a single point” (p. 194). Merriam (2002) added that triangulation continues to be a plan used to account for the validity and reliability of the qualitative research methodology. Using the various data sources, the researcher coded and analyzed data from this study to check for possible relationships on the themes that emerged.

Peer Debriefing

According to Creswell (2007), “Peer review or debriefing provides an external check of the research process. During the course of this study, my doctoral cohort members and I met to convene peer debriefing sessions. The aim was to share strategies, discuss important information in our research methodologies, and code data. These cohort members have been through the rigorous processes and committees involved in planning research studies and conducting dissertation research themselves. They were able to examine, comment, critique, and add to the strength and validity of this study. The Rigorous Data Sheet (Appendix K) was used to keep maintain accurate record of those critique sessions.

Member Checking

At various times during data collection, participants were presented with transcribed interviews so that they could confirm, make additions, or clarify what they had said. In so doing, the researcher sought the views of the participants on the credibility of the findings. At the conclusion of data collection and analysis for themes, a focus group

serving as another member checking team was convened to examine the most important themes for verification. Member checking goes towards confirming the credibility of the data to the participants and "...in such a manner as to demonstrate that the subject was accurately identified and described" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 192).

Dependability and Confirmability

The qualitative research methodology is cognizant of the changes that could occur during a planned research activity. Therefore, to assure that this study could withstand validation scrutiny and replication, the researcher maintained accurate timelines of data collection and analysis steps. Patton (2002) maintained that inaccuracies and any form of bias are totally unacceptable in a case study (p. 93).

This researcher maintained accurate documentation of activities dedicated to ensuring a rigorous, reliable, valid, and objective account of the process (Appendix B). Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 1999) stressed that confirmability was to ensure that the question of whether the findings of the research can be replicated and confirmed by a different researcher. Themes that emerged from this study were coded, re-coded, and presented to other cohort members for review. In addition, the researcher maintained a field note, observational notes, and listing and labeling of artifacts with times and dates of collection.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in conducting research studies have taken a serious tone as researchers in all phases of the research process are sensitive to ethical considerations

(Creswell, 2007). This case study research involved spending time where people work and study, and most importantly in the midst of hundreds of middle school students. Ethical issues in this study were of supreme consideration. A strong ethic was attained by assuring that appropriate conversations took place between the researcher and the site administrators. Appropriate permissions were received and the role of the researcher clearly clarified before research commenced. In addition, the proper documentations were sought through University of Alabama at Birmingham's (UAB) IRB, which had oversight powers and approval of the research study. Upon institutional approval of the study, the participants received consent forms that stressed their rights as participants.

Ethical consideration for this study called for assuring that the participant's personal information and identity be respected throughout the study. In addition, the researcher took steps to ensure that the interview sessions were conducted in a room that does not easily reveal the participants during the study. Participants were respected as individuals and not stereotyped regardless of the data they offered during the study. Their rights not to continue in the study if they wished to do so remained intact, and no coercive methods were applied to the participants for any reason whatsoever. Many have argued that being aware and anticipating ethical conflicts that could arise in a study such as confidentiality issues, respecting the culture of the research site, even entering and exiting the research venues, and how we write the research itself ultimately presents the researcher with ethical issues that he/she must be aware of as the research steps are considered (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

To maintain confidentiality and safeguard data gathered from this research, all research materials stayed inside a secure metal filing cabinet with the researcher in sole

possession of the keys. Electronic data were stored on a password protected computer. During reporting, the participants' names and actual sites were coded in pseudonyms.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

“Character is that which reveals moral purpose, exposing the class of things a man chooses and avoids.” — Aristotle, Greek philosopher (384-322 B.C.)

In chapter 3, the case study methodologies were clarified. In addition, the sampling methods, site selections, data collection and analysis were also discussed. In this chapter, the aim is to lay out the findings of qualitative data collected in the study and provide summary of the findings. There will also be minimal analysis voiced in this chapter to provide a background for the findings. Full analysis of the emergent themes will be conducted in the subsequent chapter. As a result of the large number of participants, a detailed description of each participant is provided in Appendix G.

The purpose of this research was two-fold: (a) to understand the perceptions of middle school stakeholders on the effectiveness of character education, and (b) to understand the importance of character education in three middle schools in an urban school district in Alabama.

The primary research question I sought to answer in the study focused on how middle school stakeholders view character education. In addition, subquestions emerged that focused on how do stakeholders define character education; how stakeholders think character education should be the schools’ responsibility; and how do stakeholders view results of their schools’ character education programs.

To acquire as much detail as I could, I interviewed a total of 46 participants for this study, which was conducted in a majority African American inner city school system. Except for participant 28, all other participants in the study were African Americans. Although the majority of data were collected relative to the three schools studied, I was determined to seek input from a wide range of participants, and that quest led me to participants that included a middle school nurse, janitor, a special education teacher, and also a police officer serving one of the schools. In addition to those participants, I also sought counsel with a middle school principal that also served students from another minority group, (an Indian Reserve in New York), and college professors and authors of national repute on the topic of character education.

Discussions of the Data

After the interviews were transcribed, they were read and analyzed. When necessary, an additional interview session, or in some instances phone calls were used to clarify data with the participants. Data gathered from the various focus groups was also transcribed and included in the coding and analysis.

The participants were assigned code names from 1 to 46. To easily track the participants and their roles in this study, they were grouped as follows: Students made up participants 1 through 11. Participants 13 through 19 were community members/parents; participant 12, along with participants 20 through 30 were teachers, and participants 31 through 36 held administrative positions. Participants 37, 38, and 39 were school counselors, and participants 40 through 46 held various teaching and other staff assignments at their various schools.

Emergent Themes

Various themes emerged from the study, which included Theme 1: Lost in Translation; Theme 2: Belief on Importance; Theme 3: Effectiveness Uncertainties; and Theme 4: Support. Under each theme (parent node), subcategories (child nodes) also emerged. Those themes correlated with the answers provided during the interviews. For clarity, each theme will be grouped and discussed based on the roles of the participants and their perceptions regarding character education.

Theme 1: Lost in Translation

Unfamiliarity With the Terminology

Before I embarked on this research, I had assumed that every stakeholder in the middle school setting is at the least aware of the terminology “character education.” Although a theme that emerged in the study was the lack of knowledge of the term “Character Education” by many of the participants, school administrators and other school personnel were more likely to be familiar with the expression than the students and community members. Their familiarity with the terminology was likely based on the school personnel’s levels and training. However, when asked how often they heard that terminology used at school, this group of participants generally agreed that it was rarely mentioned.

According to participant 31, who has over 6 years in administrative position, “Our character education in the school system stinks! It’s not been to me a big focus point”. Another administrator, participant 33, stated that he rarely hears it mentioned, “Not very often, not very often and I think it’s lacking....But if you never hear it.... I guess within

the last couple of years I've heard the term character education, but you don't hear it very, very much yes."

Similarly, teachers expressed familiarity with character education, but found it was lacking as a daily topic. Participant 40 claimed that character education has not been an open subject as far as she could remember.

Within the last, perfectly honest I think just within the last two years I've even been aware of character education just within the last two years, and I'll say maybe three times out the year. I think we have some work to do there.... Until now I hadn't even thought much about character education but of course, after this interview I'm going to. It has given me more of an awareness and giving me something to consider um....

Other teachers in the study confirmed participant 40's comment. I vividly remember participant 26 during the interview process. She was sitting on a standard office swivel chair across from me, a pure nervous wreck. She would swivel the chair from side to side, look downwards, and I noticed when she was about to make a point she would nod her head faster. When I asked her how often she hears the term character education, she replied, "Not often." When I probed her for more data on her answer, she replied, "I don't know. They're not really, really emphasizing that pretty much to me.... No, they're not."

On the contrary, most of the student participants, or student body, did not have a clue to what I was referring to when I asked them about character education. During the initial participant search, I went to see a potential eighth grade participant for this study. I had been informed (using the snowball sampling strategy to locate participants) that he participated in a program at their school that mirrors a character education program. I encountered the young man on the hall and the following conversation ensued:

- PI: Hi! I'm doing a research on character education. Would you like to participate?
- Tall Student: What is that?
- PI: You know, character education.
- Tall Student: Is that two words or one word?
- PI: (Stunned) What?
- Tall Student: The character thing. Is that two words or one word?
- PI: It's two words: Character *and* Education.
- Tall Student: Hmm, I don't know. Let me think about it.

He was not alone in his confusion over the terminology. I interviewed participant 8, a seventh grade student, and when I asked her how long she had been involved in character education she replied, "I think this is really the first time, unless you count the ummm, ummm, Jeff State Program? Is that a kind of character education program?" Her implication was that the interview session itself was character education, "...you were the one who asked me to be in it", she said when referring to a question about who is responsible for character education at their schools.

During my observations, I had stopped on the hallways at MS-3 to speak to a staff member I worked with at a previous school and she exclaimed, "Hi! I heard some of my students say they were doing character education with you". In essence, my research and questions about character education was transmitted as an act of character education itself. For other students, the interview sessions were also their first time hearing of the term "character education". Participant 11, a sixth grader, was completely unaware of the curriculum or concept of character education.

- PI: Alright then! Alright. So, have you been involved in programs that teach character education?
- Participant 11: No. This my first time
- PI: I see. Do you hear people say "character education" a lot?
- Participant 11: No.

Similar response also came from participant 6. She is a tall eighth-grade girl who admitted to getting in trouble several times the previous school year. She participates in various school activities including band and volleyball. She credited her own self-control for her ability to stay out of trouble this school year. When she sat down for the interview, she appeared very confident and outspoken, and except for the occasional adjusting of her eye-glasses, sat very straight in her chair. When I asked her if she had been involved in any character education program, she responded, "I haven't, really". When I probed further and asked her if she could venture a definition, she said, "I don't know what that means". Then I asked her if she had had counselors come in and have discussions with the students? She eagerly responded, "Yesterday in Ms. ___ class", and that the discussion was "about smoking, using drugs, and bullying". When I informed her that was indeed character education, participant 6's response was, "Oh!" And later she added, "Well, we don't hear it a lot from the teachers", again implying that the terminology is missing in the any discussions that may be taking place on the topic.

Likewise, I recorded confusion over character education terminology when I interviewed community members. Participant 16, a parent, was one of those who had similar reaction. When asked what he understood character education to be, he referred to the Consent Form I provided to him days earlier, "That it's a research on development of character and what goes on in the school like the acts of violence, and well I would think it would be a development to curtail some of this behavior and make it productive...."

I interviewed participant 15, a grand-parent, who echoed identical sentiments as the eighth grade student I spoke with earlier on the hallway at the beginning of the study

when she said, “I haven’t heard it, the two words together. I never heard character education together.”

Participant 15’s comment that she had not heard those two words uttered together at her grand-daughter’s school revealed what additional participants believed the schools are leaving out on the topic of utilizing character education. Participant 19, another parent, claimed that:

Um...you know just because I mean I guess just like me. Just lack of knowledge um...within everyone. Just not.... I don’t think it’s just something that’s being taught children you know, other than when they’re having discipline or say whatever. They don’t use that terminology though.

Administrators and school personnel may have been insulated from the unawareness of character education, but data gathered from other role players showed that other stakeholders who could benefit from character education are oblivious to it. Without exposure to the concept, or understanding that concept, the next theme on this study appeared to be predictable.

Indefinite Definitions

As this theme emerged, it was clear that neither administrators nor the students had similar ascriptions to this topic. All the participants had a wide range of definitions of character education, and each definition appears to be the reflection of those participant’s ideals on either what character is or what character education should be.

Participant 33 has been a high school principal before. According to his views, he:

...would define character education as a set of principles and values that you exhibit each and every day that steers you in the right direction uh...to do the right thing.... Character education to me are intrinsic values they’ll allow you to

make decisions that will force you and push you to do the right thing, you know, in life. ...character breeds good citizens the character the good character of any student breeds good citizens. It also boosts your academics and it also you know tells you it also kind of gives you a value system.

Other administrators offered similar comments on their definition, and these administrators were more likely to tie character education to morality and academic performance.

Unlike other levels in the educational process, teachers deal with students and their conduct on a very close proximity. As such, they play an integral role in the pedagogy and character education messages that are transmitted to the students. How they defined character education shed light on their beliefs regarding the topic. In her way of understanding the topic, participant 40 defined it as:

What I would say... character education I've defined it as building upon uh...a future, personality, and uh...and basically yeah I would go back to building upon a future. We're preparing them through character for their future but emphasis on personality.

Others, like participant 26, used a basic definition of character education prevalent in literature. She simply stated that, "Uh...character education to me is uh...teaching the children how to be respectful, how to resolve uh...problems that they have".

Participant 13 is a veteran educator, and one issue that bothers him regarding character education is the behavior that he sees in young boys. He said, "Character education applies to such as...as basically classes that are basically focused on morality on how men should treat women. Not sex education but characters that deals with morals, with standards. How men should treat a women right or wrong". Participant 13 appeared perplexed as he gave examples of negative behavior that he sees in young boys and completely attributed those negative behaviors to what he sees as the removal of prayer in schools.

Similarly, another veteran teacher, Participant 20, used the framework of human interaction to define the essence of character education. When asked how he would define character education, he paused briefly, looked up thoughtfully, and offered this definition:

Character education is the constructive development of educating a student in how to interact with his fellow students and prepare him or herself for higher levels of education and in our society they'd say um...let's say a tutelage program...a tutoring program to develop their skills to polish them up to let them be aware of what lies ahead in their development as an individual to make them a better person regardless of their socio-economic conditions.

The teachers who participated in this study recognized what character traits constituted acceptable behavior, and therefore appeared to weave those notions into their definitions.

I wanted to check for either similar or dissimilar data on the students' definitions, but most importantly to gauge their understanding of the topic. When I examined how they defined character education, there were no matching definitions, but there was one student who, like the teacher (participant 40) also used personality as a foundation of his definition of character education. Participant 11, a sixth grader, defined character education this way: "Character education it's about like...it's about like uh...like your personality wise and how you act in front of people um...it's based on your attitude um... and the way you do stuff and have manners and stuff."

Participant 8, a seventh grader, defined character education even more broadly. She reflected for a few seconds and answered that:

Character education? I would define that as like, how a student feels about their (stammering) their education, like how the teachers would teach, or like the...how teachers will give them the work, and what, what it is. That's how I would define umm like..., like, for instance how they would..say..say if they put themselves in the teachers' place, how would they teach the students their education..... It

could be the person giving the education away, like, the student teaching another student, that could be like she the teacher and that's the, that's the pupil. So, like, if it's, If I'll call it character education how your character is turned around as if you were a teacher, or umm principal, or assistant principal. How you just go on their turf and see how it feels to teach students and how their attitudes be, and stuff like that. That's how I would define it.

Despite the broad paint, it was evident that the definition offered by participant 8 reflected what others might be thinking regarding character education.

Like participant 8, participant 13, a parent, also included a broad understanding of character education. Considering that students spend more time at home than they do at school, it was vital to know how parents would define what they understood at that point to be character education. Participant 13, who came to check on her son when she was referred to me for the study, defined character education as:

Character education applies to such as...as basically classes that are basically focused on morality on how men should treat women. Not sex education but characters that deals with morals, with standards. How men should treat a women right or wrong. When we took...when we took pray out of the school it had a profound effect on our children developing their character to developing meaning it doesn't give them a moment during the course of the day to think about right and wrong. I think that it was one of the most dangerous things we ever did because more emphasis is placed on if you do wrong this is what's going to happen less emphasis is placed on when you do right somebody is going to be there to reward you and to say look I see you doing right.

Since most of the parent participants in the study have neither been involved in character education nor were privy to what it meant for their schools, their definitions point towards shedding more light on their perception of the benefits of character education they expected to accrue from the practice. Participant 41, a community activist and volunteer at her school, again defined it to include her expectations and belief, as:

Character, you know, as one would say, building your character it is that things that stands out about you that more or less defines you, that guides you. The character that you're trained or taught to have character that builds a type of individual that is affluent, that is functional, that is one who's giving back to his

or her community rather than to pull from it, you know. Developing good character helps one have better self esteem, better able then to respect others, because that building of the great character within helps them respect themselves, which is just another lead to respecting others. Without it, so much fails.

While each of the participants did not relay similar definitions of character education, their comments captured various aspects of the meaning that each participant assigned his/her own definition. Under his theme, it was apparent that the participants had individualized views of character education, regardless of their roles.

Participant 8 threw in a plethora of topics that in its interpretive form touches on students' attitude "how a student feels about their education", Pedagogy and curriculum "like how the teachers would teach, or like the...how teachers will give them the work, and what, what it is", and characteristics associated with positive role-models "So, like, if it's, If I'll call it character education how your character is turned around as if you were a teacher, or umm principal, or assistant principal," and other values that are widely supported among stakeholders.

The common threads in these definitions appear to be that the participants have recognition of character education as a behavior changing tool. Hence, phrases such as "personality", "the way you act", "molding someone", "attitude" and others were used as part of the definition. Nevertheless, there were instances where a narrow definition of character was applied, as in the case of participant 8 who defined it as "how your character is turned around as if you were a teacher". However, analyzing her total definition shows that narrow focus as evidence of participant 8's unsure way of relaying good character to positive authority and attributes, vis-à-vis fellow students, teachers, and administrators.

Although no single definition emanated from the administrators, teachers, students, and parents, and other participants in this study, their perspectives reflect a shared belief that character education is a huge umbrella that governs both personal and interpersonal relationships and interactions.

Theme 2: Belief on Importance of Character Education

A Sense of Urgency

When I spoke to some of the participants, there was a sense of dire warning on why they cry out for something, someone, a program that will equip the students with tools to handle conflicts and avoid disruptive behavior.

Secondary data gathered during this study proved the relevance of this theme. I also examined the suspension numbers for the three schools for the last 4 years. That data and other serious concerns raised by most of the participants illuminate there has been a concern over the crisis of character brewing within the middle school cases, and an urgent response is required to address them. It revealed that for the 2004- 2005 year, the three schools had a combined suspension of 1,076 students. For the 2005-2006 year, there was a dramatic drop in suspensions to 601 students. The 2006-2007 year documented a similar total of 698 suspensions, and the 2007 saw the lowest suspension average of 395 suspensions for that school year. MS- 3 had the lowest suspension average for those years at 510, and MS-2 recorded the highest overall numbers at 1,544 students suspended during the past 4 years.

When I asked the administrator at MS-3 why there were drops in suspensions, he cited drastic drops in enrollment in the system, and the higher income level of his

school's community (when compared to MS-1 and MS-2) as possible reasons. He also mentioned that the use of in-school detention, which he said were not often entered into the computer system, as possible reasons. Both MS-2 and MS-3 have in-school detentions where students with infractions are sent sometimes in place of out of school suspensions. At MS-2, the school leader cited the higher number of enrollment because the school is a kindergarten through eighth-grade school.

Participant 32 is an assistant principal at her school. She has also had similar positions at an alternative school where students expelled from their regular schools are sent when they commit serious offences that the system determines are Class III offences. Her perspective on the urgent need of character education supported the secondary data cited above. She lamented:

You know, we have a lot of problems with students you know that have discipline problems. They need the core values, they need core values, they need to learn about character you know. Character is very important, and it's not what people see you know, your portrayal. I mean, what people see. Character to me is how you act when you know people are not looking....I mean just what I've reiterated over and over again, you know, just, I think it needs to be a part of the program, you know our program, educational program. I do believe that we need to teach character education in schools.

In almost all cases, school administrators make the ultimate decision regarding student discipline at their schools. At this juncture, the view of administrators who would rather focus on other curriculum geared towards raising achievement scores was very glaring in this study. These administrators appeared frustrated with the lack of character education programs they do not have the time or resources to implement.

Another administrator, participant 31, stated that it was becoming, increasingly difficult to change value systems and mores!" When participant 33 was posted to his current assignment as an assistant principal, he believed he was tapped to help curtail unruly

behavior at his school. He soon found the students needed more than disciplinary consequences:

I came in to foster the kind of guidance for them, because a lot of the young men here seem to be somewhat you know kind of unguided in terms of I don't know if that's the right word uh...in terms of what they did and I found that a lot of students did things without a kind of value system and we know that values are the things that are right and wrong, what you believe in and a lot of the youngsters I found their value system was very, very low their self esteem was very, very low.

Not only were the administrators in agreement with the urgent need for character education as a way to help their schools to be more successful, the teachers at the schools studied also believe the students lack of moral or performance guidance negatively impact their ability to teach effectively. Participant 28, an in-school detention teacher echoed that belief, "...they know right from wrong but they still continue to do it you know, choose, you know to do the wrong or we say 'do what you want to do'" Those actions, he believes, hampers school progress because they students are often distracted by conflicts of all kinds. Character education can help the students cope with those pressures, he mentioned. Participant 26 agreed with that statement by pointing out that:

Okay, I think it's a need for character education in the classes in the schools because these children going through so much. They're seeing so much. They see it on TV; they experience so much at home they're probably going through some conflicts or some things that's bad on them at home. So they need someone to talk to express themselves to and know that we care. So I think we need it in our classroom we need it starting this year. I think we need it!

In lieu of the challenges the youth are facing today, Participant 26 may have hit on various areas of concern affecting how the students conduct themselves at school. Her view was that there are hidden challenges that schools have to understand to assist the students through character education. When asked if she meant that character education is needed "this year", she exclaimed:

Yeah! They...they need somebody to come in and talk with them cause it's a lot of problems...it's a lot of problems that we have to face, and you wonder why Johnny acting like this or Susie's acting like this. It's a reason...it's a reason!

Indeed, the students who participated in this study concurred that schools need to address student misbehavior through character education, and do so urgently. They recognized that there are problems in the manner in which their peers behave, and often times those behaviors appear to go unchecked. Many of the students expressed frustration at the parents for not maintaining appropriate disciplinary functions as parents, and that the schools are to also be blamed for not strongly addressing disciplinary that exacerbate the intolerable climate of their schools.

