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**A PRINCIPAL'S PERCEPTIONS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION IN A RURAL
PUBLIC SCHOOL**

by

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Abstract

A PRINCIPAL'S PERCEPTIONS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION IN A RURAL PUBLIC SCHOOL

Sandra H. Harrison

Old Dominion University, 2011

Committee Chairperson: Dr. Karen Sanzo

A majority of rural public schools face difficult and challenging problems: geographical isolation, escalating crime, impoverished families, economic inequities, faculty nonretention, declining enrollments, and lack of success in meeting accreditation benchmarks. In the past decade, support for character education as a valuable pedagogy to complement instruction and academic achievement emerged. The obligation to meet federal and state standards created expectations that school principals have the leadership ability to facilitate strong academic curricula as well as programs fostering students' moral development through character education. Mobilizing resources for character education initiatives becomes the responsibility of school principals or their designees. The purpose of this study was to investigate a principal's perceptions of character education and implementation of such programs in a rural public school, located in a state requiring character education pedagogy. The case study revealed the principal's perceptions of character education, how they affected leadership and decision making for program implementation, and the perceived relationship between character education and student achievement. A triangulated protocol employed the critical incident technique, vignettes, interviews, site observations, a focus group, and review of documents to illuminate the inquiry questions. Results provided insights about character education

through discernment of the attitudes and beliefs of the principal who facilitated leadership and implementation of character education pedagogy in the school.

This dissertation is dedicated to all children, who deserve only the best programs and pedagogy in their educational journey. It is also for school administrators and teachers who will continue to love and share their instructional expertise with children to enhance their moral and character development for lifelong success.

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Chapter I

Introduction

For more than 200 years, an essential part of children's education was to teach these future citizens to be responsible and caring individuals. The nation's schools have emphasized character development by modeling and teaching ethics, morals, and values. In the early 20th century, philosopher and educator John Dewey believed the moral development of students to be vital to the mission of any educational institution (Dewey, 1934). Later research by Lickona and Davidson (2005) recognized the importance of providing the elements of social, emotional, ethical, and academic character development "into every aspect of the school culture and curriculum" (p. 2).

As society changed, however, the nation's schools increasingly withdrew participation in such educational goals and pursuits. Since the 1960s, educational policymakers have struggled with what should be taught in schools and have incorporated pedagogical techniques and strategies based on academic achievement and standardized test scores. Spears (1973) conducted a survey and asked members of Phi Delta Kappa, an educational honorary society, for their views on the best goals for public schools. They responded with the following rankings: "1) develop skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening; 2) develop pride in work and feeling of self worth, and 3) develop good character and self-respect" (Spears, 1973, pp. 29-32). Although educators believed that character education was essential for student development, communicating and teaching the social, moral, and character growth of students was ignored in the school environment (Nucci, 1986).

Lickona (1993) maintained that the decline of character education in schools was influenced by various factors diminishing curriculum implementation. Those factors were based on the

emphasis of academic achievement and standardized test scores, individual rights and self-fulfillment over personal responsibility in the 1960's that undermined moral authority, marriage, and parenting and provided a powerful blow to schools. Positivism could be proven scientifically, and values, feelings, and personal expression could not; the pluralism of America, the secularization of the public arena, and debates regarding church and state, in addition to the question of what and/or whose values should be taught created political barriers for consensus to provide any type of character education in the public schools. Therefore, public schools removed their positions and participation in fostering the moral and character development of its [*sic*] student populations. (Lickona, 1993, p. 2)