Participant 11 agreed with his teacher and said of his peers, "...they do just what they wanna do". Participant 6 somberly added that, "...How the children act it don't make any sense at all". Many of the student participants expounded on the same theme bemoaning the lack of direction, effort, self-understanding, and complete absence of conscientious behavior from the students. They believed that a well-implemented and focused character education could tackle those problems and make their schools a more conducive atmosphere for learning. Participant 2:

Well, I really would like to add is that the kids they should work on their character education. I doubt if most of these kids in this school know about character education because all of them act the same for real. It's a few kids who'll do their work get it done. They'll talk a little but they'll do their work; they'll get it done but most of the kids in this school they're up there flunking! Like it's this boy 15. 15 in the seventh grade! It's this boy in my class 13 in the sixth grade! It's horrible!

If the students appeared worried over the behavior of their peers, the community members and stakeholders did not hold back their own fears. They beseeched the schools and their leaders to take urgent measures to wrestle the control of their schools from dis-

ruptive students. None other than the city's mayor, who spoke at the school system's opening rally for the 2008 school year warned of the need for programs and steps to harness the great potential of the majority of the students. He further warned, "Our children are out of control, our mama's and daddy's are out of control!" He sternly added, "Stop letting a handful of children upset the learning process!"

That call for action is purely why the participants believe character education is needed at the schools. Other community members in this study advocated changing the mindset rather than punishment with suspensions and expulsions, which they say does not appear to produce sustainable success in improving student behavior. About six months after this interview was conducted, the same mayor was quoted in a front page newspaper article as proclaiming his disgust after visiting his high school alma mater, and he threatened, "I will pull the officers out of the streets and into the schools" (Bryant & Robinson, 2009, p. 1).

Other parents were just as forthright in their urgent call for character education. Speaking in her calm, articulate voice, Participant 15, a grandparent, thought for a few seconds about character education and responded that whether one is on the job scene or simply interacting with family members, character education plays a vital role in one's behavior, "I think it's just something that we need everywhere", she responded. Furthermore, she believed that students' character needs to be reinforced as early as possible regarding responsibility and respect because those are the root causes of conflicts, "... because if you're not responsible somebody else is going to have to be responsible you know. Somebody it's going to fall on... be a problem for somebody else."

Participant 16, a parent whose child is in the seventh grade, came for the interview on his way to another appointment. He had a steady, captivating, whisper-like deep voice, and he seemed to enjoy sharing his thoughts on the topic. As we discussed, he had an intense, yet saddened demeanor as he described the lack of male participation at school and in the lives of many of the students he encounters. He described his efforts to get help not just for his adolescent daughter, but also to take time to talk to the students in his neighborhood. Using some chilling words in describing those students, Participant 16 said:

Yes, some of the same school kids of her age in the neighborhood live right here in (names area) Public Housing area and I try to talk to them. I'm having problems with this child this and that. I try to talk to them and lead the parents. I can't say that they're lazy. I don't know if they don't have the...I don't think with a lot of kids you can look in their eyes, and it seems they're soul less they don't have a aim or goal, an emptiness, a goal, a direction and that's what part of the problem is, but they need first you know faith based church, and you need the parents you know to be involved uh...more involvement in activities like PTA meetings you know....

“Soul-less”, I wondered? When Participant 16 described the young adolescents who appear “soul-less” and in need of “faith-based” intervention on the character of the young people he encounters, he is expressing an urgent need for character education, but he also seemed to be ascribing character education to his set of definitions and also as a communal responsibility. The school leader who wished for a program to be implemented, the students worried about their school’s climate, and the mayor whose show-of-force-threat was splashed across the newspaper may not necessarily spell out “character education” in their calls, but the unmistakable impression they convey when they espouse their beliefs is that there is definitely a need for character education in their schools.

Rotten Homes

Many of the participants in this study pointed fingers at the home or community environment as a source of most of the problems students display at school. In examining this theme, it was evident that school administrators and personnel had strong points to make on the negative and harsh impact that the environment has on students' behavior at school. All the administrators I spoke with were in sync on this particular theme.

Participant 31, a long time administrator in the middle school setting, also bitterly complained that:

Parents share a vast responsibility for lack of change in their students' character quotient. We teach the character traits here at school, but there is a lack of articulation of the same in some of our students' homes. This truism is documented through the rising numbers of discipline challenges that are at their core – students' lack of acknowledgement to basic core values about traits like respect, honesty, caring about others – compassion, etc.”

Participant 34, the younger administrator agreed with fellow administrator, Participant 31 on the issue of parental responsibility in teaching character. In addition, he also leveled a charge against the parents that highlights the intensity of frustration aimed at parents as a result of students' character displays:

Another factor that influences character education in a negative way is negative parental influence. Some students are taught negative behaviors and responses from parents which makes it almost impossible to teach them other behaviors.

Do parents “teach” their children negative behavior? Maybe not directly, but many of the participants interviewed for this study firmly believed that parents' actions may indirectly condone and foster negative behavior.

Teachers interviewed for this study completely agreed with the notion that character education is important, because the challenges students present could be traced to

what transpires in their living environment. Participant 23 has taught in middle schools in the public and private setting. He answered:

I believe character education in the middle school is very important. I say this because many of the students do not get any development from their *homes*! These are the students that cause most of the problems in the schools and also the community. These young people think that it is alright to say or do anything at anytime. Their lack of social development can spread to other students that they may influence.

Although the teachers believed the environment affects students' behavior, they did not necessarily argue that it affects their success. The argument they made was focused on character education as being a tool to use to combat those issues. As participant 40, a parent-involvement teacher, stated in a solemn tone:

One thing about it and I'll say this I never met a parent who didn't want what was best for their child. They may not know how to give it to them or you know ways to going about doing it because of their lifestyle and maybe their upbringing but I think any parent once you sit down and talk to them all parents want their children to be respectful, all children.... All parents want the best education for their children. They want the best in life for them so I...I...I think you know they may not have the same views or the same understanding as the majority, but I think when it comes to developing anything that would influence their children or their child they will be for it.

Other participants in the study wondered if parents really would "be for it". Invitations to school functions, pleas for school visits, homework help, and holding children responsible for their behavior often go unheeded. While the parental support at the school level is arguably a source of consternation in this study, especially in urban settings, Participant 40 was espousing a near universal comment evident in this study – every stakeholder desires a "good" student, no matter where they come from.

Similarly, the special education teacher at MS-2, participant 24, tried to buttress participant 40's claim by pointing out the socio economic challenges of the parents which could hinder their ability to successfully raise their children as children of character. At

times, Participant 24 will hit the palms of her left hand with her right hand in a chopping motion to hit home her points, as she added:

They are lower income parents and they don't have a lot of (pause), their mom and dads might not work but you want them to be better, so you instill part of them like, you still try to instill positive ways that they can have good work base even in middle school.

Cognizant of their backgrounds, students who participated in this study did not hold back in discussing how the environment calls for character education in their schools. They spoke of students who live in negative environments and therefore reenact those experiences at school. They used analogies that point to the fact that students who live in the "ghetto" will apparently talk "ghetto," because that is their life experience. These students also accepted the fact that they may not necessarily come from environments where negative events occur constantly, but the urge to join the surge towards environmental and pop culture seems to be a swirling event which they find irresistible. In such instances, parents are expected to take charge and redirect that adolescent. However, that parental direction appears to be lacking.

I interviewed participant 11 the very first teenage year of his life. He sat down for the interview and as we chatted he informed me it was his 13th birthday. He too seemed to realize the points being made regarding the importance of a supportive home. He informed me that he lives with his grandparents because his mother changes residence often because of inability to pay some of their bills. Despite those travails, his grandfather remains a steady foundation in his life.

When I was interviewing him, participant 11 was leaning forward in his chair with his elbow on the office desk I was using, and he was propping his chin up with the same left hand. He had on his neat, blue, fitting, knee-length shorts, and the standard

white golf-shirt, and at times spoke assuredly and would sometimes make motions with the same left hand while still supporting his chin with it. When I asked him why parents should be more responsible for teaching character education to their children, he wrinkled his face and motioned with his left hand as if to say, “Duh!” or “Hello?”, as teenagers would say when they are trying to make you look uninformed. Then he added, “Because they (parents) always at home and if your child come to school acting like that you can tell that their parents don’t really care”. In other words, the school would have to contend with that child’s negative character display without the parent’s support and fulfillment of their roles as primary moral teachers and disciplinarians.

As another teenager, participant 8, a student, puts it:

Aspects, well, what concerns me is why, like the boys, for certain, for instance: Why do they do the things they do like most boys they talk, they threaten folks for no reason. They get mad over dumb things, because they ain’t doing what they are supposed to. That why, that’s what I want to know. They don’t . . . certain boys I know don’t do their work, and they act a donkey. And don’t, I mean, antagonize their own teacher. And like some girls who think they all that. They go around cursing at the teacher, and then calling mama up here, talking about some they did, talking about some, what they did wrong. Their mama wanna “Black Out” on the teachers. Like, “Why you did this to my baby? My baby ain’t do nothing about that, aint do that”. What I wanna know why they do this, that kind of stuff. And then, their mama ain’t really, if there mama was up here watching what their child do, like . . . watch what their child do, they’ll understand why the teacher do this to them or why they get suspended so much. That’s what really concerned me. The other thing the parents let the child do what they want to, if you ask me. I know my grandma don’t. (laughter)

Participant 8 encapsulated her perceptions of students’ behavior and subsequent reactions of the parents, and she used the term “Black Out” to describe negative reactions by the parents. She described the term “Black Out” as “My friends we be saying that blackout is when . . . scream at the teacher, just go off on the teacher. . . . That’s what we be saying. Me and my sister we be like ‘You just blacked out on me!’” She went on to ex-

press disdain for her peers' actions and lack of consequences due to lax parental interventions:

It concerns me because sometimes, I get mad because because if...I look at it I say "If that was me, I woulda still got a whooping. Cause I got a, I got suspended. I'll be like look, I mean, I'll be like what do their mama's be thinking, or what do their fathers be thinking. Like somebody need to put them in their place....That's what made me, it just kinda made me...I don't get everything that I want like some kids, and then they sit there and do whatever they want, talk, and then some talk to their mama any kind of way and still get what they want. If I say some things like they say to their mamas, like, "Eh, give me this!" or "You need to be trying to get me that!" I woulda got slapped or something. I mean, cause, I'm not, my grandma is from the old school. You don't talk to her any kind of way....

Apparently, participant 8, a teenage student, somehow tapped into a certain consciousness that most of the participants expressed. What she youthfully termed "Black-out", which some in this audience could see as a racially insensitive term, Participant 13 regarded as "co-signing". However, there is no mistaking the parallels which their comments interact.

The community members, which comprised of parents and other stakeholders had similar concerns and had empirical data to support their beliefs. Some of the participants lamented their inability to discipline their own children and was hoping that the schools could provide an alternative avenue to induce good behavior in their children. Participant 15, a grandparent, accused her peers of neglecting their duties as parents. "Some parents think that apparently children don't need any attention.... At a certain age they just let them go," she said.

At times, the parents in this study became very introspective as they try to relate the consequences of the homes that students display at school.

I had some bad experiences with kids my biological kids that weren't with me because we didn't you know live together and that's why I put so much on this

kid this is my step-daughter but which is my daughter you know I don't look at it like that but I...failure is not an option if it does it'll be after I tried all I could. I've had the thing with dropout, with violence suspensions all kinds of things with my kids when I couldn't do anything about it when you don't have custody I wanted to but they're going to go with the permissive parent I mean that's why..That's why I have problems right now with my older daughter they think I'm the meanest person in the world.

Participant 13, a college educated substitute teacher and mother of several kids including a current middle and high school student, shared the same beliefs. Once more, when asked what concerns her and reasons for character education, participant 13 responded:

Their lack of consciousness... Their lack of it just seems as though they are many of these children are angry. Many of these children come from broken homes. Many of these children, when they find themselves in circumstances that based upon their choices they don't have little to any remorse about it. Often times they'll call their parents and the parents will cosign the mess, okay, and by the parent cosigning the mess it only creates a bigger mess you know. And I think if we incorporate the character building program and we re-educate our parents to understanding that our children can still love us and we can tell them that you was wrong....

What participant 8, a student, youthfully termed "Black-out", participant 13 regarded as "co-signing". However, there is no mistaking the parallels which their comments interact.

The participants in this study may not be familiar with Critical Theorists and studies (Gallien & Jackson, 2006; Gordon, 2003; Love & Kruger, 2005; Ogbu, 1992; Payne, 1996; Rothstein, 2008; Steele, 1992) on poverty, race, and urban environments, which indicated certain correlations between poverty and students' behavior. However, they do reflect similar findings and an understanding that the school needs foundational or at the least supplemental moral upbringing for the students to function successfully at school.

Participant 19, a parent and ardent volunteer at her kids' middle school, MS-3, reflected on the parental component and added:

I don't know because um...one of our problems here we...we have a problem...we have an issue. It's a challenge not a problem. It's a challenge with uh... even the simplest things like our PTA meetings, we don't get the participation of the parents you know. It's always the same few people here as many kids as we have in the school, you know, parents don't show their interest. So, I don't know um...if they would show their interest in character education.

As an active parent in the school, participant 19 reacted against lack of parental participation that seems to be against the actual perception of what the school experiences. MS-3 is located slightly away, about 10 miles, from the hustle and bustle of the city's downtown. Parental participation at MS-3 appears to be higher than most schools in the city. Thus, the fact the school is impacted by a lack of participation by stakeholders in this or any character education matter is striking considering their proximity to more affluent areas of the community. Regardless of the economic structure of their surrounding communities, most participants concur that active stakeholder participation is needed if character education is to be effective. In the words of participant 26, "Cause it takes a village to raise these children nowadays, cause they're faced with a lot of adversities or whatever so they (stakeholders) just need to get together and find out what would be effective for both the school and the community."

Indeed, most participants agree that the "village" effort required to raise a morally sound child appears to be lacking some essential huts, and that the fact remains that for the children who are devoid of the essential parental guidance (and if you include the mayor's indictment that "...our mama's and daddy's are out of control"), then the challenges of teaching character education, as asserted by the participants, is truly exacerbated. Character education, the participants agreed, has to occur in strong partnership be-

tween the home and the school setting to be effective. However, they also believed that recognizing the environment as a contributing factor and what those factors are would help in crafting an effective character education curriculum.

Rotten in the Middle

The Participants appear to understand and agree that middle school students have peculiar personalities that call for vigilance and character training, and schools have to step in to help channel and promote future success in the lives of their middle school students. They agree that the behavior of the middle school students in the three schools studied is simply alarming. As participant 36, an administrator put it: “We have a saying: ‘Everything is rotten in the middle!’” He went on to add, “That’s how it is. And... and, you know. And that’s just the facts, man”.

Participant 36 has been an administrator at various levels in education, and is the leader at his school. I interviewed him in his office, which was decorated with various state, local, and community awards detailing his successful career in education. During the interview session, he made other remarks regarding the behavior of middle school students:

Well, we are seeing a lot of bullying. And, and [slight stutter], and followed by stealing. Then we have lying. They will see things happen and either lie about witnessing it or not say anything at all. As a matter of fact, they have a code for it! They call it “No snitching”!

According to participant 36, those negative character traits lead directly to most of the disciplinary problems his students cause on a daily basis. Regardless of the academic success he has enjoyed at his school, he still felt like more could be done in terms of raising morally upright students. Another administrator, participant 31, while agreeing that

“the middle years are very difficult ones for students,” also confirmed that they have “lack of acknowledgement to basic core values.” Considering the revelation in the data regarding how schools are neglecting character education, participant 31’s comments indicate those values are lacking because adequate attention and foundation has not been given to effectively implementing character education before or during the students’ middle school years.

Participant 31 has had many years of experience in education as a teacher and administrator, and he traced the middle school issues students face back to what their parents might have done when they were in middle school themselves. I listened as he tried to make the connection between the actions middle students take, how the schools deal with those behaviors, and what happens the children of those parents. Using a 15-year old student he knew was pregnant as an example, he attempted to champion his theory:

....this students did not go to get any kind of prenatal care up until the seventh month of her pregnancy, and had it not been for this teacher that put up the money for this child to go this child never would have been getting it done, and that girl is in that child’s womb. Bringing a baby into the world, you know having never seen a doctor there are so many things that is uh...that is and then you take a girl 14-years old, her body is not developed so two chances to one the child is going to be premature. And in fact you know I used to tell them all the time you, know a girl-15 years old girl having a baby your life as an African-American, your life is over with because every time you get ready to go somewhere you got to take that child with you, and then I see a whole lot of grandmothers who are raising children and they should be in... they’re in the twilight of their years! They ought to be taking it easy, but they’re raising and not doing a very, very good job. The children run over them and things of that nature....

As slightly far-fetched as his theory might seem, other participants agree that schools who fail to understand and tackle the developmental stages of the adolescent student through programs that would help that child understand and deal with the changes

that come with that stage in life are perpetuating a life cycle of hardship for all stakeholders.

The teachers who deal with these students in closer proximity have all heard and seen these middle school students behave in shocking ways that could stun even the hardened mind. For participant 28, the accounts of risky behavior by the middle school students he encounters mirror that of participant 31, the administrator, and scream for more character education:

Yeah! That's all they think about, man! You know what I'm saying, and I find out, you know, character building is so important but it has totally gone out the window, cause you have kids having sex, you know, as early as the fifth grade, or even earlier, you know. I hear them and some of the things they say in here man you got eighth graders just doing stuff you would see on a pornographic film. ... Man, you wouldn't even believe. I mean, I done heard guys in there say they met a girl two days later they hooking up you know.

Other personnel, such as counselors and the school nurse interviewed for this study, picked up on the nature of middle school students and their behavior as espoused in literature, and therefore see character education as a useful tool to keep a hand of the pulse of their students.

Participant 38, a counselor, has been at the same middle school for 5 decades and has seen the various changes in students' behaviors. She expressed very grave concerns about the peer pressure she sees at the beginning of the students' middle school years:

Okay one reason I do believe I'm thinking about like all of our kids are not coming up okay. Like we have transition, like for like we have some fifth graders that are already here, but when we get them from other schools like _____ (names withheld) one time, _____, _____ then you have that something, I don't know how to put that, 'cause like this year was a good example, 'cause one of our students want to commit suicide because of the peer pressure. Smart kid, you're 'A/B' Honor Roll, that has nothing to do with that peer pressure, and people being afraid and this kid had you know, had issues that he had not discussed with any of the school officials. So that's why I said target that stuff in the sixth grade, fifth, and sixth grade that's serious...

At this time, participant 38 appeared very emotional over the situations she was describing. She paused for a few minutes, contemplated her words, and decided to continue the interview. She later went on to describe a conversation she had earlier with a parent who claimed her child was afraid to come to school because of fears of being bullied.

Bullying and peer-pressure is mostly seen by students in the middle school setting to be at the top of the list of what makes it very challenging. The student participants recognized that their peers play in class, disrupt class, and act in ways that are geared towards pleasing their friends or entertaining them. Asked why those behaviors he observed irritated him, participant 1 cited, "... because they disrupting my education, and they should want to get their education. So, they shouldn't act way they do." Another student, participant 10, said some of the negative behaviors he had witnessed cause him to be concerned about the character of his fellow students, because they are often "Um...destroying school property, bringing knives to school, well weapons. That's it".

A community member, participant 13, was experiencing an "Aha" moment of her own during this interview as a result of the discussion that we were having regarding character education in the middle school setting. She made sure to assert that in the context of middle schools, character education is crucial:

On a final note, the age between 12 and 15 are the character building years. You caught on to an excellent, awesome, profound ideal concept. I think that if this is something that can be developed and can continue to be researched and it could become something that could become fundamental to the school systems in general, because it's at these times that our children's mind can be molded and can be taught that. I think that more than anything, more than the bank account, as we get older we've learned that you can have all the things in the world.... but what is it a man to have the whole world and to lose his soul. So, if, you know, we got to teach these kids to stand for something so that they won't fall for anything and that begins on the inside it's an inside out job.

In her own way of expressing the interesting aspects of this study, participant 13 latched on to the same views as many participants in this research. When I conferred with her again to clarify her “inside out” comments, she expressed that reaching the mindset of the students through character education will engage and develop their mental capabilities and the manner in which they confront adolescent challenges that they may face. The participants concurred that the middle school years are challenging. Wrestling control of the middle school students away from negative influences and using character education towards channeling them to positive moral actions was a welcome sentiment expressed the participants.

Theme 3: Effectiveness Uncertainties

Uncertain Immediate Impact

I knew that participant 31, an administrator, had a tendency of expressing herself eloquently and directly, but my interest in her opinion about character education was very high because of her professional experience in the middle school level. True enough, she said to me: “Our character education in the school system stinks!” In eight words, Participant 31 summed up the general feeling of most of the participants in this study who believed that enough is not being done, or that simply that the rewards of today’s character education effort in the middle school theater may not actually be felt until later in the students’ lives.

Another administrator, participant 35 agreed with that sentiment, but she also viewed the reason for the possible ineffectiveness of character education in the middle school setting as a result of lack of adequate curriculum from earlier years of a child’s

education: “Personally from my experience in the middle school setting, I believe that character education is not helpful unless it was taught to the students in elementary grades”.

Although the three schools studied have no discernible method of measuring their character education programs or effectiveness except examining their disciplinary reports, the participants’ perception is basically to hope that in the future the students may retrieve and use the possible character traits being imparted in them in the middle school at other areas in life. Again, participant 31:

The hope is that after a student transitions to high school and beyond that some of the lessons taught begin to manifest in subsequent interrelationships as they move along the continuum of the life-cycle. Positive growth is hoped for as well that tracks a ...[pause] permanently.

Among the teachers, there are pockets of participants who are understandably certain they have been effective, albeit on a smaller scale, in achieving good results with the character education they have used. Participant 24 agreed that character education has at least worked in an instance that she could attest to witnessing:

Emmmmm, I think it’s helped. I can’t do the whole community, but I know it has helped certain students. I’ve seen certain students like one in particular that used to be labeled ED [emotionally disturbed. He was in self-contained room, and he was a wild child, and I’ve seen him grow to be basically fully included in every classroom not going to the resource room at all, and being a good all around kid. He was a good athlete, he was a good...child, I mean, he worked hard, did his work in the classroom so he would, he would have his moments but he was basically a good all around kid, and that was build up by, you know, counseling, and just building up his self-esteem.