With the social, moral, and character development of students essentially ignored, a movement to change that philosophy emerged (Lickona, 1993). In the 1970s, two character education methodologies appeared under the title of values education: values clarification and the moral dilemma. Values clarification focused on helping students have freedom to choose without enforcement. The moral dilemma technique evolved from the work of Kohlberg and Turiel (1971) who studied Piaget's models of moral judgment and cognitive development in children. Kohlberg and Turiel proposed that moral thinking was based on six stages consisting of three levels of moral reasoning, each being more substantive than the former. The model centered on discussing problems needing ethical solutions; moral thought processes focused on a "dilemma" promoted

abilities to judge a value better than another, which fostered moral development acumen. Nevertheless, Lickona maintained that the values clarification model and Kohlberg and Turiel's theory provided benefits to enhance students' moral development and character formation, even though neither model had factored in the impact of the school environment and its role as a societal entity for children

In 1987, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) proposed to the United States Department of Education a project titled *Building Character in the Public Schools*. The project goal focused on having school boards across the country "heighten the awareness of the importance of character development in local public schools to the continued success and stability of American society; and encourage the establishment and improvement of character development programs in public elementary and secondary schools" (NSBA, 1987, p. 2).

This proposal highlighted a realization that academic excellence and character development were not isolated from, but complementary to, each other (Wynne & Walberg, 1985).

Character education is founded on teaching children the virtues of honesty, integrity, fairness, caring, kindness, respect, and generosity. Lickona (1992), a leading proponent of character education, defined character as "an emphasis and intentional, proactive effort to instill ethical values of respect for self and others, responsibility, integrity, and self-discipline into every aspect of the school day" (p. 1). Milson (2002) maintained that character is "the long term process of helping young people develop good character...and acting upon core ethical values" (p. 2), and Lickona (1991) insisted that character education must consist of "operative values—values in action" (p. 51).

Character education pedagogy comprises a myriad of titles: social-emotional learning, school-based prevention, citizenship education, and moral development. Each descriptor embraces the overarching goal of fostering positive, moral, social, and civic development of K-12 children. The descriptor used in this research study is character education. Character education constitutes a program, method, or virtuous trait purposely promoted with the goal of teaching moral and character behavior through the influence of teachers and peers; the program involves the use of problem-solving techniques, self-control, high expectations for academic excellence, conflict mediation programs, and encouragement of positive attitudes with peers and the school through the educational environment (What Works Clearinghouse [WWC], 2006; Williams & Schnaps, 1999). All character education events, activities, and curricular programs, including relationships with teachers and school leaders are developed for students to be the ultimate benefactors of those initiatives. Programs may address absenteeism, discipline problems, relational aggression, and academic achievement while supporting moral and ethical values for development of positive character development with K-12 students across the nation.

Dismayed by the moral decline indicated by student behavior, educational institutions wrestled with how to implement character education into the school environment, especially with federal and state requirements for academic accreditation. Implementation of character education programs into the educational environment created tension for several reasons: (a) daily challenges faced by educational institutions, (b) time constraints, (c) type of program implemented, (d) training for effective program implementation, (e) level of importance to be placed on character education, and (f) pressures to meet federal and state accreditation requirements.

Controversial issues and numerous obstacles to effective implementation, including poor dissemination of character education information to practitioners and contentiousness among disagreeing proponents of character education (Berkowitz, 1997), contributed to the diversity of program implementation. Differences in operational definitions and conceptual understanding of character education components produced confusion amongst educators (Dalton & Watson, 1997).

The popularity of character education for school curriculum implementation waxed and waned because of its regard as more of a practice than a science (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). With no clear definition, practice, or evaluation strategies, educators at all instructional levels continually perceived, integrated, and presented character education differently. Most of the debates surrounding character education did not focus on how school leaders should contend with character education but how to develop faculty to foster a positive character-based program (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008).

Educators implicitly impart values when selecting or excluding topics; insisting on certain answers' being correct; encouraging students to seek the truth of a matter; or establishing classroom routines, forming groups, enforcing discipline, or encouraging excellence. Educators mold certain forms of social life within schools and influence experiences of community and school membership. The character traits of moral development contribute to the day-to-day activities of school life (Byrk, 1988; Goodlad, 1992; Hansen, 1993; Strike, 1996); character development is fundamental and difficult to deny in educational pedagogy (Campbell, 2003; Hansen, 1993; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006).

Schools became concerned by students' lack of moral behavior and slowly began to incorporate character education curriculum into the educational environment, even when facing challenges of time, training, and implementation (Romanowski, 2005). Numerous schools across the nation implemented character education initiatives; therefore, accountability for such programs became an additional challenge in the selection of curriculum most conducive for meeting the intended goals, objectives, and needs for those student populations. Many studies have been conducted to determine the impact and effects of such character education initiatives in schools; however, comparison has been difficult because of the vast differences in programs. Nevertheless, empirical research determining the influences and effects of character education at all educational levels has increased and continued. Influencing any change in student behavior or moral reasoning depends on the assurance that the program meets the needs of the school community and that the individuals leading the program have the skills and resources to articulate and facilitate the initiative effectively (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). Educational institutions that choose character education initiatives but do not recognize the instructional programs and needs of the school environment or exhibit the leadership skills necessary to facilitate successful program implementation could possibly fail with regard to these fundamental associations.

The Partnerships in Character Education Program, PCEP, was established in 1994 through the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE). Since its inception, approximately 25 million dollars has been awarded to local agencies and states for the design and development of character education programs (National Center for Educational Evaluation [NCEE], 2009). By 2007, at least 28 states had encouraged or mandated

some form of character education for the public school environment (Roth-Herbst, Borberly, & Brooks-Gun, 2007).

The U.S. Department of Education developed a strategic plan titled the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002-2007). Its mission was to create an accountability system “to ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the nation” (NCLB, 2002, p. 2). Six goals were established:

1) Create a culture of achievement, 2) improve student achievement, 3) develop safe schools and strong character, 4) transform education into an evidence-based field, 5) enhance the quality of and access to postsecondary and adult education, and 6) establish management excellence. (NCLB, 2002, p. 3)

Goal three required “the development of safe schools and strong character with two objectives established for safe, disciplined, and drug-free educational environments that foster the development of good character and citizenship among our nation’s youth” (NCLB, 2002, p. 43). The government’s partnership with the states refocused the nation’s schools on being accountable for academic achievement while encouraging and nurturing sound character development for future citizens.

Following the lead of the federal government, the State of Virginia examined its own instructional curriculum and proceeded to encourage character education initiatives for its public schools. Virginia’s accountability system supported teaching and learning by setting rigorous standards known as the Standards of Learning (SOL), developed for annual assessments of student achievement. This accountability system continues to be part of a statewide program of support for the commonwealth’s public schools and school divisions. In implementing this program, the Virginia General Assembly aligned its

Virginia SOL initiative for high standards of academic achievement with character development for students.

The Virginia General Assembly amended the *Code of Virginia* (“Chapter 725,” 1998) to mandate character education instruction in the public schools. Character education included the following requirements:

Each school board shall establish, within its existing programs, a character education program in its schools. The purpose is to instill in students civic virtues and personal character traits to improve the learning environment, promote student achievement, reduce disciplinary problems, and develop civic-minded students of high character.

Classroom instruction may be used to supplement a character education program; however, each program shall be interwoven into the school procedures and environment and structured to instruct primarily through example, illustrations, and participation in such a way as to complement the Standards of Learning.

(“Character Education Required,” 2004, cc. 461, 484, 839)

In addition, the code required that character education programs address the “inappropriateness of bullying as defined in the school board’s student conduct policy guidelines” (Virginia Board of Education, 2005, § 22.1-279.6).