Participant 24’s understanding of character education was clearly evident in her use of the word “counseling”, which I am interpreting to mean having discussions about behavior and self-worth with a student. For her, the student she now holds up as a suc-

cess story of character education represents hope and a beacon of possibilities when character education is used to help students.

That optimism encouraged participant 28, another teacher, to support character education. He relied on his biblical leanings in this Parable of the Gardner analogy in explaining his expectations regarding character education:

...you know what I'm saying because it may be literature it may be personal testimonies everything I think... just resources and if you give the resources they can't say they didn't have it and I think whether we see the impact now you know a farmer only sees, only has the vision of the crop he wants to have. It never looks like that when you plant the seed, you see what I'm saying. Then if you plant the seeds, the seeds are resources you know whether ... [pause] and boom you might not see the fullness of that seed until the end of that season you know what I'm saying. Just like you plant corn. You just plant the seed; you don't see nothing in a couple of months. The thing I will tell you, man, they tell everybody else don't focus on what you don't see just believe in what you do and the rest will take care of itself

For participant 30, schools may be putting too much pressure on the students to behave in a certain way when it is not possible for the students to do so based on their maturity level. He lamented:

...it just breaks my heart in a way, but at the same time you know when I see a child receding a lot of these character traits are being developed they're not just old enough right now. It's a maturation process. In other words, once they reach a certain age you know I think a lot of these immature things that they're doing they won't do them any longer. So like I said, it's a maturation process, and a lot of these character um...traits that we expect a child to have is not age appropriate for them right now. Once they reach a certain age, then you know they'll be okay at the middle school level. You see a lot of traits that are being developed, and you see that child you know three or four years from now they're in high school, eleventh or twelfth grade you'll say, 'Hey is that the same child?' So, it's a process you know and that they're developing.... right now and I think we get on them sometimes when they haven't developed that trait and it's a maturation process....

Participant 30 was not alone in trying to decode the mindset of the adolescent middle school student and their philosophical maturity, or simply the different purview

they hold compared to adults to justify a lack of results. Participant 40 shared comparable notions, and added:

And you know what I've learned, what we think is negative uh...is often...is not the same as somebody else. They look at us 'what you talking about?' you know.... Because you're trying to tell them 'That's wrong', but they're looking at it 'How can this be wrong? I'm making money' [selling drugs].

If that sentiment does exist among the students, Participant 1 clearly felt as though character education would not make a dent in redirecting her fellow students in a positive route. Asked if character education messages around him has been effective, she replied, "Because, just because somebody put something up that tells them how what to do, it's not really like they're gonna do it' cause some children are disobedient!"

Participant 3, another student, was even more unconvinced about any potential benefits of character education, and she let that feeling be known. As she explained it, "For some students, if a teacher, like, takes them outside of the classroom and stuff (for conferences about behavior), sometimes it don't work. So they need to just save their breath, 'cause they just going to do the same thing over and over again".

Participant 2 was also an outspoken sixth grader whose comments oozed with sharp criticism of what he perceives as the fruitless efforts of his school to contain student misbehavior with character education. At times during the interview, he appeared almost angry at what he sees as the lack of proper behavior exhibited by his fellow students. He acknowledged that his teachers discuss character topics with the students, but in his view of character education:

I think it can. I think it can help them, but they won't let it help them. I think it can help them, by it help them, by changing their character. Like if they're being negative it can change the negative to a positive. That's what I think the character ed can do, but they won't let it do....[his sentence trails off as he shrugs his shoulders].

Participant 2's criticisms regarding the effectiveness of character education initiatives or strategies by his school, MS-2, did not stop there. He then focused on a gender-based classroom initiative that his school uses as a way of ensuring that the boys focus on their academic performance without distractions, emphatically using "*they*" to unmistakably refer to school personnel:

Okay, one program that *they* do have that they think is going to work with character education is, (*he snaps his fingers*) I just had it - gender based classes. Those, 'cause *they* think that as long as the girls are with the girls they won't have to show out for the boys, and *they* think as long as the boys are with the boys they won't be messing with the girls. And so if *they* put them separate *they* think that it's going to be better, but it's actually worse 'cause most of the boys are getting into fighting and most of the girls are getting into fighting, and I know that *they* do not want to deal with that, them people, them kids parents coming up here talking about "who put their hands on my children? *They* need to keep their hands off my children." So, *they* just need to put, I don't know what they should do, but I do know one thing, *they* should do, just put them together, er, and I think it will go better than separate.

Participant 2 appeared very sensitive to any misbehavior from fellow students that affect him or others. He genuinely believed that not only were the school's efforts not working, the parents and the students refuse to accept those efforts, therefore limiting any positive impacts it may have.

If school administrators and personnel could not adequately pinpoint the effectiveness of their character education initiatives, the community members involved in this story appeared to join their sentiments. Asked if she sees any difference as a result of character education practices at her school, participant 17 relied on her numerical estimation to shed light on how she feels about character education and its impact:

I don't think it is, it's kind of like a 20% of me saying 'I don't think it's working' other 80% is coming' it has progressed to that point of yes it's working', but the 20% I say is not working because anytime that it's okay with you when a child just get up and walk out of class because they don't want to be chastised or because they're having a bad day, that's a problem with me you know.

Like participant 17, other participants may not be seeking 100% effectiveness because the reality is that at any given time some students will misbehave; however, disciplinary records reviewed and reported previously support their worries, as it showed that school administrators receive hundreds of referrals yearly. Many of the participants believe that those factors point to the shaky results of character education among the three schools. Participant 17 further added, “I say it’s 20%, which is a small percent you know. We need 100% if we want to get our kids and community back. We need to be 100%”.

Furthermore, she added:

...and I also want you to know that you have some children that are doing their best as well, but still the percentage of children that need that extra help, that extra push as far as character behavior problems...it’s outweighing the others and that situation alone needs to be addressed.

Participant 17 is not alone in her skepticism towards character education in the middle schools. Participant 19 shared her curriculum disappointments, “I don’t think it’s as effective because it’s not enough because there is no established forum you know. I don’t think it’s enough”. By established forum, participant 17 was referring to an absence of a particular curriculum structure that addresses character education at her school.

Using terms such as “just a little tad” as proffered by participant 11, and a war analogy from participant 15 who suggested that students’ behavior is like war – “some survive some do not,” and that “It has helped certain students”, some of the participants clearly believed that there are mixed results on the impact the purported character education initiative(s) they use or are familiar with may have among the students at the three schools.

Heavy Emphasis on Academic Achievement

It was evident from the participants that the drive for academic goals has relegated character education near oblivion in the three middle school settings used for this study. This comment was delivered by an administrator, participant 34, who was brazenly blunt in this assertion:

Character education has not been taught very well in the middle school or elementary school level because it isn't a focus of anyone who is in power pertaining to education. The primary and only focus of any educator is how well students perform on the standardized tests given throughout the school year.

Although that point may be known to educational stakeholders, but the admission and openness to which it was admitted made this a striking data that the administrators in this study were willing to share. They expressed concern with the push for achievement in academic areas and being literally forced to relegate the application of character education to a non-existence status.

Another administrator, participant 32, did not just share the same sentiments, but she also forcefully clarified the mentality that pervades the implementation of character education programs and processes:

Making sure the students meet the goals for you know adequate yearly progress I mean you know that's the thing - the data. They're looking at data. They want to make sure that our students are progressing, so everybody's like, 'okay, push the test! Push the test!! Push the test!!!', but you know we're trying to teach the whole child not just to teach them how to take a test and pass the test. I mean, we need to start back in the schools; we need to put core values back in the schools.

Pushing the test and focusing on academics, as these participants have clearly identified, seems to have become the mantra and thus the status of character education, if any, in their schools, according to many of the participants who are charged with leading their students and maintaining a safe and conducive environment. For participant 33, the

blame for the lack of focus on character education and concentration on academic achievement may rest squarely at the highest levels of government:

I think because we're in an era of accountability and even in the area of accountability uh...I really believe that account...in the area of accountability George Bush's No Child Left Behind it does not...it does not mention anything about character education, and uh...you know which is most important, and so if in fact it doesn't mention it because everybody want to get to the point say if you got to get to point T everybody is pushing the student to get to point T you know, and even if a teacher wants to use character education they don't have time to use it because you got to make up so much in a classroom in order to get the kids to get to this level to be reading on a particular grade level. If you're doing all that, there is an absence of values.... And if this is pounded into the children's head about character [he clarified he meant achievement]...about uh...let's get to this point we got to get to this level we got to get to this stanine now well what happens even if you have to cheat to get to that stanine then what happens is the intrinsic value of character education is diminished it is diminished but if you have character education it will tell you that you got to do everything honestly you can't cheat to get to a particular point but you know uh...it [NCLB] just doesn't say that.

After reviewing his comments, I spoke with participant 33 to clarify that indeed character education is implied in NCLB as a means of ensuring a safe school. He seemed even more perturbed with the lack of emphasis on that aspect of the legislation. Like many other stakeholders, there was a lack of awareness on the legislative and curriculum mandate for character education.

Teachers have also seen the shift away from molding the total student to be a productive student, to a complete emphasis on just drilling them with test materials. Teachers, such as participant 20, are all too aware and displeased with that fact. As a veteran social studies teacher at MS-2, most external programs are organized through his classroom or department. Regarding the shift away from character education, he said, "if [pause]. I would say that [if] we have to do it for 15 min then it would be done because other things pop up that supersede that [character education lessons] at that particular

moment on a particular day that you have to address, and so that's why...[shrugs his shoulders]"

Another teacher, participant 23, commented regarding the same distractions that deviate character education plans. He mentioned that, "Teachers and other school personnel have been bombarded with so many other issues to deal with. Teachers rarely have the time to talk with students about social and character development". When I asked participant 24, a special education teacher, for her thoughts on why character education is not a focus at her school, she looked around, up, down, twirled her necklace in her hands for a few seconds and added that it is not tied to AYP, and therefore does not represent a major area of focus for the school. She further clarified:

Because it's not ..doesn't..tied with AYP, it's not tied with test scores, so people don't think of that when they think about test scores, but if you get a kid with character in, you pump his... you know [pause] character up, you build him up, then he's likely to do better on the test, in my opinion versus a child that does not...has very low self esteem. If they have high self esteem they'll do better in the classroom.

Participant 39, a school counselor, feels completely hampered in her efforts to implement any kind of character education at her school because of the chase for higher test scores. As the school counselor, she felt like it duly falls on her responsibility to coordinate or implement character education initiatives at her school. She literally flared up during the interview. Her gestures sped up as she spoke in utter exasperation for what she believes are academic barriers that deter character education plans she has for her middle school students. She lamented:

Instead of building up a child holistically, mind, body, and soul physically, socially you know, everybody just wants to "clear" [as in Academic Clear/Pass], everybody just wants to look good in the newspaper and everybody just wants to look good across the television because their school did well academically you know.... It's going to be hard to implement character ed. when I can't get to the

children. And I can't get to the children without interrupting academic class time, and I can't do that without getting the teachers' permission or the administration's permission. So a lot of times I feel a little um...stuck you know, a little jilted, like I can't implement what needs to be implemented. So, I really think that it should start at elementary school.

Pertaining to this theme, students did not have much to say regarding why their schools have shifted focus from character education to strictly on trying to be on Academic Clear/Pass, which is a report card from the state that is derived from the AYP standard (Alabama State Department of Education, 2009). Their understanding of the concept and unawareness of character education probably contributed to the shrugs and a look that says, "I don't know". However, their parents and other community members in this study have picked up on that pendulum swing and shift of focus from teaching character or morality to focusing entirely on academics, which happens to be whatever subjects are tested on statewide assessments. Participant 19, a mother of two middle school children, bewailed the trend away from character education. "I think one of the reasons maybe because you've got so many other issues you know uh...that you're having to teach for tests, exams, all these things, but you know I just think certain things you just kind of need to focus on."

Participant 13 did not fail to communicate her frustrations at the schools for relegating character education to the background. She was empathetic to the issues schools have to deal with and the mounting pressures to produce data that shows test score improvements. Nevertheless, she believes that as a society, we are better off with a combined focus of academic and moral training of our students. She said of the total focus on academics:

I think that that's the problem and I think that it's not all of the schools I think that right now it's basically the _____ city schools. I think that the reasons why

we have some, many problems, because if you've noticed, many of the extra curriculum activities in the 21st century have been taken out of the school. Now, the focus is on statistics! The focus is on [academic] education. The focus is not so much as the individual child but in numbers and dollars. And I think that in the process of us trying to continue to get state funding, that the children are falling through the gap!

The participants would like their schools to succeed academically and in the social representation of their students as individuals capable of peacefully existing in any environment. The belief that schools have to make progress on the academic measurement scale appears to stand in the way of administrators, teachers, and other school personnel who may be inclined to institute regimented programs to elevate character education at their schools.

Informal Character Education

For purposes of this study and based on actual data, I will define informal character education as the casual, unplanned, charts, displays, noncurriculum, and unstructured steps that stakeholders take to encourage positive performance and moral behavior. As you walk into any of the three schools I studied, you would be confronted with a sensory overload of printed materials urging kids to behave in a certain positive way. Teachers' classrooms are also filled with these materials. From the commercially glossy banners and posters, various pictures of students with awards, to hand-made writings with an assortment of phrases urging positive character, the message is clearly present – be good. These messages are all placed at strategic positions in the classrooms, offices; hallways, cafeteria, and anywhere else that it appears should not be left bare.

At MS-2, there are display boards all around campus touting character traits of courage, self-control, being positive, staying focused, believing in one's abilities, hon-

esty, kindness, excellence, and making the best of life. There are anti-bullying messages on one bulletin board. One of those boards proclaimed the motto of the school as, “No Limits, No Barriers, No Excuses”, and touted the character virtues such as: Caring, responsibility, citizenship, fairness, trustworthiness, and respect. Another bulletin board echoed the same traits of honesty, self-discipline, good character, integrity, responsibility, trustworthiness, and so on.

Posters that tout the various character traits were glued on one classroom door. I was shown a character reward banner that showed an eagle swooping into a gift basket. In that basket were gifts such as T-shirts and other rewards donated by corporations that partnered with the school. However, the counselor pointed out that it was an old banner that has not been used in a long time.

Among the artifacts I collected pointing to the informal nature of character education at the three schools was also a 2007-2008 eight grade Honors and Awards pamphlet at MS-2 that pointed to more informal character education by schools. At the back of that pamphlet was a poem (no author noted) that was dedicated to the students, and it read:

*Each of us has different talents
Different dreams and
Different destinations, yet
We all have the power
To make a new tomorrow*

As evidenced by those practices, the middle schools I studied appear to be using more informal strategies to teach character education. Participant 28 recounted a positive experience he had with a student using that informal strategy:

...she came and said ‘something you taught me helped deal with my mama and my daddy’And this a girl that really doesn’t say much. She said, ‘I got

something good to tell you,' and I tell our kids all the time is that when your parents are frustrated and mad I said just be quiet or if you know just say, 'hey mom, I apologize for making that mistake please forgive me' and it cuts down the anger and you say it in a right tone of voice.but just the fact that she said 'something you taught me, what you said about my mama and daddy really helped me cause I was about to go off, man!' Just that word changed her life cause she said 'I chose to do something different' that means you trusted the God in me that he gave me the word not in Chris to put it into practice. That's life changing!

In conjunction with instructing the students informally, some of the participants explained to me that they have devised various ways of communicating and incorporating character traits in their students. At this point in the data, it seems that participants are shifting from describing what character education is to asserting a working set of practices through which they strive to instill character. Participant 36, an administrator, informed me of how he loaded his football team with all the disruptive and overly active boys in his school. He explained that his rationale was to teach them to focus their energies towards achieving positive goals. At MS-2, they elected students to participate in the Student Government Association (SGA). Those SGA members read to younger students in the building and actually go out in the community to pick up trash or read to the elders.

For 43 years, participant 38 has been a constant figure at MS-2. She recalled her days as a student at MS-2 and reflected on how her teachers taught her character education using memorable poetic verses. She smiled as she recalled one such untitled poem from her days as a little girl in the South attending MS-2:

“little children must obey
what is told them everyday
mother, father, teacher too
tell you what is right to do,
do not cry or fret I pray
when told to do a thing obey”

There was also another poem participant 38 learned from her teachers that she recited that showed that even during that period, character education was a topic of concern.

“A bunch of golden keys is mine
to make this day will gladly shine,
good morning is a golden key
that unlocks every door for me,
when friends give anything to me
I use a little thank you key,
excuse me, beg your pardon too
when by mistakes some harm I do....”

“I could go on and on,” Participant 32 added. From her perspective, character education, both formally and informally used to be a daily fixture at MS-2, at least back then.

Participant 41 attended MS-2 also. The first thing you notice when you speak to her is the way she accurately enunciates her words in grammatically correct form. She sat straight in her chair and maintained eye contact with me throughout the interview. She described herself as a life-long member of the community, and you could feel the pride in her voice as she reminisced about how orderly and involved the teachers were at MS-2 when she was a little girl there. She too recognized the pedagogical disconnect:

...what’s allowed to be said or directed to the children restrains us at a point. I mean that type of restraint where years ago when coming through this very same school character development teachers were able to instill within you, and see it develop by following through, by going through routines with you that they could instruct and direct you when you’re out of place; when you’re wrong, you know, to get you back on the right track or place you there and then able to keep you there to a certain degree. But uh...as time has gone by so much has been taken away as far as the ability, authority or put us in a position where your hands are almost tied in some areas but... [her voice trailed off].

Similarly, participant 42, who is the janitor at MS-1, has been at that middle school for 14 years. At almost 60 years of age, he possesses the slight swagger of a con-

fidant man; yet, he is a staff member saddled with a severe sense of sorrow regarding the moral compass of the students he serves satisfactorily. He blames the nature of the students to lack of male role-models at home and at school. He too practices informal character education. In his own words:

Yeah and its certain kids that you see with certain characteristics that you might be able to reach out to and give a word of wisdom or advice to, you know. Some might take it, some may not, you know, but the thing is as a man you feel like you should impart this anyway, because in my life I've always had a father figure or uncles, male role. I come up during the time where my father's word was gospel even though I might have strayed away from his teaching, but you always have that, that beginning or some center point that you can go back to because you was taught and trained a certain way. Where, I see a lot of kids nowadays don't have that training, you know. We call it old fashion, you know, and its nothing wrong with being old fashion because some things just never change.

Participant 42 appears to make the connection between formal school practices of character education and the daily informal gestures towards appealing to the students' sense of moral uprightness. Coded artifacts and data also revealed that school administrators and personnel are aware of character education; however, they have admitted that they do not emphasize character education, and other stakeholders agree that assertion.

Theme 4: Support

Buy-in Lacking

A theme emerged during data collection that shows an overwhelming disenchantment with various efforts at the three sites in advancing character education at the middle school level. Many of the participants, especially the educators, believed that the character effort they put in at the school is not supplemented at the home; some parents believe they could be involved more, and other participants fault the school system as a

whole for lack of emphasis and resources on character education. Others plainly lamented the lack of support they get from their own faculty members.

Participant 34, a young administrator, who was very open about this topic mourned this fact when he stated, “Also, most schools don’t have a character education program because of lack of funds or a non-interest from students, parents, and teachers, which is very sad”. Echoing similar sentiments, participant 31, another administrator stated, “There are programs that have been introduced in our school district over the seven years I’ve been an administrator. Lack of technology, human resources from outside sources, buy-in from staff and as well as parents have stifled any real change”.

Both participant 31 and participant 34 have at least a combined 15 years of administrative experience in the system and have led their schools through challenging periods. Their love for students radiates through the tough decisions they make daily regarding disciplinary issues. They have been in the trenches, along with Participant 36 who also stated, “To be honest, I am not sure. It’s one of those things that, em, you know, em, you don’t have 100 percent participation. Of course some won’t participate. But you know, you go with what you have”. When probed to expound on what personnel/component he is missing in his programs, he added:

[Smiling] Well, I really can’t tell you how I feel about that . To be honest with you. And, and, I just think everyone should be on board when it’s about children.

PI: I don’t mean to be rude, but why can’t you discuss how you feel about that aspect of the program?

Participant 36: (He paused for a few seconds) Well, the things is, there are those who I believe if they are really here about the children, maybe we can achieve more as it regards this topic, and , and, and you just don’t, you just don’t have some of your key people on board on certain things. And for me this is one of them. You need an effective ...(he skipped telling me the name or position he was referring to) part of that component.

Why did he hesitate to discuss those individuals? If participant 36 was indeed referring to people in various positions in the school system who could do more to help character education programs become more effective, he simply refused to name them.

Some of the teachers such as participant 23, a veteran teacher for a quarter century bemoaned the lack of attention aimed towards implementing character education and described it as a “back-burner” event. “There is not enough resources or personnel to fully implement a successful program,” participant 23 added.

Where there are resources available, the question is to what extent schools tap into those resources. Some teachers in the study reminded me that there are several churches surrounding their schools, and any of those organizations could be requested to help craft initiatives that could benefit the students. As participant 20 put it, “It doesn’t necessarily have to be on a religious basis, but really to help development their skills and to let them know that there’s a proper way to conduct yourself.” To do that, participant 20 believes that teachers should allay their fears of lawsuits about participating in formal and informal character education. He pointed out that although:

You’re really trying to help them, but we live in a society now that people are devious in their motives to...I wouldn’t use the word safeguard but at the same time negate whatever the issue might be. ‘I don’t want to hear it, so I’m going to say that you said this’ and take it out of context to a degree. And it’s twisted around and you have a tornado and it tears up all the good work...

The reservations that some teachers may have about taking personal initiative to take care of students like participant 38, the veteran counselor, described could be abated if the parents support the school or those teachers. Participant 26 is not aware of any collaboration whatsoever that exists between the school and the community, but she is quite certain that the community can inform the school of what negative events are taking place

so that schools could try to collaborate with them to tackle the problem. She urged the two entities to “get together and find out what would be effective. We could all be on one common ground and try to help each other ‘cause it takes a village to raise these children nowadays.”

The children themselves simply have no clue how their schools work in partnership with all stakeholders to foster an effective character education program. Asked if he knew how his school works with the community on character education, participant 11 answered, “Not really”. Who makes the determination on what is implemented for character education, if any? His answer was, “The principal, I guess”. Logical as his answer was because the principal is in charge of the school, other participants believe there is enough personnel in schools to take initiative for a character education program besides the administrative body and counselor.