Consequently, to provide an initiative emphasizing character development criteria as stated by the Code of Virginia’s Character Education Standards of Learning (2004), character education programs may include the basic character traits:

- (1) Trustworthiness, including honesty, integrity reliability, and loyalty; (2) respect, including precepts of the Golden Rule, tolerance, and courtesy; (3)

responsibility, including hard work, economic self-reliance, accountability, diligence, perseverance, and self-control; (4) fairness, including justice, consequences of bad behavior, principles of nondiscrimination, and freedom from prejudice; (5) caring, including kindness, empathy, compassion, consideration, generosity, and charity, and (6) citizenship, including patriotism, respect for the American flag, concern for the common good respect for authority and the law, and community mindedness. (“Character Education Required,” 2004, cc. 461, 484, 839)

Additionally, the character education requirement for Virginia’ schools provided assistance from its school boards in the following ways:

Practices designed to promote the development of personal qualities that will improve family and community involvement in the public schools in the way of resources and technical assistances to school divisions regarding successful character education programs; (i) identify and analyze effective character education programs and practices; (ii) collect and disseminate among school divisions information regarding such program and practices and potential funding and support services, and resources supporting professional development for administrators and teachers in the delivery of any character education programs. (“Chapter 725,” 1998)

As the State of Virginia encouraged its schools to integrate the social, emotional, and ethical development of students into their curricula, character education became an intentional initiative for schools to implement and integrate into the educational schedule. Although the overall purpose and mission of character education is to nurture the moral

and character development of students, the implementation and integration of an additional educational program requires leadership from the school principal to facilitate the successful delivery of the program with faculty and students. Therefore, a principal's vision, beliefs, attitudes, and leadership emphasis on a character education program are factors for the success or demise of such pedagogical implementation, even with federal and state Standards of Learning expectations and requirements.

Horace Mann, a supporter of American educational reform, believed that developing a person's character was as important as academics and that teaching values would train and prepare students for occupational opportunities (Foner, 2006). The United States Congress concurred with these ideals and created the Partnership in Education Program in 1994, and with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 increased support for character education even more. NCLB purported that "character education is our shared responsibility." The legislation required that "character education be integrated into the curriculum [and provide professional development of teachers and technical assistance to local education agencies (LEAs) in implementing character education" (USDOE, 2006). The overarching goal was "to promote strong character and citizenship among our nation's youth," in addition to encouraging outreach to local communities and parents to communicate that a successful life is based on moral development of character (USDOE, 2002).

Even with federal, state, and local support for character education, however, there seems to be tension or consternation for school principals in making leadership decisions in support of character education's becoming an integral part of the school culture and environment because of the pressure and demands of standardized test scores and annual

accreditation requirements. This tension appears to be an unintended consequence of the NCLB Act of 2001 because the legislative mandates of character education, high-stakes testing, and school accreditation were all designed and developed to improve public school education for every student across the nation. With test scores and accreditation percentages measured annually, character education might be deemed important by the principal but viewed as an ancillary initiative because federal and state accountability demands possibly compromise the leadership emphasis on its implementation into the school environment.

Background of the Problem

Principals are decision makers regarding curriculum and implementation of instructional programs best suited for the student populations served by their schools. Not only is the school principal required to articulate the educational curriculum of a school by setting meaningful goals in basic math and writing skills; to encourage academic excellence; and to promote good work habits, self-discipline, personal growth, human relation skills, and moral values; he or she must also have the influence to organize resources and personnel to attain those goals. Of the standards adopted by the National Policy Board of Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2008), Standard Two requires an educational leader to

Promote the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth by encouraging the use of the most effective and appropriate technologies to support teaching and learning, while monitoring and evaluating the impact of the instructional program. (p. 1)

Standard Five requires an educational leader to

Promote the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner, promoting social justice and ensuring that individual student needs inform all aspect of school which model principles of self-awareness, reflective practice, transparency, and ethical behavior. (NPBEA, 2008, (p. 2)

For those reasons, a principal's goals, plans, and influence impact the success or demise of any curricular integration in a school, depending on the vision and implementation strategies mobilized by the institution's administrator. Subsequently, those decisions could possibly hinge on how much emphasis is placed on the character education program, the instructional pedagogy afforded within the school environment, and the challenges schools face with time constraints, professional development resources, and implementation efforts.