However, it should also be mentioned that this theme of lack of support was heard across the stakeholder spectrum. Other community participants in this study also cried out against the lack of support for programs to help their students behave and perform well. Stakeholders such as participant 17, a mother of two, has picked up on the lack of buy-in from staff members at the various schools and practically laid the blame at their feet:

Well mainly it goes back to the participation. You have a lot of teachers that say ‘Hey, once 3 O’clock come I’m off the clock. This is my time.’ That’s kind of how they look at it within the school hours; then they’re pretty much not interested. You have...you have out of ten you may have two that are willing to go that extra mile and help out in areas like that and that’s being honest...

At this point in the interview process, I had a feeling that participant 17 felt like she was making a case that needed to be emphasized because she was looking at me

straight in the eyes as if to say, “I’m going to tell it!”, and indeed she was not finished, as she added:

Especially if they’ve (teachers) had a hard day at school or bad week you know it could be just one child giving them problems they kind of take it out on everybody else. Look I don’t feel the need to put more than what I’ve already put in and then you’re looking at the issue of teachers being underpaid that’s always been an issue so they feel like I’m gonna work for what you’re paying me, for you, know I’m just being honest that’s....[her voice trails off].

Participant 17 and many others who touched on this theme felt strongly that with the entire staff fully engaged, character education programs and efforts could be more effective.

Participant 17 still had additional insights to add:

Um...I think you should know that I believe some of the teachers are doing their best even though you have genuine concern with some of ‘em um...,and I also want you to know that you have some children that are doing their best as well, but still the percentage of children that need that extra help that extra push as far as character behavior problems it’s outweighing the others, and that situation alone needs to be addressed and the teachers need to also understand that if you’re going to be in this profession not trying to give you an ultimatum but if you’re going to be in this profession you’re going to have to at least have the you know the sense of caring more than 8:00 to 3:30 or whatever the school times are you know if you got a child that need to stay after school and say hey I didn’t want to talk earlier but I feel like I want to talk to you now, you know....

Collaboration was strongly identified as lacking in this initiative by the participants, regardless of their roles in the schools that were involved in this research. Clearly, the administrators and school personal had sharper words pointed at other levels of stakeholder component. From all indications in the data coded to arrive at this theme, when participant 31 claimed that the character education plan for the system “stinks”, she also added that “staff and as well as parents have stifled any real change” aimed at instituting an effective character education program. As most of the participants agreed, character education should be a school-wide initiative for it to achieve the designated purpose of uplifting the students in their moral and academic performance.

Disconnect in Practice

During my observations, I witnessed some character education “activities” in practice. However, neither MS-1, MS-2, nor MS-3 had the same practices. One link they shared was a district-wide Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) event.

When I learned of that event, I approached the principal at MS-2 and asked for permission to attend the event with the students who were going.

The GREAT program had kicked off a day earlier when students started receiving white t-shirts with blue GREAT logo set in a black background. On the shirt, there was a black Birmingham Police Department Badge logo at the bottom center of the shirt. Some students wore the shirt over their white uniforms. Others wore only the GREAT shirt.

At the program, the Chief of Police led the students on the GREAT pledge. According to the Chief of Police:

The power of choice is the greatest power on earth.
Surround yourselves with positive people.
There are “dream-makers” and “Dream-Breakers”

The Director of the Division of Youth Services emphasized:

Portability/simplicity of messages to the youth.
Spend time highlighting the positives.
Know thyself.
You can be a headlight (leader) or taillight (follower)

At the end of the program, I saw many students down at the middle of the stage ripping off balloons used to decorate the arena, in an apparent fashion that showed they did not have permission to do so. An intriguing conclusion one could reach was that apparently the character education messages they just received regarding how to conduct themselves failed to make an immediate behavior changing impact.

During the ride back from the program, there were exciting comments that centered on the “fun” that made the program memorable, and also the exuberant speech made by the Youth Services Director. He spoke to them in the language that they appeared to understand and they reacted very enthusiastically. He was funny and witty and used pop cultural references.

Within the sites studied, I witnessed character education activities that varied from one school to the next, grade level differences, and even individual classroom/teacher differences in their approach towards character education. The impact is that stakeholders are not able to identify character education even when they may be directly or indirectly engaged in that activity. There is simply no cohesive understanding of character education and character education practices.

Once again, I coded and re-coded the administrators’ comments and it was clear that participant 32’s points could resonate among all the various groups and their roles in the school. Participant 32 implied that the disconnect is evidenced by the lack of compliance with character education initiatives:

I think you know sometimes initiatives are presented and then sometimes they fall through the cracks. ‘cause I know at one time _____ City Schools had that character program, and I think I have a book that was written. I think it was before Dr. _____ was the superintendent and it was written. It was a character education program where you know the teachers were suppose to address character education daily.

Participant 38, the veteran counselor, had the same thoughts and also blamed various changes in the system for lack of implementation of character education initiatives, including the legally mandated ten minutes daily advisor-advisee session:

I believe long time ago, I forgot specifically what year, they had a middle school meeting with all of the middle school personnel explaining the things they’re supposed to be doing in the middle school. Okay, as the system has changed a lot

of the programs are not being implemented. There were books that had certain skills that should be taught in the middle school, and I think with the new people and such turn around at the Birmingham Board they aren't touching base with each other. A lot of those programs are not implemented anymore and the new teachers that are coming in just do not know, that's what I feel.

Participant 32, the administrator, does not have the extensive number of years compared to that of participant 38, but it was obvious through their answers that they felt the initiatives the school system (or schools) could have implemented were not realized because of the disconnect on almost all levels, when it came to character education.

How do other teachers depict this disconnect? I examined the data more and found the answer in the actions of some of the teachers. At MS-2, I observed Participant 27, a teacher who begins every year by electing class officials in her homeroom class. Participant 6 was in that classroom and pointed out that, "Like um...in my class we have group meetings because um...we have uh...President, Vice President, and Secretary in my class." The duties of these officials varied from checking fellow classmates for uniform compliance, saying the Pledge of Allegiance, reciting their school's mission and vision, and saying a class pledge. Participant 27's colleague next door eventually implemented the same process. Notably, that was as far as that initiative progressed. According to participant 27 who explained why she is committed to implementing character building in her homeroom:

You know, when we were in school you got into school of education and you were always taught to teach the whole child. You had to address every aspect of the child from top to bottom. I think with No Child Left Behind and all of the other requirements or accountabilities standards everything is based on numbers and statistics the child gets lost somewhere. As adults, we know that some people just don't test well. I may not be able to write on paper how well I interpreted something or how well I understand, but let's sit down and talk about it. Or, you know, have me present my knowledge in a different way and I think that's where like I said that time, period that 30 minutes of advisory time that was quality, informal time for just students for you to be involved, engaged with students that

didn't, that wasn't based on the test book; just issues, topics, things that concern them, 'cause our kids face a lot of things that we have at our age. At least my age had no clue. So, I think it would take us having to go back to the basics maybe of addressing not so much the academic development of the students of course but the intellectual development, the social development, the character development. All that has to, I think has to be interconnected, and because standards have changed certain parts are taken out you know...

While participant 27 had a concise and eloquent articulation of what character education meant to her, the students, and their future, other stakeholders still find the initiative devoid of enough stakeholder support to succeed.

Participant 42 has kept the hallways of MS-1 gleaming for about 14 years. He tapped the lack of implementation of strong programs as a reason that character education is ineffective at best:

We had an incident here a few months ago where a kid [who] should be still in school 16 years of age on the Southside shoot four people. The parents say, 'Why was he allowed to go in to that club?'; not asking what was he doing out at 4 o'clock in the morning? So, now you know who but now the thing is the child is lost, but who gonna take on the responsibility? And this is what we seeing more and more of now, you know. So what solution? I mean, the churches try to come up with answers, the neighborhood try to come..., the leaders of the city try to come up with answers, but the thing is it been basic all the time....

Participant 17 also agreed with differentiating character education programs to fit different age groups and challenges:

...it needs to be divided because of the age group, you know. A lot of kids are not going to consume you talking to them about certain things, about their character, or what have you and they're not going to understand you know. You're going to end up answering more questions than they even need to know right now.

Many of the participants believed that the curriculum should not just be for the middle school students, but also differentiated to reflect the challenges faced by urban African American students. Speaking on the effectiveness and curriculum challenges he faces in teaching his own program, Participant 43 stated:

This program is effective somewhere...somewhat I can't say it's totally for the black neighborhoods that it's effective but in a white neighborhood it works very well. I can't say that about the black neighborhoods.... Because the books that people that created these books that they work in, the situations that are in these books that they are doing is mainly designed for white suburban kids in their neighborhoods.... It doesn't even apply to them you know you can sit up and I have to make mine interesting. I have to improvise and do something to keep them interested in it, because you know a black kid listening to it you know like, 'okay Johnny...Johnny you gonna go here and Johnny...Johnny finds a gun in a locker at school. What's he gonna do? Does he go and tell someone, blah...blah...blah?' And then, 'Oh did you see what Johnny did with the gun?' And then they might give you a situation, 'Well, what would you do, blah...blah...blah?' But you know, a gun in a black neighborhood, in a black school, I mean it's common to them. I mean, you know what I'm saying? They're not going to go through that same little scenario you know, even like a cigarette you know. He got caught smoking a cigarette; that's bad. What would you do? You know black kids in the neighborhood like, 'So what?' They go right across the street at the neighborhood store and buy a cigarette even though they underage. So, it's effective if you can, but just you have to improvise to get them interested....

Participant 43 and others believed that when implementing character education, the schools have the adolescent factor to consider. The urban component of the curriculum also has to be addressed to have an effective character education curriculum. As a veteran military-policeman, he has to improvise with the curriculum he uses because it was not tailored to his urban adolescent audience; therefore, it would be ineffective if not tweaked to suite his target audience.

Other data that appeared in this theme indicated that the students who should be the most beneficiaries of these initiatives are left out of the localized character education practices because of lack of uniformity. Some may benefit or be exposed to it based on the professional initiatives of their homeroom teacher, but others simply do not know much about the what, why, when, how, and where character education takes place.

Participant 1 (a student), and many others who have no discernable idea of what character education is present clear examples of the impact of the Disconnect in Practice

theme that emerged in this study. When asked if she has participated in character education at all, participant 1 responded, “No Sir. When asked whether she participated even in elementary school, she responded again, “No Sir.” As will be analyzed in the next chapter, this lack of understanding of character education in practice presents further challenges for educators and their perception as helping students develop morally.

The various themes that emerged in this study have shown that character education remains loosely defined. In addition, most of the participants believed there is a need for character education, although the efficacy of such initiatives remains uncertain. To achieve success, there was a unanimous consent from the participants that the entire school community has to be involved in the larger picture of fashioning an effective message the middle school students can adopt to improve their positive character traits.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

“One thing about it and I’ll say this I never met a parent who didn’t want what was best for their child. They may not know how to give it to them, or you know ways to going about doing it because of their lifestyle and maybe their upbringing, but I think any parent once you sit down and talk to them all parents want their children to be respectful, all children...all parents want the best education for their children. They want the best in life for them.” (Participant 40)

“Some people get all ‘A’s and flunk life” – Novelist Walker Percy (Lickona, 2004, p. 4).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the perception of middle school stakeholders on the importance and the effectiveness of character education in three middle schools in an urban school district in Alabama. This chapter provides in-depth analysis of the emergent themes, extensive conclusions drawn from this study, and concrete recommendations for educators.

In part, I am a product of the educational environment where I have spent many years working as an educator. I approached this research from a Constructivist world-view/paradigm searching for meanings and understanding of that environment (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). During the course of this research, I inquired from students and educators I currently work with and have worked with before, and I also spent time with new acquaintances. Many of these individuals share the same notion that I do that if stakeholders can get students to abide by school rules and treat each other with respect, and equip themselves with proven personal skills necessary for success, our

students, communities, and nation could be an even better place. Therefore, I set out to find out how stakeholders feel about character education, particularly in the middle school setting where I began my educational career.

With pressures mounting to improve academic scores driving teachers to emotional and academic dissonance, school leaders are faced with the choice of implementing curriculum that also ensures that those standards are met in safe and stress free environments; otherwise, they would simply be hoping that a stringent academic curriculum will keep the students focused (Assaf, 2008; Rushton & Juola-Rushton, 2008). NCLB, which mandates strict academic standards, also requires the safety and character component necessary to educate the total child.

Our urban adolescents need positive character guidelines to be successful in what is already a global community. The parent, job seeker, or student in China, Brazil, or Nigeria is just as affected by SES and political impact of events that transpire in the United States and vice-versa. Simply acquiring a “good” education, as stipulated by academic testing standards may not be enough anymore to ensure economic and political opportunities. The findings in this study should alarm all stakeholders who expect today’s schools to demonstrate similar care, awareness, and commitment to teaching the total child using performance and moral tenets as teachers and the entire community strived collaboratively to do decades ago. The era of the school teacher as moral enforcers and masters of their classroom universe is no longer applicable in today’s school environment. We need to inculcate an approach towards character education that presents a balance on academic performance and moral behavior expectations.

Analysis of Emergent Themes

After careful coding of the themes generated from the 46 participants and observations carried out in the three schools studied, the central research question regarding how middle school stakeholders view character education can be answered. In addition, the subquestions were also answered. The first question dealt with a general understanding and definition of character education. The second and third questions dealt with answering questions regarding how the stakeholders viewed the importance and effectiveness of character education at their middle school settings, respectively. An overall analysis of participant groups was also conducted.

Analysis Related to Theme 1: Lost in Translation

When I began this study, it was important that I get a glimpse of how participants define character education, because understanding what they know, think, or believe character education is will help understand their perceptions of the topic. I was at times in for a shock. I must admit that I assumed that everyone would have either heard of “character education/development” or knew what it was. That notion was challenged when I encountered that skinny eight grade student on the hallway. That encounter paved the way for similar data I gathered which showed unfamiliarity with the terminology from many of the participants, even among those who are involved in programs aimed at promoting character and excellence.

It is noteworthy that many of the participants did not initially have a clue as to what “character education” meant. After explaining or given them an idea, it was as if

they had an “Aha!” moment, and then they were able to generate a definition that fit their understanding of the topic.

As a result of the vast unfamiliarity with the terminology amongst some of the participants, it was practically impossible for them to define it. I had a choice then: offer them an insight of what character education could be and see where the data led us or shut those participants out of the study. Initially, many of those participants were recommended on the notion that they were involved with character education in one capacity or the other.

The fact from this study is that where there were programs, any programs at all, that remotely resembles character education implemented by the schools, the primary consumers (students) either did not know it was “character education” “character development” or simply did not relate the event to building “character.” The principal who filled the football team with gang members or troublesome students, the counselor who went from class to class with videos and materials about alcohol, and the teacher who elected class officials and made her students recite personal and national pledges were all engaged in activities that many of the consumers could not relate to character education.

Participant after participant could not identify character education events or activities even when it was practiced at their schools. The same could also be said of the parents’ perceptions toward the schools’ character education plans. As a result, defining character education varied among the participants, depending on their belief of what constitutes character building. This situation poses certain problems for educators, but the inability to uniformly define character education is not a huge issue, if the informal and formal programs they do have is assessed as functional. It becomes problematic when

students and other stakeholders perceive that their schools do not have character education programs, even as they engage in some form of character molding.

These data are in line with assertions found in the literature review that there is not a single definition ascribed to character education, even though the stakeholders in most parts believed that character education is necessary (Damon, 2005; Lickona 2004). In addition, Robinson III et al. (2000) found that the term “character education” could fit into “anything” that schools might do to help students become good people. Based on data uncovered in this study, the schools simply are not doing enough to elevate character education to a system or school-wide awareness that could help them generate definitions of character education that their stakeholders can understand and embrace.

Also, results from this study not only confirms the flexibility in defining character education (Lickona, 2002), but made for an interesting research because I never knew how the next participant may define character education. By defining character education from their own experiences or expectations, the participants provided invaluable data into their knowledge, their concerns, and their relationships with the schools. Those stakeholders, who have participated in various activities with the school or at their school, appeared more likely to name and relate some instances and activities to character education than those who have not participated. Of the 46 participants interviewed, none gave a similar definition to another participant’s. However, their answers were reflections of how they mentally configured the process of teaching or inculcating good behavior.

According to Lickona (2004) character education has generally been seen as practical efforts aimed at developing good characteristics and teaching children right from

wrong. Part of my study was aimed at getting the perspectives of my participants on how they define character education relative to what they know and what they do on the topic. Since there is no distinct definition of the topic as pointed out earlier (Lickona, 2004), each definition was deemed as valuable from the participant's viewpoint.

Analysis Related to Theme 2: Belief on Importance

Research question 2 asked whether character education is the school's responsibility. Pedagogical discussions on the implementation of character education and its impact in my data analyses uncovered an overwhelming belief in the need for character education.

Although the participants desperately wanted something to be done about the behaviors that they experience or see in middle school students at their schools, they were not ready to assign the comprehensive moral upbringing of the children to the school. They wanted schools to help, but they also recognized that the parents have enormous responsibility in molding the character of their children.

These middle school students are aware and some are engaged in issues such as alcohol use, weapons possession in schools and out of school (December 8, WERC 960AM radio station reports a middle school student brought a gun to one of the school system's middle school), harassment, bullying, and many other behaviors we may consider questionable. As a result of the unique nature of this educational stage, it has been called "hormone heaven" (Gregory, 2008). I also heard a speaker at the system-wide event (where the mayor also spoke) refer to her experiences in middle school as, "I did time in junior high". I took note of those conversations, because at one event both politi-

cal and educational leaders touched on character issues and tough middle school experiences.

During this study, I had a chance to examine school documents that are related to student misbehavior and disciplinary records. Over a 4-year period, there were possibly a thousand or more combined referrals sent to the school administrators. That number also may have been understated, as participant 36 mentioned, “As you know, you cannot put everyone out of school for every little thing they do these days. And I say little because some of the things they do these days and still stay in school was not tolerated back in the days”.

Although some of the participants expressed getting the students to be themselves (which I translated as being “positive” and exhibiting good character traits) is seen as a long-term or short term objective, the fact remains that educators want issues of student misbehavior addressed and eliminated. “Character education is a very essential ingredient in the top to bottom instructional success and learning process of middle schoolers,” Participant 31 insisted. Such comments were also in line with findings from literature that there were calls for character education centuries ago to address student behavior (Bennett, 1989; Bryan, 2005; Frey, 2002; Mayer & Cobb, 2000).

From another administrative viewpoint, a rather blunt and emphatic agreement emphasizing the importance of good behavior by students was echoed by participant 34. He informed his staff members at the first faculty meeting of the 2008-2009 school year: “If we cannot control them, we cannot teach them. And if we cannot teach them, we cannot make the goals we are required to make. If we cannot make the goals, then what purpose are we serving?” He went on to encourage his staff to talk to the students, listen to

them, and try to understand their academic as well as personal issues. Those personal issues played a major part of the finding in this study.

However, there was a lot of finger pointing when the participants were asked who should be responsible for teaching character education to the middle school students. The overwhelming response was that it should be the parents. However, the contradiction occurred when the participants affirmed that the challenging environment that the students come from affect their behaviors at school. Which then begs the question regarding how to address that commonality between the schools and the community? Indeed, the participants gave various suggestions regarding how the communities and the schools can work together to achieve positive outcomes from their character education activities – if any exists.

It is apparent why the responsibility for teaching character education was directed to the parents. Most urban schools lack adequate parental participation, and teachers and school personnel often decry their ability to be “parents” and teachers at the same time. In line with similar findings, several studies examining influence of parental participation in urban schools (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Flessa, 2008; Jeynes, 2007; Stephens, 2008) discovered that there was a significant difference in academic achievement and other variables on all levels and among all races when parents are involved in their children’s schools. In those instances, schools worked better in managing student behavior through cooperation with parents on various programs.

Participant 11’s youthful brusqueness on her overall assessment of parents (as enablers of their students’ bad behavior when they come to the school and “Black-out” on the teachers) clearly contradicts participant 40’s reflective comment that all parents in-

herently care about their kid's behavior. Why, one may ask? It is understandable that those parents may want what is best for their children, but may enable the opposite. Still, declaring that parents care about their kids' behaviors may not be clear to several participants in this study who decried the lack of "control" that several parents exert on their children. Such lack of parental control that did not exist many decades ago (Hedgepeth, 1993; Hlebowitsh, 2001) now negates the schools' attempts to instill and cement character traits in the students.

Similarly, participant 23 sees character education as important, not for *what* it will teach the students, but why it has to be taught. He said, "I believe character education in the middle school is very important. I say this because many of the students do not get any development from their homes".

The more I examined my data on this research question, WB Yeats poem, "The Second Coming" kept churning in my mind:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Whether it is a failure to communicate (*The falcon cannot hear the falconer*), or the enormity of what schools have to deal with on a daily basis (*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold*), the participants understand that the adolescent middle school children, who are themselves confronted with various biological and psychological chal-

lenges (*The ceremony of innocence is drowned*), entrusted to schools must be educated in totality.

When participant 26 almost cried out, “It’s a reason...it’s a reason!” why students are behaving badly, she may be referring to the structure of their lives after school, or lack thereof. As I dug deeper into my data, I began asking axial coding questions to uncover how the participants viewed the imparting of character traits. Axial coding entails finding how, why, what, when, where, and other in-depth probing of data (Straus & Corbin, 1998). Several of my participants pointed out the apparent lack of a nurturing home and community that could help reinforce positive character traits that the students may have received at school.

There is no quick cure for lack of parental involvement in schools, but the data from the participants point to a concrete understanding that schools should indeed teach character education. However, schools cannot do so without a clear plan to tackle reversible effects and deconstruction of those moral principles once the students exit the campus and therefore are thrust into the waiting arms of an environment that may be a total antithesis of the schools’ missions and visions.

Here again, I was confounded by my data. The participants expressed that schools were not doing enough, and that more should be done at home. However, it is apparent from the student participants’ answers that their parents, not the school, were the source of their character education. They would be correct, except that those schools do have, albeit haphazardly organized, “character education” programs and discussions at their schools. What this says is that schools and the parents have to work together in communicating joint responsibility of teaching both moral and performance character to the stu-

dents. The question then is where is the synergy in communication, mission, and vision that schools purport to have that includes character education in reaching their goals, in light of the issues they contend with on a daily basis?

Why do stakeholders feel that character education is important? For participants in this study, the behavior of the middle school students in the three cases studied is simply appalling. As participant 36 put it: “We have a saying: ‘Everything is rotten in the middle!’” That was quite a serious comment. He went on to add, “That’s how it is. And... and, you know. And that’s just the facts, man.”

Indeed, what are those facts he alluded to that has many in the middle school setting concerned? In literature, findings pointed to disruptive behavior by students in general (Sanchez, 2005; Stein, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 2006; You et al., 2008), and middle school students’ behaviors (Caskey & Anfara, 2007). Consider this experience I had during this research at MS-3: I had bought some refreshments for the participants in this study, and I actually saw some students going in and stealing the candy.

The next day, I thought about informing the administrator, participant 36, of this incident. As it turned out, he had already experienced and acknowledged such behavior as present in the middle school students at his school.

Well, we are seeing a lot of bullying. And, and (slight stutter), and followed by stealing. Then we have lying. They will see things happen and either lie about witnessing it or not say anything at all. As a matter of fact, they have a code for it! They call it “No snitching”!

There are many disciplinary concerns in the middle school setting, and these apprehensions were shared by the participants arguing the need for character education. Participant 31, while agreeing that “the middle years are very difficult ones for students” also confirmed that they display a, “lack of acknowledgement to basic core values.” The

challenge therefore is that if character education practices are implemented by these middle schools to end incidents similar to those mentioned in this research, the impact might not be known unless schools actually emphasize, practically, and diligently monitor those initiatives to prove their effectiveness.

Analysis Related to Theme 3: Effectiveness Uncertainties

This theme addressed the stakeholders' perceptions regarding the results of their school's character education programs. Character education as a curriculum or simply in practice has not been a major focus at the schools that participated in the research - period. It seems to be only full speed ahead on academic improvement and performance, without consideration to any amalgamation of performance and moral character. Therefore, there is simply no mechanism in place to ascertain their effectiveness. They do have some programs aimed at correcting and directing students toward positive behavior, but again, they do not refer to them as CEP. Many of the participants have urged patience on any expected results, and at the same time they and others expressed skepticism over the results of what they consider their character education efforts. I dug deeper during the interviews and into my data asking why the participants have the perceptions they do regarding the mixed results of the effectiveness of their character education efforts.

Do the schools actually have character education programs? Again, the accurate way to respond to this question would be: What programs? I probably would have the same response as the tall skinny student who asked me if character education was one or two words. There were no particular programs that any of the three schools and their stakeholders could point to as a defined CEP. However, I began to search deeper and

asked them what programs they had to help students either behave well (moral character) or do well in school (performance character). These programs are listed and briefly described in Appendix D.

Those programs may well be intended to build character, but if the schools themselves are not emphasizing character to the students, or even using the term “character education” when carrying out those program, is it little wonder then that stakeholders, especially the students, have no clue what character education might be? Some may say it is not relevant for students to know that those are character education programs as long as students get the message; however, the flipside to that could be a lasting perception that the schools are NOT building character – at all. This is important on several levels because perception does matter. Schools shape the mind of the students and the community. My experience has been that if stakeholders believe the school is working with them or for them to combat disciplinary issues, they are more likely to be more supportive. Secondly, the students will know the school is taking steps to help them, not just suspend and expel them. This is an essential finding in this study because middle schools cater to impressionable young adolescents who may require specificity and explicit information regarding their schools’ behavior plans and expectations for their performance and moral compass in life.

Overall, it was evident that there was not really a major way for schools to measure what they themselves admitted to as a concept that has been put on the back burner. As a result, The Eleven Principles of Character Education used as observational tool was rarely in practice. Is it surprising then that the schools were honest enough in saying their character education initiatives do not work when they admitted it was not a priority? In

addition, what I found were generalizations made by some participants on the effectiveness of the concept of character education, rather than actual documentations that may be correlated to any given program; hence, the next theme.

In most cases, the participants cited informal character education incidents where they “talked to” students or had conversations with them that altered the students’ behavior in a positive way. Many of the participants actually harped on that and asked school personnel to have more conversations with students, listen to the students, and include different programs that may target a variety of the issues affecting their middle school students. Agreeably, talking and listening to students are important aspects of character education and helps to ensure and Ethical Learning Community (ELC) (Lickona, 2008). There was ample evidence that schools engage in informal character education. However, for these schools that may be all they could realistically engage in because adequate time is not devoted to planned character education.

Therefore, my findings point to the fact that the adolescents targeted in this study seem not to grasp that those informal actions aimed at improving their moral behaviors are in fact aspects of “character education.” At this point, I am not sure who is more confused by this: the students or the school personnel on what constitutes character education for them. My data suggest that the prevalence of the informal character education patterns may be substitute for actual participation and engagement in real character education programs. What are the results of these informal character education aspects? I would answer that based on the data collected for this study, those informal practices could not possibly permeate the core of why the adolescent middle school students in those schools behave the way they do.

Part of my data collection involved being attentive to the participants body language. In most cases, especially when I was interviewing the teachers, I could tell that they knew any programs they might have in place was not realistically fulfilling the objective of making the students' behavior and performance better. Some participants actually rolled their eyes, others looked down, and some simply smiled. However, there were tepid hopes and expectations of planting character education seeds that will sprout as the students mature.

Some participants were completely unconvinced that the messages will produce positive behavior outcome. Participant 1 gave me an emphatic "No" when asked if he thought the messages will help. Participant 15, a college graduate and grandmother to a middle school student told me that perhaps expecting too much of a change from students' behavior is unrealistic regardless of character education. She basically compared their lifestyle as such: "It's somewhat like a war sometimes. People go off to war; people come back alive, but they don't come back as themselves".

Literature suggests that character education initiatives and programs in middle schools have produced mixed results (Bryan, 2005; Lockwood, 1994; Walter, 1997), and Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) decried the lack of adequate monitoring and evaluation of many programs. Those findings are in line with this study. However, the exception is that their schools and system are not enthusiastic whatsoever in implementing and engaging in character education initiatives.

Life for the students in the communities used for this study is indeed lived in the battle field. Yet, performance and moral character education is not an emphasis for these schools or system, as they claimed? The simple answer is, again, a resounding yes.

Analysis Related to Theme 4: Support

It is not peculiar to hear educational stakeholders criticizing one another. Education is a controversial and serious business because of the vast and diverse philosophies of the stakeholders. However, what was moving to me was the stark reality that some of the students themselves observed when they mentioned that the parents were not attending to their responsibilities as parents in imparting positive character training to their children. The schools do not feel that they should engage more efforts in bringing the parents aboard their character education initiatives, if and when they have any.

Although teachers were also identified in the conversations as not adequately participating and buying into character education formally, the triangle of helplessness over bringing more stakeholders on board appeared to infuriate and sadden most of the participants. The more participants I interviewed, the more the feeling of inadequate buy-in continued to seep into the whole conversation.

However, could there be a reason why buy-in does not occur as it should? Data point to the fact that it is because of the serious emphasis on the academic programs and little emphasis on a parallel track of moral and performance character. Educators do not feel that they have adequate opportunities to implement strategies on how the students behave, just how they perform. At MS-1, the school leader pointed a finger at the parents as uncooperative in the efforts. At MS-2, it was the same, but with the Central Office added. At MS-3, the school leader complained about lack of buy-in from his staff. A counselor also deprecated teachers and administrators for not allowing her access to students to implement her programs. In most cases, all the school leaders would welcome more cooperation, but all focus is aimed at academic achievement and not on character

education. Is it surprising then that the students are left asking whether character education consist of one or two words when they are not used to hearing it often from their schools' leaders?

According to literature, Critical Theorists have found correlations between the involvement of parents in urban school, SES factors, attitude of teachers in those schools, and other environmental impacts on how minority and urban students learn and conduct themselves at school (Lynn et al., 2006; Rothstein, 2008; Woolley et al., 2008). The urban schools in this study experience these factors daily. The difference is in what they perceive they are able, allowed, and inspired to do in terms of using character education to rein in performance and moral deficits exhibited by their students.

There is simply no connectivity in the character education activities that take place, formal or informal, within the same school, from one teacher to the next, among grade levels, and among schools. As I examined the data closely, it was clear that there was total disconnect involving common practices, school relationships, and communication of character education initiatives. There was also little or no differentiated curriculum. As participant 32 stated:

I think you know sometimes initiatives are presented and then sometimes they fall through the cracks. 'cause I know at one time _____ City Schools had that character program, and I think I have a book that was written. I think it was before Dr. _____ was the superintendent and it was written. It was a character education program where you know the teachers were supposed to address character education daily.

More like falling through a crevice, because as has earlier been unashamedly decried by many other participants character education and any such initiative is not a priority. As such, there is absolutely no cooperative planning whatsoever that existed at the three schools studied.

The GREAT program attended by middle schools in the system could have been a great opportunity to generate cohesive plans for character education. Right there, in a packed arena of hundreds of anxious, excited, hormonal, guided and unguided, pre-teen and adolescent students, an opportunity was either missed or partially created to extend that mantra of character education. However, that was where the shared character education activity halted for the three schools studied, as each school went back to their campus with business as usual. There was no evidence of a continuance of the lessons preached at the program espoused by the school leaders or other stakeholders.

Pedagogically, the disconnect rests in tailoring available activities or programs to actually fit or target certain behaviors to achieve program effectiveness. Most of the participants called for differentiated programs tailored to address the various character issues facing the school or the students. To the extent that differentiation occurs, it is both localized at the school level and unknown to most people on campus. In essence, when implementing character education, the schools have the adolescence factor to consider. The urban component of the curriculum or students' culture also has to be addressed to have an effective character education curriculum.

There seems to be an acceptable notion in this study that the middle school years are different and challenging. Participant 36 gave me the "Rotten" phrase I used in this finding. The disconnect in practice and lack of differentiation evidenced in this study are major aspects of this research, because they do not align with calls for a curriculum targeted at ensuring success in the middle school years (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; NMSA, 2008; Wiles & Bondi, 2001).

Whole Group Participant Analysis

As I examined my data and findings, it was imperative to check for commonalities and differences in the way the various groups of students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other stakeholders perceived character education at their schools. The school personnel were more likely to understand and define the terminology, mainly because of their position as educators. The students were not able to do so, and that factor is a negative reflection of the school and highlights their inability to institute a strong curriculum or effective character education practice. A good majority of the stakeholders believed character education was important and could work if given prominence and implemented with the help of all stakeholders. Most participants also looked to the homes to provide a foundation to character building, because they believed their hands are tied on what they are permitted to do in enforcing character traits and dealing with the stress of academic goals. As participant 38, who has had a historical view of character education for over 5 decades recalled from one of her own elementary school teacher's character education practice:

And you would have to have...girls would have to have a bow on their hair and boys would always have to have a tie on, and if they did not have a tie she would put a paper tie on them. The same with girls. We would have to have something on our hair. She would make sure you had brushed your teeth, and just a whole lot of little things you probably can't do at school now....

She went on to add:

Like, parents are so suit conscious now, like the teacher is invading more so like the student's privacy by looking at personal parts of them, but at that particular time there, it was no shame, 'cause everybody knew what was expected of the teacher. It was not...it was like a daily thing, and most of the teachers here lived in the community. They knew most of the parents, and the parents had experienced some of the same things working with the teachers....

Participant 42 captured the sentiment of dissention poignantly when he discussed the attitude of parents and teachers regarding the responsibility of the students' moral upbringing:

...you got to constantly engrain in a child this is acceptable, this is not acceptable, you know. No matter how much you know, small, we might think it is these are basics that they might not have been able to, say, some kids never get it at home. So if they get here and they don't get it somewhere along the line, then their parents have failed and the school is failing to. Now we at a point now where it say the parents say that's not my responsibility and the school is saying that's not my responsibility either, but now it's the same way.

Evidently, the role of the teacher as a moral and performance compass to the students have changed drastically, especially in the urban setting. Interestingly, adult male participants in this study also spoke out more forcefully to lament the absent of male role models for the students. The average home model in these communities appear to be single parents who are often busy working two jobs, sometimes work at night, and they look to the schools to augment character training. This creates a tension – where families look to schools to augment character education, and schools look to families to send well-behaved and prepared students to school.

Research Conclusions

This qualitative case study research was carried out at three middle schools, and results from these sites have provided a foretaste into their character education practices. Although qualitative results are only limited to the three schools studied and not subject to generalizations (Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the results will likely generate ideas for any audience. The following conclusions are drawn after an intense study and careful analysis of the data collected from 46 participants who ranged from students,

a school janitor, a school nurse, parents, teachers, principals, to notable figures on the national scene who have researched and written on character education.

To begin, the middle schools are not fully aware of the benefits character education could bring to their schools. Although there is widespread agreement by the participants that character education is very vital, the fact that there are no mechanisms in place to gauge effectiveness points to uncertainties in what schools actually believe they could achieve if they focus on character education. Literature clearly points to some advantages of character education programs (Batiuk et al., 2004; Daunic et al.; 2000; Smith et al., 2002), and the participants agreed that their schools should focus more on character education as much as they do on academic improvement.

Most of the participants are aware that a strong emphasis on character education means attention is paid to the total student, which in turn could impact the most sought after result – improved student performance. In what Lickona and Davidson (2008) called the “parallel track of moral and performance character”, they clearly cited a merger of the two. As a matter of fact, it was one of my participants, who seemed to have channeled Lickona and Davidson’s (2008) conference in Cortland, New York, and nailed it when she excitedly told me:

...but who wants...who wants an insane genius? Who wants a straight “A” student who has no morals. Who wants a straight “A” students who is unconscionable? Who wants to be in the same room with a straight “A” students who has no respect for himself or anybody else? Parents want more for their children than just to be educated. They want them to be complete. They want them to come out as a whole not just as a part....

It appears that educators, in their quest for academic excellence, have not realized that the intense focus on academics may be alleviated if character traits that enhance student learning are inculcated in the students at the same time as moral trainings are pre-

sented to them. Literature revealed in Cookson's (1980) study that ethical standards held by private school leaders led them to prepare those students to attain managerial and professional careers. Those leaders ranked teaching morals higher than excellence of professional training for teachers, and well-organized lesson plans.

Second, the future of our young students is truly at risk, as evidenced by the various concerns raised by the participants and the huge amount of disciplinary referrals and suspensions the three schools deal with each year. Students and young people in this study were described as lacking "consciousness" and "soulless", among other descriptions. Educators know and accept the fact that most students are indeed well-behaved. However, it is the conduct of the few that demonstrate soullessness and lack of conscience that generate the most concerns and distractions. Some of the parents I interviewed appeared scared of the path their children will take in life, and some of the students told me that because their fellow students are often determined to act the way they intend to do and that character education may not even have any effect at all. I heard a group of seventh grade students adopt the same tone.

The following illustration was used to arrive at the emergent themes for this study, but is used at this point to buttress this analysis. At MS-1, the students participate in an abstinence program 2 days a week for about 5 months. It is important to stress that the schools participate because it is a federal funded program and curriculum administered by the city and their personnel, and not by the school system. Thus, the schools just provide the venue and the audience. During the sessions, issues regarding sex and abstinence, peer pressure, sexually transmitted diseases, and other pertinent topics are covered. After one such session, I sought out the administrator for permission, and convened

a focus group with fifteen of the seventh grade students who participated in the program to gather data on what their opinions were regarding what they just heard as it relates to character education.

Understandably, the topic of sexually transmitted diseases was of much interest to the young adolescents, because they all wanted to talk at the same time, argue, point at each other, sometimes yell at each other, laugh excitedly, and espouse their opinions at the “nasty” diseases they heard about and the role playing they just enacted. When I asked how many of them thought they learned something new, most of them raised their hands. However, when I asked how many of them thought the program would help kids stop participating in the risky behaviors they just heard about, only three hands went up. Of course another animated argument erupted, as almost all of them wanted to tell me at the same time why they thought it would not make any difference in what other kids would do.

One tall girl in particular who seemed to dominate the conversation starred at me with her face down as if to say, “Are you dumb?” and told me, “Do you really think they’ll stop mmh mmh mmh?” The last three phrases, which I assumed to be a crude way of saying they would not stop being sexually active drew a wild laughter from her fellow classmates. Another girl who had also been talkative and had spent most of the conversation in animated arguments with a particular group of boys around her gave me another you–must-be-crazy look and seemed to correct me, “You think they there to listen. They just be there. They ain’t paying attention for real”. One young boy, who had been very polite and would raise his hands before speaking, told me he believed the abstinence program would stop the students from involving in sexual activities because of the new and

scary things he just learned. However, the same skeptical girls emphasized to their classmates that the program will help *them*, and added “but I don’t know about anybody else”.

This focus group was relevant on several of the themes uncovered. I said to the students, “Wait a minute, I have another question to ask: How many of you have been in a character education program?” I was given the same confused look as I often received during the individual interviews. Interestingly, when I asked this question the tall girl who had been doing most of the talking whispered, “Let me turn my back” and indeed turned her back. Why? She heard a question she did not know or have an answer to give and did not want to venture what might be an embarrassing answer. She, like most of her peers, had no idea that the abstinence program was character education because they were not aware of the terminology. The schools have not emphasized it, and on a deeper level have not adopted it as their responsibility to augment what is basically a program they are not in charge of administering, which could be of immense value and save the lives of their students.

Teachers and educators have a tough job as it is keeping up with state and federal mandates (Chirichello, Eckel, & Pagliaro, 2005). With the entire focus trained on academics by teachers and administrators, the use of discipline as character training may not be enough to redirect the disruptive behaviors exhibited by certain students, and in fact may negatively impact their development (Skinner, Neddenriep, Robinson, Ervin, & Jones, 2002). Often times, administrators see the same circle of students constantly and are not always equipped with the best methods to contain or provide remediation. In es-

sence, appropriate corrective and remediation methods in character education and conflict resolution strategies are not being implemented.

In the 21st Century, the urban adolescents or youth in America are faced with socio-economic difficulties that are extremely complex in nature. From drugs, alcoholism, violent media images, violence on the street corners, absentee parents, sexual promiscuity, to the pervasive mentality of flashy dresses and cars procured by any means, the impressionable minds of the adolescent may not easily clarify *right* from *wrong*. As participant 40 stated:

And you know what I've learned what we think is negative uh...is often...is not the same as somebody else they look at us 'what you talking about?' you know.... Because you're trying to tell them 'That's wrong', but they're looking at it, 'How can this be wrong? I'm making money'... And if the environment that they are in, what, they're with us eight hours a day and the other time they are with that other environment and those people who they look up to don't see a problem with the way they're living, of course they are going to focus back on that, you know; and they end up calling us negative names thinking that we're negative, you know.

For most of these urban adolescents who memorize an entire rap CD in minutes but seem to be labeled as having difficulties in academic achievement because of their zip codes, there are limited opportunities of economic and social advancement. Hence, the cycle of ignorance and other social ills continue to impact their daily existence as the schools do not appear to have a way to generate a character education curriculum that will cater to these urban adolescents.

Third, schools are overwhelmed with testing and academic mandates. The mere mention of NCLB sends most educators into a condemnation mode. Hence, any program or initiative that "detracts" from the academic curriculum and drill is considered suspect. As the participants in this research pointed out, it is all about drilling for the test and focusing on meeting academic goals. Unfortunately, that feeling pervades all levels of the

three schools studied in this research. Add to the testing frustration the daily issues of negative character displays by students and what you get are mostly environments where teachers and students are caught in a sequence of frustration and helplessness.

By placing so much emphasis on testing and ignoring the total child education philosophy, character education initiatives do not stand a chance of survival. Rather than investing in programs to foster positive character, more money and resources go toward the latest assessment methods. Consider also that all groups and sub groups are mandated to make academic progress yearly, including special education students and those diagnosed with various emotional issues, the finger pointing intensifies. School personnel point to parents as those who should be responsible for instilling character traits in the students. Parents tended to view teachers, who participant 14 referred to as “Inspirators” as sometimes abdicating their duties to go the extra steps in engaging the students in formal or informal character education.

As participant 34 unabashedly mentioned, any smart administrator who wants to survive in the administrative position must concentrate on academics, not character education. It is not a priority for them, and the students confirmed it. Those students who participated in this research stated that they were getting most of their character education from their parents, not from teachers. Teachers simply may have given up on trying, and there could be a reason for it. Participant 3, a student, may have gotten to those reasons when she said, “For some students, if a teacher, like, takes them outside of the classroom and stuff sometimes (to instill informal character education) it don’t work, so they (teachers) need to just save their breath cause they (students) just going to do the same thing over and over again”. The implication is that teachers are not required or mandated at

these three schools to engage in character education with an approved curriculum, and both the students and the teachers do not see any vindication for the efforts of the external programs and informal character education in place.

Fourth, school administrators are under enormous pressure to produce statistical achievement data. They may be effective at leading their various schools to achieve mandated testing standards; however, there is a lack of collaboration on the topic of character education. Edward DeRoche, a co-director of the University of San Diego International Center for Character Education wrote that school leadership on character education is a central issue regarding the implementation of programs (DeRoche, 2000). Citing Patterson's (1993) argument, DeRoche concurred that current and future school leaders have to incorporate the values of openness to participation in decision making, openness in diversity of opinions, openness in resolving organizational conflicts, reflection on what contributes to better organizations and their environments, and the ability to recognize and turn their mistakes into positive learning experiences (Patterson, 1993, pp. 27-31).

Another factor making administrators uneasy about character education is some of the legal ramifications they may encounter. In a terse article recognizing the difficulty of dealing with students' misbehavior, Arum (2004) argued that as a result of the litigious nature of our society, many teachers and administrators are afraid to address students' character issues for fear of violating their privacy or other rights. In a situation where educators are lacking buy-in from staff and parents on character education, and the intensity is at its peak and focused on academics, school leaders interviewed in this research see no point in emphasizing character education in place of achieving higher academic scores.