Equally important for any character program to be successful are the school, the school community, and the population served. The geographical location and socioeconomic status of the school community can be positive or problematic in how programs are employed depending on the perceived importance by the school principal. An impoverished district might be doing all it can to improve math and reading scores to meet state accreditation standards before emphasizing a character education program not easily measured, even though mandated by the state.

The nation's schools face difficult problems, and rural public schools have blatant concerns, especially with the cycle of low socioeconomic conditions and somewhat expected lack of success (Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000). According to Clark, Manifold, and Zimmerman (2007), low socioeconomic status plagues many rural schools in which at

least 45% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The myriad of problems afflicting rural schools and the lack of a clear definition regarding what constitutes a rural school district and its specific needs have impeded research in the field of rural education.

In 2003-2004, however, a combination of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and Census Bureau data resulted in a revision of code classifications that improved the definition of rural schools: “Rural areas are designated as those areas that do not lie inside an urbanized area or urban cluster” (USDOE, 2007a, p. 1). According to the USDOE, small rural schools are those schools with average daily attendance of fewer than 600 students, or districts in which all schools are located in counties with a population density of fewer than 10 people per square mile. Rural public school systems in the U.S. constitute more than half of all school districts and one third of all public schools, yet they enroll only one fifth of all public school students (Johnson & Strange, 2009).

A 2009 *Rural Policy Matters* editorial stated that more than “13 million children and adolescents attend school in rural communities and isolated towns. Of these, over nine million go to schools in communities with fewer than 2,500 people,” and “13.2 million rural students attend school in over 9,500 school districts, with an average enrollment of just under 1,400” (“High-Poverty Rural,” 2009, ¶¶ 1-3). Estimated data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2000) maintained that 37% of children in rural locations lived in poverty, representing a higher rate than the estimated poverty rate for most urban districts. In addition, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (USDOE, 2007a) and the database for funding under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act of 1965, also known as No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, reported that 70% qualified for federally subsidized meals at school, representing a rate slightly higher than the average rate for urban comparison districts.

In the State of Virginia, there are 134 school divisions, organized into 8 regions, with 36% of the schools designated as rural (Johnson & Strange, 2009). Student concerns such as fighting, school threats, smoking, and low graduation rates are a few of the many problems reported in the 2006 Virginia School Safety Survey results (VDCJS, 2007). Wallin and Reimer (2008) maintained that rural schools are typically plagued with instructional issues: isolation from specialized services, limited accessibility to quality staff development and university services, teacher shortages in math and science, decreasing enrollment that leads to decreased funding, and a declining pool of qualified administrative candidates (pp. 591-613). In addition, a high rate of poverty, as measured by free or reduced-price lunch data, and an elevated need to teach and serve the students academically and socially are complexities not only for the rural school communities but also for the superintendents of those school districts and the principals of those particular schools.

A rural school principal has multiple roles, sometimes serving as both superintendent and principal of a district while teaching, administering, and nurturing a comprehensive academic program to meet federal and state accreditation benchmarks. Other leadership responsibilities require the engagement of students in efforts to make their communities better through the provision of character education in the school environment that supports students' becoming thinking, moral, and contributing citizens. Therefore, any attempt to implement and integrate character education pedagogy that

enhances the moral and character development of students is equally important to understand.

Hence, the social and educational support for character education and its results for schools have encouraged further investigation of how principals perceive it and how those perceptions can increase or decrease the successful implementation of such programs in the rural school environment. It is important to understand a principal's perceptions of character education but equally essential to understand the leadership of these programs and their impact on student achievement in rural public schools, especially in a state that requires character education. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case design was to investigate and explore a principal's perceptions of character education and character education program implementation in a rural public school, in a state requiring such instructional programs.

The unit of analysis consisted of a purposefully selected K-12 rural public school principal from the State of Virginia. Yin (1994) stated that the

rationale for a single case design is the representative or typical case. The objective is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation. The case study may represent a typical "project" among many projects...or a representative school. The lessons learned from these cases are assumed to be informative about the experiences of the average person or institution. (p. 48)

Patton (2002) asserted that "purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (p. 230).

The selected school site was designated as a high-needs school with a proportion of 45% or more eligible for free or reduced-price lunch according to previous lunch program statistics. To investigate this topic, a qualitative single-case design approach was utilized to gain knowledge of a rural school principal's perceptions regarding personal attitudes and beliefs about the importance of implementing character education in the school. This emphasis, in particular, was explored because of the federal and state accountability Standards of Learning requirements for character education pedagogy. The investigation explored the leadership and decision-making process for mobilization of faculty and character education resources, in addition to the relationship of character education and student achievement. The results provide information about the principal's perceptions, in addition to the decision-making and leadership emphasis with regard to character education programming in the school environment. It was hoped that the study would also provide an understanding of a principal's conceptualization of character education in the school, its effect on implementation, and its relationship with student achievement in a rural public school environment, in a state mandating character education pedagogy.

Significance of the Study

According to the 2002 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth, a sampling of 12,000 high school students across the United States revealed that 74% admitted cheating, 38% had stolen items, and 43% believed one had to lie or cheat to get ahead, but 95% believed it important for people to be trustworthy (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2002). Ryan and Bohlin (1998) purported that character education programs with an infrastructure, a defined vision, goals, objectives, and values, involved personnel,

procedures for evaluation, and links to home, school, and community could achieve and provide a quality initiative for school populations. Equally important are individuals, actively engaged in the schools, modeling, teaching, guiding, and encouraging students to embrace character education strategies for better interpersonal skills (Shure, 1992).

Reynolds (1998) maintained that if some type of character program is promoted and practiced through the school curriculum, students' conduct difficulties and challenges can be mediated through the influx of character education. Identifying an appropriate program to match the community's concerns and issues and mobilizing resources and individuals to administer the program help to influence and promote an impetus of change in student conduct. Additionally, the success of the program in mediating student conduct depends on the skills of the individuals who administer and implement the character education program (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). Thus, accountability expectations become the principal's responsibility in providing a school environment where students perform and meet accreditation standards in core academic subjects while promoting and implementing an effective curricular model of character education, enhancing moral development and character formation, as established and required by the Virginia SOL (VDOE, 1999).

Rural public school districts face challenges in meeting the needs of minority youth, English as second language learners, transient families, and students with special needs, as well as the obligations for state and federal accountability standards each year. Rural schools often are subject to shrinking tax bases due to declining enrollments, disproportionate federal and state funding, difficulty in retaining high-quality and effective teachers and administrators, limited access to advanced programs for students,

and population departure due to lack of economic opportunities in the district (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

Rural schools and their limited enrollments are at distinct disadvantages for programs, personnel, and educational resources because of federal funding guidelines. Their geographical isolation, as well as low salaries and multiple teaching assignments, create problems in hiring and retaining teachers (Barley & Brigham, 2008). Rural schools usually have smaller classes; more individualized instruction and limited enrollment of students, but they contend with dropout rates twice the national average in the most remote rural schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2001), in addition to the numbers of students who drop out earlier (Gándara, Gutiérrez, & O'Hara, 2001). Statistics from the Center on Education Policy (2007) maintained that 45% of rural students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

The Virginia SOL (VDOE, 1999) mandated and established expectations for public schools to produce students with moral and ethical qualities and for students to demonstrate those qualities in their emotional responses, reasoning, and behavior. Although state expectations encouraged schools to establish programs, no specific definitions or types of character education were provided. Thus, with the numerous types of programs available for usage, schools implemented character education in countless ways, some more than others and some not at all.

There are usually two types of character education programs that schools implement: (a) comprehensive, those integrated into the full spectrum of school activities and school life; and (b) modular, those designed to be in a single classroom or group of classrooms involving a particular type of event or activity and which can be school-wide

without being comprehensive (WWC, 2006, p. 7). The programs usually have one common goal: to help children become morally and ethically sound, cooperative, and good citizens. This direct teaching of character values within the school curricula assists the process for implementing positive values when making decisions and exemplifies responsible and respectful behavior for students.