Fifth, urban schools are at a disadvantage when it comes to the “baggage” that their students bring with them. Literature supports this notion as Gordon (2003) pointed out that constructing effective intervention via character education would not be feasible if environmental factors affecting student advancement and conduct were not considered within the curriculum and pedagogy. The fact, once again is clear – there are not many discernible character education programs that exist at the schools, and those that do exist may simply not have a curriculum targeted toward the urban student. As participant 43 stated, “...Because the books that... people that created these books, that they work in the situations that are in these books that they are doing is mainly designed for white suburban kids in their neighborhoods. It doesn’t even apply to them [urban kids] you know”. Therefore, he had to improvise on the materials he uses.

High crime, murder rate, and school drop-out rates, poverty, and lack of positive male role-models at home and in the community are among the factors that contribute to the correlation that many of the participants in my study drew regarding student behavior. In most of their responses, the participants all identified environmental and cultural issues as dominant and reflective of students’ behavior at school. Not surprising, these impressionable middle school adolescents emulate what they see and hear from parents, community members who flash around money acquired through drugs and other crimes, and pop-culture. As participant 40 mentioned, it is hard to try and remold an adolescent’s mindset when what he/she knows and experiences daily conflicts with school messages on morality. And therein lies the dilemma that urban schools and related moral discussions confront when trying to implement character education.

From my personal experience working in an urban environment, it is not unusual to see poor parents who may be on public assistance; yet, they may spend expensive amounts on tennis shoes and other accessories on students, some of whom are sometimes not model students. Then schools also contend with parents who uphold, “co-sign”, and “Black-out” on school personnel when their students are being redirected. Literature revealed that these actions by parents to demonstrate love to their children regardless of their misbehavior are indicative of poverty (Payne, 1996). These issues are recipes that dilute the intensity that should otherwise drive the case for stronger character education initiatives.

Finally, when it comes to the topic of character education in middle schools involved in this study, the village is completely deserted. Not just on the topic of character education, many participants expressed concern over the lack of participation that the parents and community as a whole have shown. Either by design or through a series of missed opportunities to collaborate with the parents and community, the stakeholders in these schools were simply not involved in the daily process of any activity that relates to character education.

Many participants in this study decried the lack of participation of all stakeholders in initiating, organizing, and monitoring any character education activities. Asked whether they are aware or involved in decisions pertaining to the planning of character education activities in their schools, almost all 46 participants in this study said they were not aware of such decisions. Many thought the principal makes the decision, others thought the counselor makes the decision, and none of the participants thought the stu-

dents that are targeted for the programs are involved in determining the programs to implement, the purpose, the targeted sub-group, and other related areas.

What was very prevalent during the discussions is the finger-pointing that permeated the entire interview process. Many school personnel blamed teachers, some administrators blamed their staff members, and staff members blamed whoever had the kids before and after school. What about the students? They just do not know who or how those decisions are made, if any at all. At one point, participant 8 and participant 42 said I should do more “character education”, referring to my research.

For any school worth its grain on solving the puzzle related to why the students act the way they do, involving parents could have been one of the bedrocks for MS-1, MS-2, or MS-3. It was also evident that the students and staff members do not believe that parents are interested in extra-curricular activities aimed at building character. Administrators and parents do not collaborate on character education, same could be said of the teachers, and no one has involved the students in making decisions and explaining when and why they are initiating programs at school aimed at positively enhancing their character.

Implications for Educators

The findings from this study are derived from a single research conducted at three middle schools. These findings have provided a glimpse of what middle stakeholders think of character education in the middle school setting. Educational stakeholders may wish to consider and implement aspects of what has been uncovered in this research to suit or augment their character education practices.

Development of a Character Education CAP and CRED Models

According to Howard et al. (2004), the current condition and climate of schools portend that “It is not a question of whether to do character education but rather a question of how consciously and by what methods” (p. 210). These implications are largely formulated from the extensive review of literature, research data, the researcher’s Constructivist paradigm and substantial experience as a middle school teacher and administrator. Furthermore, they are classified into two main models: CAP and CRED models (Figure 3)

The primary purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the perception of middle school stakeholders on the importance and effectiveness of character education in the middle school setting in an urban school district. A major finding of this study revealed that stakeholders were mostly unaware of what character education is and the nature of character education practices that exist at their schools. This model generates practices that educational leaders should consider to enhance, raise awareness, and actively promote their character education programs.

CAP Model

To begin, it is important to familiarize the stakeholders on campus and in the community with character education terminologies and pillars. When educators teach any subject or topic, definition and familiarization of the terminology is a huge part of the introduction process. The same curricular step should be present in any character education program or initiative. Educators and stakeholders should be encouraged to use the term character education as a way of ingraining the concepts in the culture of their schools. In

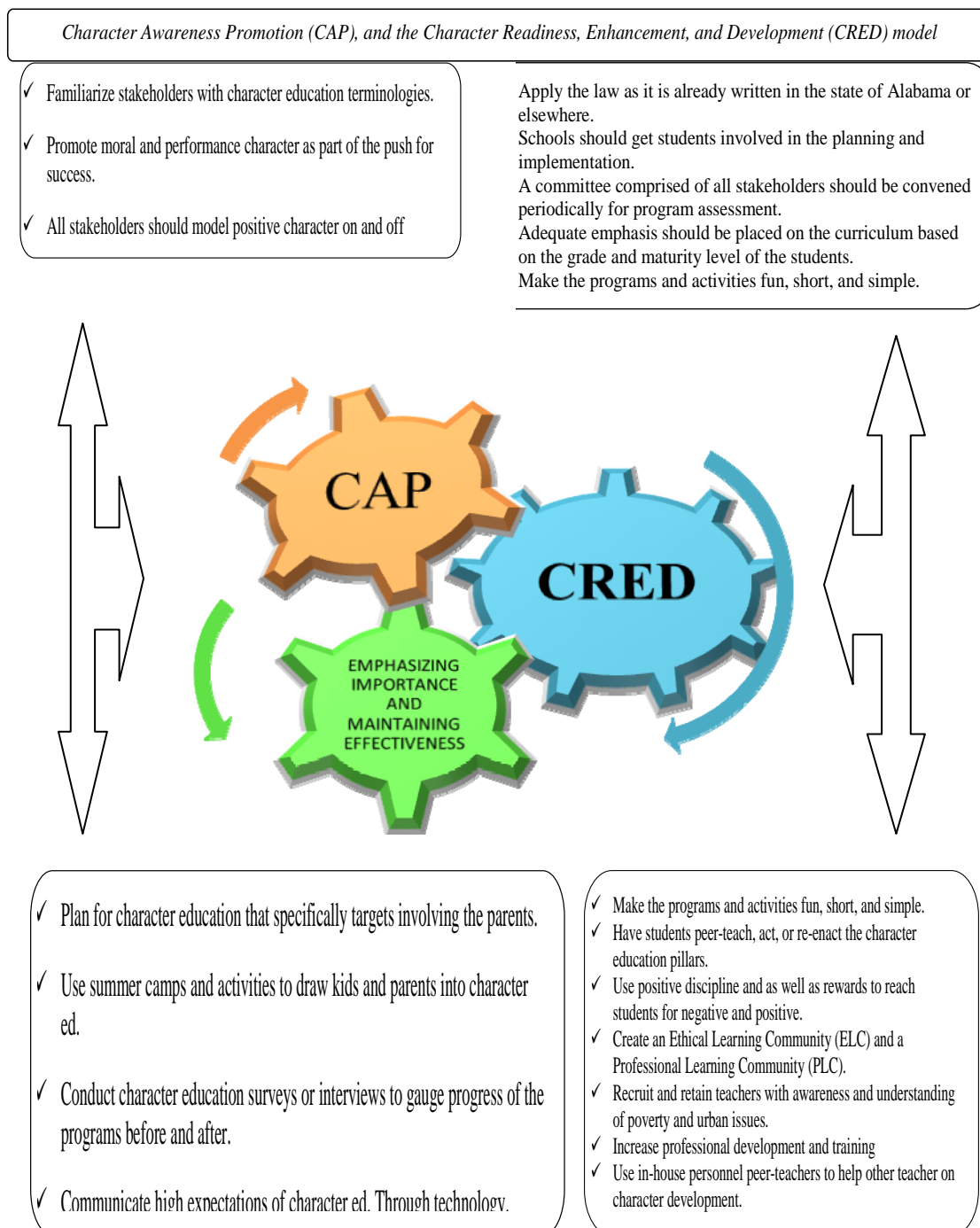


Figure 3. Character Awareness Promotion (CAP) Model and Character Readiness, Enhancement, and Development (CRED) Model.

a study of secondary school cultures, Brady (2008) warned that, "...failure on the part of individual inhabitants to comprehend and accommodate the cultural nuances of the organizations they dwell in has the potential to significantly diminish their prospects for success in those domains" (p. 1). Schools simply cannot expect their students to model and proudly proclaim their positive character when they are in the dark about what character education entails.

Second, it is important to promote moral and performance character as part of the overall push for school goals and achievement. According to the Twelve Component Assessment and Planning model developed by Davidson et al. (2008), it emphasized that "Character education isn't a separate subject; rather it can be taught through any subject"(n.p.). To incorporate the moral and performance character into the curriculum, Davidson et al. (2008), enjoined teachers to ask questions regarding what connections their objectives could make with character education. Each subject or topic being taught could easily make a connection to any of the pillars of character education, such as: social studies/Constitution – discussions on prejudice and cooperation; computer tech/cyber bullying – building stronger self-esteem could be emphasized, etc.

Third, all stakeholders should be encouraged to model positive character on and off campus. Middle school students are very impressionable and the behavior of adults in their lives impacts their own conduct. In a study of substance abuse by middle school students, Suldo et al. (2008) promulgated a hypothesis that there is a correlation between the propensity of students to engage in risky behaviors such as drug use based on their relationship with the adults in their lives such as parents and teachers. When these adults model and forcefully reject negative behaviors and promote positive character through

their actions, students tend to respond positively. Similarly, LaRusso et al. (2008) found that positive climates do have favorable effects on the behavior of adolescent health and risky behaviors, and students who reported a high level of teacher support had positive opinions regarded their schools as having a higher respectful climate.

Fourth, stakeholders need to plan for character education that specifically targets involving the parents. As some of the participants pointed out, some of the parents may not know and be equipped with the best tools to use in tackling the behavior of their children. A program that introduces and reinforces character traits with the parents could extend the school's initiatives at the home front.

Fifth, stakeholders need to use summer camps and activities to draw kids and parents in character education activities. During the summer periods, many students who could not afford to go to camp are left without physical or educational outlet. There are many camps that specifically target adolescent behavior and character education. Writing that, "Developing a positive self-concept in adolescents has been perceived as a precursor to alleviation of behavioral problems," Larson's (2007) experiment found that there were statistical differences on the effects of an adventure camp program on the self-concept of adolescents between the experimental controlled groups of nine to eleven year olds. Similarly, Rinn (2006) in a study of 140 gifted students also found that there were positive differences in self-perception after a summer program for students who had completed seventh through tenth grades the previous year. For both at-risk and gifted students, summer programs aimed at building character education and awareness works, and schools should initiate, encourage, and embrace that idea to foster their character education initiatives.

Sixth, schools should conduct periodical character education surveys or interviews to gauge progress of the programs before and after implementation. Interestingly, administrators encourage pedagogical practices that require teachers to use pretests to determine students' level on any given objective, before proceeding with instructions on the topic. Similar steps should be followed to generate feedbacks on the character education program to be implemented to determined needs and expectations.

Finally, stakeholders should communicate high expectations regarding the moral fiber of the school through newsletters and technological avenues such as emails, text-messages, and phone calls to promote positive issues about students. There are several programs and technological tools available to schools to make automated calls to parents to inform them about student attendance, behavior, absentees, etc. School systems and administrators should invest in such programs to augment their efforts in character education. In a study titled Meet the parents, Villano (2008) posited that the benefits of such technological programs that keep parents notified and involved is indisputable.

Stakeholders could be reminded on the weekly character education words or activities by using these communication tools.

CRED Model

As always, apply the law as it is already written. Alabama Accountability Law (Act 95-313) mandates no less than 10 min for daily character education instruction, and that must include the pledge of allegiance. Ensure that teachers utilize those 10 min block to implement character education in their classrooms.

Second, schools should get students involved in the planning and implementation of character education strategies and programs at their schools. Based on the data collected in this study, the voices of the students would greatly add to the strategy on the character education programs to implement and how it could be effectively implemented. Participant 6 appeared skeptical about the effectiveness of character education because she thought students would not heed the teachers' informal character education attempts. However, she recognized that to make character education effective, students have to be involved: "Like, they can have programs with bullying, then drug using, and like have the people, like the student tell the teacher what their problem is, and they put them in other groups with other people that have related problems". This strategy not only involves the students as part of the process, but will also offer curriculum insight for planning strategies. In other words, why should the school staff assume they have all the answers to students' needs without consulting with the same students?

Third, a committee comprised all various members of the school community should be convened periodically to examine the school's character education needs and plan strategies to tackle those issues. Such plans should anticipate or collaborate with the community to forestall negative transference of activities in the community into the school. Often school administrators have to get involved in the aftermath of fights and other conflicts that transpired in the neighborhoods. By cultivating a community of shared character education initiative, schools will be alerted to concerns that could erupt on campus.

Fourth, when character education initiatives are planned and implemented, adequate emphasis should be placed on the curriculum based on the grade and maturity level

of the students. Participant 6 in this study and other proponents of differentiated instruction (Anderson & Algozzine, 2007; Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Edwards, Carr, & Seigel, 2006; Gregory, 2008; Levi, 2008; Rock, Greg, Ellis, & Gable, 2008) have emphasized the benefits of reaching the diverse student population in any urban or rural school setting. Differentiated character education pedagogy would benefit all students including those school personnel sometimes describe as “smart, but silly,” “well-behaved, but lazy,” or “behaves in the classroom, but goes crazy on the hallways.”

Fifth, make the programs and activities fun, short, and simple. This strategy should keep the targeted audience interested and attentive. In addition, students are more likely to be energized and remember concepts incorporated in the presentation. As was evidenced by the dramatized video on the topic of alcoholism, the students remembered the theatrical events that took place in the video. Make the 10 min mandated by state law worthy by instituting school-wide activities or games, such as character word scrabble games. Making character education interesting should not just be for the students, but should also be interesting to the parents. As participant 15 stated, “you know something that would interest...you know something to interest the children...really to interest the parents because you know a lot of these parents somewhat you know lose focus on you know what’s happening....” Participant 3 added, “And make it funner, ‘cause some people they, once you start talking about certain stuff then their mind just blink out cause it be boring to them.” Participant 24 offers a more direct answer to making character education pedagogy interesting, “You need to get the kids bang, bang!!” In other words, she advocated getting to the point of it quickly.

Sixth, have students peer-teach, act, or re-enact the character education pillars. Students are more apt to listen and be more in tune with topics presented by peers. In a longitudinal study involving 975 middle school students in grade 6 through grade 8 in 52 classrooms, Kamps, et al. (2008) found that their results supported a ClassWide Peer Tutoring (CWPT) program. Recognizing that “Teachers need classroom-based programs to develop and support mental health fitness in adolescents because this age group faces significant challenges to their mental health,” Tacker and Dobie (2008) also used 30 middle school students to examine a program called “Mastermind” that includes using peer-teaching to enable the adolescents discuss and deal with various issues. Although peer-teaching was not the only method used in the program, the pedagogy of peer-teaching was used and the program was rated as effective.

Seventh, use positive discipline and as well as rewards to reach students for negative and positive behaviors so as to keep their self-esteem intact. Several participants in this study harped on taking time to listen to the students, talk to them, try to understand them, and show that we care. Participant 30 mentioned that it takes “...being patient with them every time they made a mistake...” to also bring about an effective character lesson, because “chewing them out is just not the right approach”. If we want students to achieve academic success, it makes sense to find a way to keep them in school rather than using suspensions as the ultimate resort to all infractions. We create a vicious cycle when students are suspended out of school, their academic achievement suffer, and we turn around and spend more time emphasizing academics, rather than implementing a parallel track of moral and performance character education strategies.

Participant 45 truly believes in the power of positive discipline. He was determined not to let his younger brother travel the rough road of drug dealing, womanizing, gun possession, and robbery charge he had faced. He literally begged school personnel to show love and care to the students:

Oh! Yeah, cause if the teacher, just you know, being a teacher and just doing a job and just saying we're going to do this you know acting in a certain way, you're going to get that same way (behavior) towards the student. You going to get that negative energy back. You ain't setting nothing but a negative energy anyway, but if you send something positive like in a positive way showing love...love overcomes anything. That's because God is love and so you know once you just show and spend time with kids cause they only kids, they only kids!! "And the more they'll want to get close to you, the more they'll want to work in your classroom, cause they know you staying on them, but you, they knowing you caring about their education for real; not just teaching them to caring about their education.

True, not all students will respond positively to the notion of trying to appeal to their emotional and psychological understanding, but character education goes to the heart of appealing to the students to understand themselves and make better decisions. The proponents of positive discipline defined the goal as being "to invite students to see themselves as capable of tackling tough challenges, overcoming obstacles, accomplishing great things, and behave accordingly" (Purkey & Strahan, 2002). Lickona (2008) discussed that character-based discipline "Deters and corrects negative behavior, and teaches good character." Character-based discipline also has "Two essentials: Clear rules and clear consequences."

Eighth, stakeholders need to create an ELC and a PLC as part of the school culture that will serve as a model for moral behavior in aspects of the schools' daily activities. At the 2008 Smart and Good Schools Initiative 14th Annual Summer Institute in

Character Education conference in Cortland, New York, Parisi (2008), described the goal of this character education component as:

A professional community that includes school leaders and all instructional and support staff not only administrators, teachers and counselors but also secretaries, coaches, custodians, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and all others whose work and example affect excellence and ethics in ways large and small. Every adult makes a difference; everyone contributes, positively or negatively, to the character of the school and the character of the students.

If character education is to be implemented effectively, all stakeholders on campus must be involved. No stakeholder should be overlooked or their input minimized. The janitor who has to clean up the threatening graffiti in the bathrooms or stairways has as much contribution to make on any character education pedagogy as the principal whose job it is to lead the entire school. Increase dialogue regarding moral and ethical challenges facing the school and allow for dissensions and different opinions. If the school is experiencing moral dilemmas, it should not be swept under the rug and assumed to be nonexistent. All staff members and stakeholders should be able to have their voice heard on ways to create a better moral environment.

Ninth, stakeholders must recruit and retain teachers with awareness and understanding of poverty and urban issues. Lynn et al. (2006) wrote that urban teachers can engage in transformative teaching strategies to prepare their students for an evolving society.

When I was a middle school teacher, participant 23, a former team member used to say, “You have not earned your stripes as a teacher until you can come here day in day out and work with students like ours! Those folks (teachers) ‘over the mountain’ (referring to a nearby wealthy suburban town) can’t last a day in here!” Lack of parental sup-

port and student behavior are often at the top of the list on why potential good teachers leave the profession (Lynn et al., 2006; Thornton, 2004).

To accomplish a higher retention rate, the school district involved in this research offers signing bonuses for teachers in the critical areas of math and science, and appoints a mentor to all new teachers. Individual schools, such as MS-2, use various reward programs such as: informal dress out days, free parking spots, complimentary half-days of work, free lunch off campus, and peer recognitions. The key is to recruit, identify, and retain quality teachers who understand the urban student dynamic, plans, and implements performance and moral based strategies to enable the students to maximize their efforts.

During the interview process, the selection committee should ask the applicant what his/her views are regarding economically disadvantaged students, parental participation, adolescent behavior, and other negative topics that tend to mask the many gems within the students in an urban setting. As a teacher and administrator, I have actually witnessed teachers sending students out of the classroom with disciplinary referrals for not having a pencil, sleeping in class, or not having a homework assignment. Teachers who lack the temperament for such students may contribute to their lack of self-worth, unhealthy relationship with the teacher, and eventual disruptive behavior. The urban student can learn; however, today's educators have to be cognizant of the handicaps and strikes he or she may be carrying before walking into the school doors (Cucchiara, 2008; Ogbu, 1992; Rothstein, 2008; Woolley et al., 2008).

As the school motto for MS-2 clearly stated: No Limits, No Barriers, No Excuses for students and teachers, demanding high expectations is a plausible notion, which is

even more effective when tempered with understanding, care, diligence, and strong pedagogical emphasis on character education.

The next area of concern focuses on the need to increase professional development and training of staff members in the areas of conflict identification, prevention and resolution, and peer-mediation strategies.

Finally, when possible, use in-house personnel whom students identify with students and those good at managing students' behavior to peer-teach character education strategies to other school personnel. In my experience, students (for various reasons) pick and choose a teacher's classroom where they do not cause any disciplinary problems. As an administrator, we have had to switch students with severe disciplinary problems to another class and observed as the student made academic and character changes. School personnel have to realize both individual differences in students managing their behaviors and the differences that also exist among staff members in their ability to understand, relate, commit, and diffuse students' personal or classroom conflicts.

Recommendations for Future Studies

This qualitative research was born out of the need to find answers on how middle school stakeholders feel about character education. During the literature review section, it was evident that the character or moral conducts of middle school students and subsequent actions taken by schools to address those concerns have received little or no scrutiny. Based on the extensive and wide-array of stakeholders interviewed in this study, my recommendation is that further studies should contend with finding ways to help schools combine moral and performance character in their curriculum.

More qualitative studies on character education should also focus on finding ways to mitigate the environmental impact on our adolescent middle school students so as to help schools attain the upper hand in the tug of war over the heart and souls of our impressionable middle school students. To eliminate the disconnect in practice evidenced in this study, additional experimental longitudinal studies should also be conducted district-wide to study the effectiveness of comprehensive programs that schools could be funded to use for their character education programs and initiatives.

Although this study dealt with the themes as generated by the roles of the participants, future studies should specifically delve more into the specific roles of middle school stakeholders such as administrators, teachers, students, and parents on character education.

Summary of Study

This is a very important study in an era of high stakes educational accountability. As educators, we are on the verge of indeed trying to excel academically, while the behavior challenges from our students continue to spiral, sometimes out of control. My task in this study was to seek empirical input from the participants and their perspectives on character education and how they perceive its efficacy in advancing moral and performance character. I hope that my fellow educators and others interested in character education would not simply take my words for it, but rather examine the exact words of the participants in this study to see what they can do to advance the moral and performance characters of our precious adolescent middle schoolers. I am a proud educator, but I too share the blame for the inactions on implementing effective character education strategies

at our various schools. The findings from this study has not only enlightened me and those who participated in this study, but will hopefully have similar strong impact on anyone else who reads or is presented with findings from this study.

About a decade ago when I was still a classroom teacher, I was on the same grade level team with a social studies teacher (participant 20, who also ran a program that met once a week called First Priority. Students who volunteered would meet early morning on selected days before school to pray and read *The Bible*), and I vividly remember the many conversations we had about students' behavior. He would often look at me intensely and demonstratively, take off his glasses, literally get in my face as he told me, "Doc, when you write the book, man, you gotta put all this 'Shtuff' down, man! People don't get this right here, man! You can't make this 'shtuff' up even if you try!" A couple of things worth mentioning: I never told him I intended to write a book! *This 'shtuff'* also happened to be the confounding behaviors that we experienced daily from students (and some of their parents) who would come in, "Black-out" on us, and "co-sign" their students' detrimental behavior.

Since then, I began to feel that something was missing in whatever we were doing about those students who misbehave or to prevent others from joining their ranks. Besides suspensions, a few character education programs in place, and informal talks to students about their behavior, and in addition to the State mandated 10 min that included the pledge of allegiance, the school climate remained the same. Many teachers groaned about students' behavior, and many students were totally oblivious of what it took to be a good academic or moral student. Day after day, month after month, and as we trudged on year after year, nothing changed.

When I began my doctoral studies and had an opportunity for a research topic, I picked character education because I am strongly convinced that as an urban educator, we desperately need a revamped emphasis on what we intend to do to turn get our young urban and African American students on the right track. “Endangered species,” “Government property,” etc, were words I often heard used to describe some of our middle school students; however, in a year where we just elected the first Black president of the greatest country in the world, would using informal talks to our students like, “What’s your excuse”, or “You too can become a president” be enough to make them work harder, behave better, and realize what I call the New American Dream – that anything is possible? Character education, if implemented successfully, could make the difference between saving a wayward student from himself and others and producing the next African American president.

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APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM



Institutional Review Board for Human Use

Form 4: IRB Approval Form
Identification and Certification of Research
Projects Involving Human Subjects

UAB's Institutional Review Boards for Human Use (IRBs) have an approved Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). The UAB IRBs are also in compliance with 21 CFR Parts 50 and 56 and ICH GCP Guidelines. The Assurance became effective on November 24, 2003 and expires on October 26, 2010. The Assurance number is FWA00005960.

Principal Investigator: NZEOCHA, EMEKA

Co-Investigator(s):

Protocol Number: **X080512003**

Protocol Title: *The Perceptions of Middle School Stakeholders on the Effectiveness and Importance of Character Education in Three Middle Schools in an Urban School District in Alabama*

The IRB reviewed and approved the above named project on 5/16/08. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services. This Project will be subject to Annual continuing review as provided in that Assurance.

This project received EXPEDITED review.

IRB Approval Date: 5-16-08

Date IRB Approval Issued: 5/16/08

Marilyn Doss, M.A.
Vice Chair of the Institutional Review
Board for Human Use (IRB)

Investigators please note:

The IRB approved consent form used in the study must contain the IRB approval date and expiration date.

IRB approval is given for one year unless otherwise noted. For projects subject to annual review research activities may not continue past the one year anniversary of the IRB approval date.

Any modifications in the study methodology, protocol and/or consent form must be submitted for review and approval to the IRB prior to implementation.

Adverse Events and/or unanticipated risks to subjects or others at UAB or other participating institutions must be reported promptly to the IRB.

470 Administration Building
701 20th Street South
205.934.3789
Fax 205.934.1301
irb@uab.edu

The University of
Alabama at Birmingham
Mailing Address:
AB 470
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BIRMINGHAM AL 35294-0104

APPENDIX B
SAMPLE LETTER OF RECRUITMENT

HUDSON SCHOOL
 3000 F. L. SUTTLESWORTH DR
 BIRMINGHAM, AL 35308
 Telephone: (205) 231-3000
 Fax: (205) 231-3075

Mr. E. Nzeocha, Ed.S
 Assistant principal

 Alabama

May 5, 2008

Dear Fellow ___ Stakeholder,

I am a doctoral student at the School of Education, Department of Educational Leadership at University of Alabama, Birmingham. My research will be aimed at understanding the perceptions of middle school stakeholders on the effectiveness and importance of Character Education. This study WILL NOT be an evaluation tool for you or your students/school; rather, it is intended as a source of information for me to generate research data relating to how middle school stakeholders feel about character education in general.

This research will involve recorded interviews lasting between 45 minutes to an hour. If necessary, a follow-up interview, phone call, or email will be used to ask for more information or clarifications. I will also be doing observations on campus related to character education. Please know that other middle schools in the city are cooperating with this research also, and I thank all of you.

In order to ensure validity for this research, your name WILL NOT BE USED and all interviews will be recorded and reported using anonymous or coded references. Example: "Participant No. 5 from Alpha Middle School stated that...."

At the conclusion of the study, a final report will be presented to the participants from each site, and copies will be made available to participating schools on request. Please read the Informed Consent form, sign and return to your school counselor or assistant principal. If you are a student, please let your parents read it, and both you and a parent will sign the form.

Thank you.

APPENDIX C

ELEVEN PRINCIPLES OF CHARACTER EDUCATION OBSERVATION MATRIX

	Principals	Administrators	Counselor	Teachers	Students	Parents and Community
P1						
P2						
P3						
P4						
P5						
P6						
P7						
P8						
P9						
P10						
P11						

Eleven Principles of Character Education Observation Matrix

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Administrator/AP *Parent* *Teacher* *Student* *(Other)* _____

Name: _____ (Code Name) _____

Organization/School _____ (Code Name) _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

Introduction:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I am sincerely grateful for your willingness to share and express your thoughts. I will be asking you many questions and recording your responses verbatim. After the transcription of your thoughts and feelings, I will ask for your review of what I interpreted. It is important for the transcription to be verbatim so that I do not paraphrase something you've said with an incorrect interpretation.

What I am interested in finding out in this study is what your perception of character education is and its impact or effectiveness. Please express your thoughts and feelings as freely as you like. I am interested in what you think about character education, your experiences, and other ideas you may wish to add. I may ask you some additional questions as we go along in order to clarify certain points. Do you consent to have our interview to be tape recorded? Yes____ No____ Are you ready to start?

Interview Questions:

1. Please tell me what you can about yourself.

Probe: How long have you been involved in (character education program) _____?

2. How would you define character education?

3. How often do you hear the term character education at home or at school? (importance)

Probe: The state has mandated 10 minutes a day for teaching character education, what is your opinion about that?

4. Personally, what do you think about character education? (Importance)
5. Tell me how character education may have helped your school or community. (Effectiveness)
6. How do you feel about implementing character education in middle schools in a different way than in elementary or high schools? (effectiveness)
7. Tell me about any major thoughts you have had about character education during one of the classroom or programs on character education. (effectiveness and importance).
Probe: What can schools and communities do together to implement a character education program that works? (effectiveness)
8. How does your school work with the community in implementing character education programs in your school? (Effectiveness).
9. Tell me how decisions are made regarding what character education programs are implemented at your school? (Effectiveness)
Probe: What aspect(s) of students' character concern you the most? (Importance)
10. Why do the character issues you mentioned concern you? (Importance)
11. Describe how you would like character education implemented or practiced if you were in charge of a character education program. (Effectiveness)
12. Who do you feel should be responsible for teaching good character to our middle school students? (Importance)
Probe: In your opinion, why do students behave the way they do, good or bad behavior? (Axiology)
13. Tell me how the environment students are growing up in may play a role in how they behave? (importance and effectiveness)
14. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not touched on in this conversation?

APPENDIX E

SAMPLE INTERVIEW JOURNAL SHEET

Questions	Participants' Responses	Memo/Additional Questions
1. Please tell me what you can about yourself.		
Probe: How long have you been involved in (character education program)? _____ _____		
2. How would you define character education?		
3. How often do you hear the term character education at home or at school? (importance)		
4. Personally, what do you think about character education? (Importance)		
5. Tell me how character education may have helped your school or community. (Effectiveness)		
6. How do you feel about implementing character education in middle schools in a different way than in elementary or high schools? (effective-		

ness)		
7. Tell me about any major thoughts you have had about character education during one of the classroom or programs on character education. (effectiveness or importance).		
Probe: What can schools and communities do together to implement an effective character education program? (effectiveness)		
8. How does your school work with the community in implementing character education programs in your school? (Effectiveness).		
9. Tell me how decisions are made regarding what character education programs are implemented at your school? (Effectiveness)		
Probe: What aspect(s) of students' character concern you the most? (Importance)		

<p>10. Why do the character issues you mentioned concern you? (Importance)</p>		
<p>11. Describe how you would like character education implemented or practiced if you were in charge of a character education program. (Effectiveness)</p>		
<p>12. Who do you feel should be responsible for teaching good character education to our middle school students? (Importance)</p>		
<p>13. What role, if any, does the environment or community play in how students at this school behave? (importance/effectiveness)</p>		
<p>14. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not touched on in this conversation?</p>		

APPENDIX F

ADDITIONAL SAMPLE OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Site: _____

Date: _____ Length of Activity: _____

Observation Area(s): _____

Descriptive Notes

Reflective Notes

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APPENDIX G
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS AND DESCRIPTIONS

Participant 1

This 11-year old sixth grade participant is a shy, neatly dressed student who described herself as friendly and someone who likes to make friends and have fun.

Participant 2

This participant was an 11 year old boy who revealed how he has been affected with an enormous tragedy that he speaks of vividly and also with hope. I mention this because he is trying to succeed despite that fact. He was particularly vocal and engaging during the interview process.

Participant 3

At 13, this participant said she enjoys playing with dolls. She has aspirations to be a pediatrician and also own a beauty shop.

Participant 4

This young eight grader has the build of a linebacker, with a deep voice comparable to the late Barry White's. He appeared very much at ease, used gentle gestures during the interview process, and he demonstrated a conversational ability that could transcend beyond his academic environment. He said, *"I mean, I like to draw a lot. Emmm, play basketball. That's it, as far as hobby wise. Besides go to school, I really don't do too much of anything else. I go to church on Tuesdays.... Other than that, I'm at home"*.

Participant 5

This seventh grader confidently says of himself: *"I'm 13. I'm short. And, I got, I make good grades. A-B Honor Roll, but I'm putting forth the effort to make "A" Honor Roll.* He was also a football player at his school.

Participant 6

She is a 13-year old eight grader who described herself as a nice person. After staying in trouble during her sixth grade year, she proclaimed her mission as: *"I want to try to be a better person so I can better myself in life."*

Participant 7

This eight grader likes to play basketball and football, and he made the football team at his school. He conveys a quiet, easy going demeanor, and explained that he was born and raised in the research city, moved to the West Coast, and back to the research city.

Participant 8

As a seventh grader, this 13-year old participant was quite eager to be a part of this research. Apparently, she has had some disciplinary issues in the past and says this of herself: *"I can have an attitude when I want to. (laugh) You know that. (laugh) And ummm.... sometimes I can be, I could be good/nice when I have to and not have an attitude when I want to. Well, most of the times, I'm, I'm nice as I am (laugh). I just wanna be in my world. I just do wanna be at home sometimes."* On her "happy days" she says of her friends, *"I just be like, 'Hey!' They be like, 'You so loud!' I be like, 'I'm*

sorry. I'm, I'm just happy today.' I don't wanna be mean. I don't wanna be like really loud, loud, emm. That's how school is supposed to be.... Then when I'm happy, I be like (giggling), I be ghetto, I be like: "Hey Ms..., Hey Ms....., Ms...

Participant 9

When this participant walked in for the interview session, she had a smile that radiated across the room. She is a cheerleader on her school team and is on the A-B Honor Roll. She also comes from a family of eight, and expressed her church affiliations proudly.

Participant 10

This tall participant stated that he was a starter on the football team as a wide receiver. *"I got O.K grades. ...I respect my elders.... My mother told me that my days will be shorter if I disrespect my elders."*

Participant 11

This interview was particularly memorable because it occurred on the participant's 13th birthday. Now in the sixth grade, he mentioned that he had attended 3 different schools in the system and now resides with his granddad, because his mother kept moving. He said of himself, *"Uhhh, I like to eat. I like Candy. Ummmm, I like to play games. I like shoes, clothes, everything I can wear, see, or touch."* He is also into football and basketball.

Participant 12

She is in her 12th year as a social studies teacher. She described her experience as a middle school teacher as "very challenging".

Participant 13

A single parent of three, ranging from 13–30 years old. This participant came across as well-educated, and she spoke with strong convictions. *"Ummm, ummm, Basically I come from a very large household, and my, umm, mentality was that having been corporately punished as a youngster growing up, I use alternative methods...."* However, she expressed regrets about not using corporal punishment on her kids.

Participant 14

An expectant mother of two, this participant has a paralegal background and has just recently moved to the research city. She expressed doubts about the school system, and conveyed her displeasure with some staff members at the school.

Participant 15

This participant graduated from college in 1969 with a degree in Applied Sciences. She worked in the clerical field for 26 years. She's now a retired state worker, and holds a part time job at a big retail chain. She is also very active in her church and spends time involving herself in her granddaughter's education.

Participant 16

After arriving in Alabama from another Southern state a couple of years ago, participant 16 describes the city as “...a pretty good place to live”. He spoke in a captivating, crisp, clear tone, and mentions his appreciation for his new home. He spends lots of time advocating for his daughter.

Participant 17

She is a 35 year old mother of two. She has two middle school children who are “almost teenagers”. She describes herself as a homemaker, and she professed her interest in getting her own business dealing with interior designing and catering.

Participant 18

She has lived in the area most of her life and enjoys the school and the community. She volunteers at the school and takes interest in not just her own children, but also on other kids at the school, “...I ask them how do they feel when they have good days or bad days”.

Participant 19

With a quite, sweet sounding voice and personality, this participant has seen all her three daughters go through the same middle school in the city school system. After working in a major corporate industry for many years, she now enjoys her time as a grandmother, and her role as a homemaker. With her husband of 25 years, they had also spent some time living abroad where their children were born.

Participant 20

He is an ordained Baptist minister and a 28 year veteran teacher, most of that time as a social studies teacher. He described himself as an only child who was raised by “strict parents”. All his four relatives are also retired teachers. “I love to see young people advance”, he said.

Participant 21

This is an eighth grader who enjoys football. He also likes to spend time with his grandma whom he said teaches him “...guidance to do right everyday”.

Participant 22

She is a 15 year veteran social studies teacher. She described her current position as her second career. She’s also a doctoral student, and a mother of two children.

Participant 23

He is a 52-year old black male. He has been an educator for 26 years, spanning grades 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8. He described himself as a Christian and, “...believe that there is good and bad in everyone.”

Participant 24

This special education teacher is in her early years of teaching, and she works with student organizations at her school. She's also a wife, and mother of a middle school student.

Participant 25

At the time of interview, this social studies teacher is currently in her third year of teaching. She had been involved in character education and was instrumental in getting a \$250 grant for her school towards the character education program they had at that time, which involved grades 3, 6, 7, and 8.

Participant 26

Participant 26 is a science teacher. However, she is the coordinator of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) at her school, and therefore has insight on the activities related to their character education. She attended the same school as a student and has been teaching there for about 13 years. Ironically, she was very nervous during the interview, and I had to reassure her regarding the process.

Participant 27

This teacher was tall and dressed in a pant suit when I called her in for the interview. She was all business during the process as she spoke vividly about activities that take place in her classroom. She spoke passionately about the global implications and challenges facing African American students.

Participant 28

At about 6'3" and about 250 pounds, with an affable personality to match, participant number 28 easily stands out in any crowd. He is a youth minister, church organizer, preacher, in charge of his church's College Mission, social worker, and now a substitute teacher for his school's In-School Detention (ISD), and considers himself "experienced". His goals include tracing his family tree, and at the age of 40 he is also going back to get two Master's degrees in post-secondary education and a Fifth-year teaching degree in mathematics. He sees teaching as his "...calling".

Participant 28

This 30 year veteran teacher has been at her current position and school as the seventh grade social studies teacher for the past 12 years. She has previously taught at the high school level where she taught various grade levels.

Participant 30

When I was first introduced to this tall, middle-aged participant, for some reason he appeared familiar to me. I didn't know him, but he later said of himself, "...I'm a deacon at my church, and emmm I love to read, play basketball, and walk, you know, and emmm, just basically the type of guy who just likes to have fun you know, and emmm do spiritual stuff, you know." His two kids are both professionals in their fields and one holds a Ph.D.

Participant 31

This participant describes herself as coming from a close family. She has over 22 years combined in education as teacher and administrator. Much of her drive could be traced to her formative school years where she proudly recalled, "...we were taught by educators who were the *"Crème de la Crème"* of the teaching profession". As an administrator, participant number 31 is an eloquent speaker, detail oriented, multi-tasker, and very passionate about children. She has also travelled extensively around the globe. She loves reading professional materials and encourages her staff to rise above the challenges of teaching poor and urban students.

Participant 32

She is a product of the school system and currently an administrator in the same school system. She taught middle school for seven years, has taught grades fifth through seven, and in is her fourth year as an administrator.

Participant 33

An extraordinary 62-year old African American administrator, he spoke of the challenges facing the students' with an urgent tone. He has worked at many levels in education and once headed a Blue Ribbon high school with 1,465 students. He describes himself as, "...a spoke in the wheel" and attributed the credits for his success as an administrator to his staff.

Participant 34

This young school leader does not believe in any excuses for himself, his staff, or the students. He is currently in his fourth year as a principal.

Participant 35

In describing herself, this participant stated: "*I am from a family of eight siblings all of whom are college graduates from a four year college or university. Education was stressed in my household. I was repeatedly told as a child that a mind is a terrible thing to waste, and knowledge is power. Also, that power is success*". She has about 10 years of administrative experiences in elementary and middle school settings.

Participant 36

As a 12 year veteran in educational administration, this participant has won several professional and personal awards. He conveys a very energetic, focused, and successful personality.

Participant 37

With 10 years at the research site as a counselor, she was also a career tech teacher at a high school for nine years. "...I decided to go back to school to become a counselor; I wanted to help children," she proudly proclaimed. She oversees programs at her school that could be termed character building programs, such as the Beta Club.

Participant 38

With degrees in real estate, a Jurist Doctorate, two Master's degrees, a Class "B" Type "19", and a Superintendent's/Principal Certification Type "38" degrees, this participant was not just a school counselor, but a walking history of her school and community. In 1968, she started as the first Black teacher in a white school. She also attended this same research site as a student. She re-called how she and the students at the school felt the vibrations of a church bombing at this school during the Civil Rights Movement.

Participant 39

This participant has been a counselor for nine years at her current school. "I come from a long line of educators.... I fought going into education for years, and then finally I stopped fighting against the blessing and just went on and accepted my calling...." She feels blessed with her role as a counselor.

Participant 40

The initial dream job for this participant was to be a fashion designer. She says she is "...an active Christian", and has spent 10 years as a Family Involvement Coordinator. She runs a program at her school that takes students around the city to expose them to communities outside their environment.

Participant 41

This is another participant who attended the research site as a student. She still lives in the community and serves the school in various volunteer roles, sometimes as a classroom or main office substitute. Her children also attended the same research site. She described herself as an "...advocate of community service", and she is heavily involved in her church activities. She spoke fluently of her views on the topic of character education.

Participant 42

At about 60 years of age, participant 42 has been working as a janitor for 14 years at the same middle school. He has witnessed student behavior extensively and has also worked with various administrators. He sees an issue with the lack of male role models for the students, "...the only thing they have is lady role-models and they have that at home, and they come here and they see the same thing. So, the influence, the male influence is not there...."

Participant 43

He served nine years as a military police officer and platoon leader. He is currently a 21-year veteran of the police department. One of his vivid memories was being shot at almost daily in his squad car as he patrolled the neighborhood surrounding one of the research sites. He recalled on rare occasions wondering what could be wrong when shots were not fired at him.

Participant 44

Also is on his 17th year active military duty. He has a Master's degree in public health and is currently a school nurse with the system.

Participant 45

I first saw this stakeholder when he came into the main office of the research site where I was gathering data. He said he came to check on his younger brother. I thought that was not only rare, but intriguing. True enough, he has had life experiences that parallel a lot of young inner city African American males. "... *I was a kid that was out there doing things and stuff like that. Most people thought I was a good kid, but I had skeletons in my closet...*" As he spoke, there was an unmistakable deep sense of concern in his tone for the direction of the students, or at least his brother.

Participant 46

She majored in secondary education and has been teaching for 21 years. She worked at the Youth Services Division for nine years for the socially and mentally abused children, ranging from ages 10 to 16 years of age.

APPENDIX H
SAMPLE TRANSCRIBED INTEVIEW

PARTICIPANT 20

PI:

Please start by telling me a little bit about yourself

PARTICIPANT 20:

I'm a native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania I'm an only child raised by strict parents. I have 4 relatives who are retired schoolteachers education has been a positive thing placed in my life early age. Fear God love God love my brother man. I love to see young people advance to become successful, productive individuals in our society

PI:

And you're also a preacher

PARTICIPANT 20:

Also an ordained Baptist minister

PI:

How long have you been teaching?

PARTICIPANT 20:

Uh...27 years going into a 28th year

PI:

Wealth of experience well how long do you feel like you've been involved in character education uh...programs, or activities or things like that...that you had to uh...things that you've been involved in?

PARTICIPANT 20:

I believe at my present school _____ we started character education about 10 years ago just about 10 years ago we would have it during homeroom session character development we called it and um...we had specific lessons that were to be taught to our students to help develop self esteem um...project goals um...how to interact with each other...how to solve discipline problems etc...

PI:

How would you personally how would you define character education?

PARTICIPANT 20:

Character education is the constructive development of educating a student in how to interact with his fellow students and prepare him or herself for higher levels of education and in our society they'd say um...let's say a tutelage program...a tutoring program to develop their skills to polish them up to let them be aware of what lies ahead in their development as an individual to make them a better person regardless of their socioeconomic conditions

PI:

I know you said you've been involved in character education for about 10 years but how often do you hear the term character education

PARTICIPANT 20:

You hear it when it becomes a hot topic as far as educators are concerned on higher levels when they see a problem in discipline and conduct um...um...not adhering to the code of conduct in school then you see the need for character development or character education and it's addressed accordingly

PI:

What do you think about character education personally?

PARTICIPANT 20:

I think it's essential in the development of all of our students even beginning in the elementary on the elementary level because it's a stair step development and by the time they reach middle school on into high school they become more aware of what is expected of them and how to conduct themselves properly

PI:

And see that's one of areas we're going to talk about a few more questions from now about how it could be applied differently but um...at your present school tell me some of the ways character education may have helped your school or the community um...if any?

PARTICIPANT 20:

Presently we haven't done a lot in character education, character development presently I believe about 4 years ago we had a fairly good program working with our students now we do have some mentoring programs at our school now that can be considered character development with young men and a couple going on with some young ladies but it's not a school wide thing it's only targeted to at risk teens or teens who have been involved in problems in our school and in the community that they're addressing their needs but a school wide program is not in existence at the moment

PI:

How do you about that though?

PARTICIPANT 20:

I think it's needed it's definitely needed it should be some time carved out as we had in prior years to address the things for all of the students instead of just at risk students. All students need to have this type of program in their lives through their school and also it can go in through the community, community centers and churches also, we have churches surrounding all of our schools that can interact with them it doesn't necessarily have to be on a religious basis but really to help development their skills and to let them know that there's a proper way to conduct yourself there is a way to carry yourself in such a respectful way to address how to address one another, yes sir, no sir, yes ma'am,

no ma'am you address your parents your posture your outlook on life even though it may be bleak at the moment there is a brighter day ahead so it's a lot involved in it...it's a total making a total package of the student

PI:

Um...As you know though the state mandated 15 minutes every day

PARTICIPANT 20:

Right

PI:

Now well if it's actually being implemented as such or not but it is supposed to be 15 minutes every day and um...do you see in your own experiences and your school do you see that 15 minutes mandated

PARTICIPANT 20:

15 or 50

PI:

15 minutes daily in the mornings do you

PARTICIPANT 20:

Oh! Okay

PI:

Do you see that being...?

PARTICIPANT 20:

I can say that it's addressed but I don't believe that it's addressed daily it is addressed within the classroom cause I'm speaking on my own behalf now I do address it but it's not something on a daily basis Monday thru Friday you might do it on a Tuesday, you might do it on a Wednesday and you might not do it again the rest of the week so no it's not addressed every day, because and one of the reasons because we just haven't been um...regimented to do it that way if ___ would say that we have to do it for 15 minutes then it would be done because other things pop up that supersede that at that particular moment on a particular day that you have to address and so that's why

PI:

And those are some of those things you mentioned may supersede would be things like...

PARTICIPANT 20:

A student uh...had a problem that you had to take care of personally, there may be an announcement going on the intercom that interfere with you conducting the class on that particular topic, um...um...teacher may be absent, something comes up that just veers you away from concentrating on that particular element on that particular day now if that had to be a part of the curriculum the curriculum each day then it will be addressed each day that way I think in a positive realm

PI:

You touched on this slightly about implementing character education from elementary onwards but how do you feel about implementing it a different way say in elementary school than it would be in middle school than it would be in high school how do you feel about of course what I'm trying to understand is the middle school area so how...what can you tell me about that implementing character education

PARTICIPANT 20:

Middle school

PI:

In middle schools

PARTICIPANT 20:

I believe the middle school the middle school student is going through a period of transition he or she is discovering who they are what course they're going to take uh...their likes and dislikes their positive, negative aspects in life so the character development will be a molding point a launching point a foundation to build upon to give them self esteem to give them successful role models to allow them to see that others have been down the same path and that there is nothing new it's just has to be developed it has to be nurtured it has to be it

PARTICIPANT 20 CONT'D:

has to be shown to them in a way they can grasp and understand that this is what I need to do to go on and be successful and then they accept it prayerfully they accept this teaching this guidance and then you move on to high school where probably even more professional developed more role models brought into the school speaking to them on various topics and what have you to help them grow

PI:

I see but let me ask though do you see the way it is implemented right now in middle school do you see when character education is done that it is taking the points that you just mentioned

PARTICIPANT 20:

No

PI:

Into consideration say okay we're dealing with middle school students let's go straight to the point and talk to them about this...that...that during character programs

PARTICIPANT 20:

No we don't necessarily do that we don't get down to the grassroots we kind of dance around it to a degree uh...I believe the reason it is because you don't want to say anything that might be offensive to a student or that someone may take out of context and you have to be aware of your age bracket and what young people have been exposed to

um...in their own lives so sometimes you can't get to the grassroots of the problem right away

PI:

As you just mentioned you have to be careful the things you say the things you try to do less you may be accused of

PARTICIPANT 20:

Right

PI:

Of something or maybe sued that's a valid fear isn't it

PARTICIPANT 20:

Yes

PI:

Of being sued or maybe being complained a complaint being sent about

PARTICIPANT 20:

You're really trying to help them but we live in a society now that people are devious in their motives to...I wouldn't use the word safeguard but at the same time negate whatever the issue might be I don't want to hear it so I'm going to say that you said this and take it out of context to a degree and it's twisted around and you have a tornado and it tears up all the good work

PI:

This is the question that I try to kind of get at what people are thinking in their mind we've all probably sat in those programs whatever program it is that's going on and our mind is wondering about stuff so tell me maybe of any thoughts during one of the character education programs any particular thought that you might have had

PI CONT'D:

or maybe a thought that you always have during any of those programs

PARTICIPANT 20:

I believe I always thought that the programs are useful but you don't see the immediate successes the positives that they're making I believe it takes a time a duration of time for this to happen for nine months if you're teaching character development you may see some changes some positive changes in some students during the course of nine months but in the long haul it might be until they're in the 11th grade, 12th grade that boom! Now hey! This thing has been working so it's probably a four or five year process of development before this actually takes place now I'm talking about eight grade so when they leave me and go to the 10th grade that's a whole new world you know and so they're fighting for identity, and freshman and doing all these little things that high school kids do but at the same time they're still developing their character hopefully that programs that they have in high school are working in a positive way to build them up so that you

can see this as a viable, academic curriculum within the school system that's being used on a daily basis to help develop our kids

PI:

What can schools and communities do together to implement an effective character education program?

PARTICIPANT 20:

We need more involvement by parents in our schools to help teachers, administrators whether this storm we have of discipline, lack of motivation, of respect for authority, the dressing and even the morals some of the morals of our young people you know you say things to them to try and help them but at the same time they don't understand it because they're seeing something or someone else do something on television or in the community that looks like they're successful but it's taken them in a wrong direction and to be honest with you they're listening to the wrong voice or voices.

PI:

So there seems to be competing

PARTICIPANT 20:

Right

PI:

There seems to be competing voices you know you're telling them one thing

PARTICIPANT 20:

Right

PI:

They're hearing another or doing another

PARTICIPANT 20:

Right

PI:

Particularly your school how does your school work with the community uh...in implementing character education programs at your school?

PARTICIPANT 20:

I think we have um...we have um...

Interruption

PI:

So we talked about what school and communities do and I think the question I was asking was how does your school currently work with the community?

PARTICIPANT 20:

We have a mentoring program through some professionals in our community who come in and deal with character development with our young men and most of these are at risk young men remember this now then we have um...what is that thing called again adopted the school adopters

PI:

School Adopters

PARTICIPANT 20:

The school adopters who come in also and work with our young people um...our principal um...has scheduled numerous motivational speakers to come in for our young people to speak about character development at various times intervals during the school year so it's addressed but it's not addressed in the classroom as much as it's addressed for the school wide presentation the assembly program let me put it that way

PI:

How are decisions made at your school regarding what character education program is implemented um...in other words?

PARTICIPANT 20:

I believe it comes from our principal from the top it comes down to the teachers whatever has been given to her by the board then we you know

PI:

How do you feel about that?

PARTICIPANT 20:

I think it's good sometimes you know a teacher or teachers might get together and come up with something that might be a little bit more creative as you mentioned earlier that might be more appealing to the students our students want to be entertained it's a mentality that they have now so if they're entertained challenged but entertained they do better than to just have a questions and answer type activity and uh...get them involved with some things get them involved with it so I think that's uh...it's works better that way um...but we haven't as teachers had the freedom to do that on a regular basis no

PI:

And as you mentioned if you can get maybe teachers or more people involved to plan it... it could get creative and be it because you have more voices speaking to what may be the students want

PARTICIPANT 20:

Right I think and also involves the students asking them what you think would be more conducive for you to understand it and learn this particular um...aspect of education through character development I think getting

PARTICIPANT 20 CONT'D:

the students involved is very important

PI:

You talked earlier about the lack of discipline, disrespect to authority uh...the dressing and these are character issues that middle school students manifest um...any other aspect of students character in the middle school that concern you?

PARTICIPANT 20:

I think the openness of students to express their sexual desires the continuous activity of a few to bully or intimidate other students openly the

PI:

Openly

PARTICIPANT 20:

The total lack of respect for authority from the principal down to the janitorial staff its' become a problem that is um...deteriorating the morale of the workers within our school and the only way it can be addressed is by the principal and the parents and teachers working together to discipline these kids or at least talk to them and work in a plan that's going to make it better it can only get worse

PI:

And you just really answered my next question why those issues concern you cause you just mentioned the morale

PARTICIPANT 20:

Morale

PI:

If those things continue

PARTICIPANT 20:

It becomes a burden on the teacher and he or she may come to school every day with a positive attitude at least trying to do his or her best in the classroom to educate the children and the problem is still there it has not been elevated has not been addressed in any way

PI:

Let me ask you this someone comes to you and says Doc you're in charge of character education now how would you implement a character education program at your school?

PARTICIPANT 20:

I would take a block of time if it's the 15 minute period of time and each teacher would sit down I would start in a group with the whole group all of the teachers to ask for suggestions, to ask for lessons that they could develop along with students involvement that we could implement within the classroom on a daily basis for that 15 minutes to help our students develop better character education and I believe that would be a successful positive entity within the development of kids we're dealing with not just African-American children we also have Hispanic, we have Caucasian children also and it's a melting pot as America is we all learn together we learn from each other just like country if you go to other countries you learn their culture you learn the language you learn the dress we work together and learn how to become better people better people better young people

PARTICIPANT 20:

and negate some of this negativity that persists within our classrooms and mannerisms

PI:

Who do you feel should be responsible for teaching good character to our middle school students?

PARTICIPANT 20:

I think the parents should start off it starts at the home it starts with the parents now I would say it also falls on the shoulders of the church if the student if the child is involved in a church they should be able to teach they should be teaching good character I...

PI:

Well you know not to give my own personal opinion because I'm supposed to be objective but that's what churches do anyway right

PARTICIPANT 20:

Yeah

PI:

That what churches

PARTICIPANT 20:

That's what churches are supposed to be doing

PI:

Okay you may know more about that than I do so I'm going to backup

PARTICIPANT 20:

They should be doing it

PI:

I'm going to backup on that

PARTICIPANT 20:

You're right

PI:

So but definitely the parents and as one participant told me we're only with them eight hours a day you get them for the rest of that time that was what one of my participants said

PARTICIPANT 20:

Every Sunday at my church before I do the benediction before the do the announcements I tell the parents make sure your child picks up a book, a newspaper, take them to the library make sure they're doing something educational every day for these two months so that when they go back to school in August they will not go back cold but will be excited about learning because they've been learning on their own scale doing something positive than watching television we're dealing with that internet and getting involved in things that can be destructive

PI:

Good luck with that

PARTICIPANT 20:

But I do it, but if you don't say it nobody will address it now I had some thoughts maybe next year with my church to set up a mentoring program for the summer for those two months to get our people to get our young people and others from other churches to come in just like you do with the Y but that's something that has to be developed you know

PI:

Well what role if any does the environment or community play in how students at your school behave?

PARTICIPANT 20:

They adopt the characteristics of the environment association brings on assimilation when they see disruptive young people in the community when they see their own brothers and sisters being disruptive at home and nothing being done then they take on sometimes the attitude well I'm going to be disruptive too I'm going to be disrespectful too or I can use profanity I can wear my clothes this way and I can talk down to the teacher and do all these things and nothing is going to be done because she did it and he did it so I'm going to do it so they're only emulating what they see

PI:

And we have to provide a counter balance

PARTICIPANT 20:

Right

PI:

To that by making sure we show them examples of

PARTICIPANT 20:

Positive

PI:

Not just positive examples...examples of consequences right

PARTICIPANT 20:

Oh Yeah! There are some consequences for every action you know

PI:

There's and equal

PARTICIPANT 20:

There's an equal opposite reaction so now if you do this and it's wrong then it has to be some consequences you're going to have to pay

PI:

Is there anybody else you may recommend that I can talk to that may give me some insight about character education and middles school students you can think about that later you can give me a call?

PARTICIPANT 20:

You're talking about another teacher, educator

PI:

Anybody

PARTICIPANT 20:

I tell you talk to Mr. _____ he's over at _____

PI:

Oh! You know what yeah okay good I would love to speak to Mr. _____ any way oh this is his new number okay good, good you need to put this on your phone before you lose it

PARTICIPANT 20:

I was going to call him to eat lunch today if I can catch him, but I don't know if I'm going to be able to catch him I don't know what's he's doing

PI:

Look when you see him please extend my sincere and full greetings to him

PARTICIPANT 20:

No doubt

PI:

Anything else you would like to add man tell me about character education in middle school students?

PARTICIPANT 20:

I think it's a worthwhile entity we need to address it on a positive way as quickly as possible before we see some detrimental...detrimental effects of not having good character development or a character development plan in our school system...system wide

PI:

Well thank you this concludes our interview

End of Transcription

APPENDIX I
NVIVO8 CODED THEMES AND QUOTES

Themes	Sources	Total Refer-ences	Quotes
Lost in Translation			
<i>Varied Definitions</i>	23	34	<p>“How I act” “A person that does his work” “like your personality wise” “It’s based on your attitude” “How men should treat women” “Inside out job”</p>
<i>Unfamiliarity with Terminology</i>	20	43	<p>“What’s that?” “What’s <i>characteristics</i> programs?” “I haven’t heard the two words together” “I’m not aware of” “Character education. What you mean in specific, what?”</p>
Belief on Importance			
<i>A sense of Urgency</i>	32	113	<p>“schools should do more” “They tend not to have any fear of consequences” “who wants an insane genius?” “they are soulless” “it’s horrible”</p>
<i>Rotten in the Middle</i>	28	83	<p>“because they disrupting my education” “bringing knives to school” “they just do what they want to do” “always want to push people around” “bully and want to start fights” “their lack of consciousness”</p>
<i>Rotten at Home</i>	28	88	<p>“most kids act the way they live” “their parents don’t really care” “stop all the cursing” “not raised by a man”</p>
Effectiveness Uncertainties			
<i>Informal Character Educ.</i>	37	83	<p>Displays Signs “one upstairs that’s yellow” “al them posters and things” “like my mother told me”</p>
<i>Uncertain immediate Impact</i>	29	64	<p>“No” “It’s not really like they’re gonna do it” “um...a little bit” “It’s somewhat like a war” “It’s kind of like a 20%”</p>
<i>Heavy Emphasis on Academic Im- provement</i>	14	26	<p>“educational limitations” “It’s the timing” “so many other issues” “other this pop up” “NCLB”</p>
Support			
<i>But-in Lacking</i>	24	85	<p>“Uh...I say the principal” “lack of communication” “once 3 o’clock comes I’m off the clock” “Community centers and churches” “people are devious”</p>
<i>Disconnect in Practice</i>	24	58	<p>“character reward banner” “just lack of knowledge” “When it becomes a hot topic” “15 minutes daily” “No, we don ‘t necessarily do that”</p>

APPENDIX J

SAMPLE CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Birmingham Cultural Alliance Program (B-CAP)

B-CAP is a free after-school program at MS-2 that aims to expose students (also has a parental component) to the positive aspects of the city. The students are taken on field trips that include attending City Council meetings, Board of Education meetings, and various trips to other interesting areas of the city that they may not otherwise be able to see. They also participate in hands-on activities that augment the school curriculum. Students have to maintain good grades and behavior to participate in the program.

Breakfast Club

As the title suggests, the Breakfast Club brings students and possible mentors to the schools in the mornings for breakfast and discussions.

Call Me Young Lady

A brochure at MS-2 claims that this program provides young girls (ages 10-14) with the proper guidance to become successful teenagers/young adults through character development. The young ladies in this program were often seen dressed in various roles. At one of their meetings, I observed them (about ten middle school girls) in a room decorated in pink, wearing pink pajamas, surrounded by pink flowers and various other decorations as they sat in a circle having their discussion.

Campfire

At MS-1, this program separates groups of boys and girls as they discuss topics that impact their lives.

Conflict Resolution

As the name suggests, this program at MS-2 is used to address issues that generate conflict amongst students and ways to resolve them.

Junior Achievement

This program purports to bring the real world to the students. Professionals from various industries and careers go to the schools to discuss their careers and what steps students need to take to achieve similar success.

Linking the Interest of Families and Teachers (LIFT)

LIFT is a program that brings at-risk school-age children and adolescent girls together once a week to discuss various challenges and issues they face on a daily basis.

Note: This is a list and explanations provided by the schools. It is safe to say that there are disparities between what the schools believe they could achieve with character education, what they say they do with the programs listed above, and the activities they actually initiate using those programs.

APPENDIX K
RIGOUROUS DATA COLLECTION AND STUDY SHEET

May 5, 2008: I attended a school system-wide D.A.R.E program. It is usually held once a year, and I took that opportunity to begin generating a concept strategies for this study and to gain a perception of how others in the system feel about the topic of students' behavior.

June 5, 2008: I paid a visit to the seventh grade social studies teachers at MS-1. I also had conversations with the reading teacher regarding her possible involvement in the research.

June 6, 2008: I visited MS-1's assistant principal to discuss research steps and protocol as it would pertain to his site.

June 10, 2008: I place several phone calls to MS-1's eight grade social studies teacher to ascertain his participation and schedules so that we could continue preliminary regarding various aspects of the research at his school.

June 30 - July 2, 2008: I travelled to New York where I attended the "Smart & Good Schools: Helping your Students Do Their Best Work and Do the Right Thing" conference at the State University of New York College at Cortland. I met with Dr.'s Thomas Lickona and Mathew Davidson, noted authors and proponents of character education. I sought their input regarding my research topic on character education as it pertains to middle schools.

July 15, 2008: I discussed with the special education teacher from MS-2 on her views on character education and enquired if she would be willing to participate in the study.

August 25, 2008: I contacted principals and other gate-keepers at the three re-search sites regarding additional list of participants.

September 9, 2008: All point persons/gate-keepers were contacted regarding the participant list they provided.

September 11, 2008: I received a green light from my committee to begin full scale data collection in preparation for a deadline for a working session.

September 16, 2008: I visited the administrator at MS-1 for discussions on the re-search.

September 19, 2008: I met with my cohort group for strategy session.

September 24, 2008: I contacted more participants at MS-1 to participate in the study.

September 26, 2008: The first preliminary transcribed interview is ready, and I started going through it and made various notations regarding coding.

September 29, 2008: I contacted more participants at MS-3.

October, 2008: I began full scale data collection.

November 16, 2008. I met again with our cohort group for peer review and strategy session to discuss emergent themes in our studies.

December 7, 2008: I conducted a focus group with some of the participants on their views on students' behavior and their view of character education programs at their school, and I presented them with preliminary emergent themes on the study.

December 14, 2008: I met again with my cohort members for a peer review sessions to assess emergent data, discuss the direction of our various studies.

January 10, 2009: Our cohort group met again for a peer review meeting at UAB's School of Education technology conference room. We discussed coding patterns, reviewed emergent themes and data analysis.

January 19, 2009: The cohort group held a peer review conference call to discuss strategies for data analysis and reporting.

February 2, 2009: Group meeting on revisions and further data analysis on Chapters 4 and 5.

February 8: Conference call to discuss possible revisions and theme changes that could result from new findings during data analysis.

February 16, 2009: Group discussion and emails on peer review of Chapters 4 and 5.

February 17, 2009: Email received from cohort member regarding a review of the entire document.

February 18, 2009: Emails and text messages regarding our Chapter 4 and emergent themes.

February 19, 2009: Detailed phone conversations on creating models for the recommendations made for practitioners.

APPENDIX L

SAMPLE PEER REVIEW COMMUNICATION

Please Examine Chapters 4 and 5

Saturday, February 21, 2009 12:31 PM

From: "Emeka Nzeocha" <.....@yahoo.com>

Add sender to Contacts

To: "Chuck Willis" <.....@yahoo.com>

Cc: "Barry Wilson" <.....@walkercountyschools.com>

Message contains attachments

CHAPTER 1 2 3 4 5 02 23 2009.pdf (1532KB)

Guys,

I am attaching my entire document for a quick peer review. Please check it for theme relationships, data analysis relationships, and any linkage you may find to literature that I have not discussed in the document as of yet.

Barry, I hope those points on your recommendations helped. Send me the entire Chapter 5 again so that I could look at your model and how you reorganized the Chapter and compare it to mine.

I have looked at Chuck's. Barry, I need to see if your thoughts on his document are the same as mine. I came up with 1 issue that he might want to re-check. In Chapter 5, he summarized his findings. I am not sure, but I feel like he needed to add 1 more sub topic on that chapter, such as how principals feel they could achieve success without NCLB.

Aside from those, my friend, I like the reporting of your findings in Chapter 4. I like the quote you used on the theme "Administrative Roles/Responsibilities" : "I am the lawyer, doctor, Indian chief, and everything that goes with it. I am the instructional leader. I'm professional development. I'm the custodian. I'm parent-involvement. I manage the office. I do it all. I'm a little of everything".

Check the quotes on mine also, because I think the quote selection gives the theme more clarity.

Later, guys.

Emeka