Therefore, the principal of the school has considerable influence to administer and build basic literacy; to encourage academic excellence, good work habits, and self-discipline; and to promote personal growth through the integration of character education programs with the curriculum and school environment. Consequently, the perceptions of the principal can possibly provide a broader perspective on the need, impact, and implementation of character education programs that are the most successful for low-socioeconomic schools. The school administrators' perceptions can afford meaningful information for current and future principals' leadership practices with effective character education implementation and integration models for rural elementary, middle, and high schools.

Creating powerful learning experiences that incorporate a well designed, synergized character education program improves student learning, increases family-school partnerships, engages community in positive ways with schools, and strengthens the virtue of future citizens (Lickona, 1992). Research by Brown, Berezniaki, and Zabar (2003) concluded that effective character education

articulates and makes explicit the values of the school and the community in which it is based, applies these consistently in the practice of the school, and occurs in partnership with students, staff, families and the school community as

part of a whole-school approach to educating students and strengthening their resilience. (p. 12)

Research Questions

This study was guided by an overarching research question and two subquestions based on the theoretical perspectives of character education and a rural public school principal's perceptions of character education with regard to program implementation and the relationship of character education and student achievement:

How does the rural school principal perceive and conceptualize character education in the school?

- a. How does the rural school principal's perception of character education affect program implementation in the school?
- b. How does the rural school principal perceive the relationship between character education and student achievement?

Operational Definitions

Operational definitions for key terms in this study include the following:

Character education. An emphasis and intentional, proactive effort to instill ethical values of respect for self and others, responsibility, integrity, and self-discipline into every aspect of the school day (Lickona & Davidson, 2005, p. 2)

Comprehensive character education program. Programs, events, or activities integrated into the full spectrum of the school environment (WWC, 2006).

Critical incident technique. A flexible set of procedures for gathering and analyzing reports of incidents for the situation under study (Flanagan, 1954); relies on memory of an actual episode (Urquhart, 1999).

Focus group. Situation in which a facilitator moderates a group of participants who gather to share attitudes, opinions, and reactions about a specific topic.

Modular character education program. Designed to be used in a single classroom or group of classrooms in a school that involves a particular type of event or activity; can be school-wide without being comprehensive (WWC, 2006).

Perceptions. Beliefs, attitudes, or opinions regarding character education programs, events, or activities

Rural public school. School located in an area with undeveloped country land and a population of fewer than 2,500 (Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertson, & Shapley, 2007); 45% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (Center on Education Policy, 2007); generally designated as being associated with an emphasis on family values relating to heritage, culture, and traditions (Clark & Zimmerman, 2000).

Vignettes. Hypothetical scenario technique for exploring people's perceptions, beliefs, and meanings about specific situations (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003); opportunity for more attitudinal information than a direct approach technique (Urquhart, 1999).

Virginia Standards of Learning. Rigorous academic standards, known as SOL, measuring achievement through annual tests and alternate assessment, providing schools, school divisions, and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) with critical data to inform the development and implementation of effective instructional strategies and best practices (VDOE, 2002).

Overview of Methodology

This investigation employed a qualitative single-case design approach to understand how the perceptions of a rural public school principal in a state mandating the

establishment of character education pedagogy in public schools conceptualized character education in the school, influenced the leadership and decision making for program implementation of such initiatives, and affected the relationship between character education and student achievement. The use of a single-case design approach afforded a within-case analysis to gain knowledge of the principal's current attitudes related to character education. The general goal was to discern the principal's beliefs concerning character education leadership efforts for program initiatives, how those perceptions affected program implementation, and the relationship between character education and student achievement, especially in conjunction with federal and state accountability pressures.

Thus, with federal and state legislation's supporting and mandating character education pedagogy, investigation of the attitudes of a principal in a low-socioeconomic, isolated school district, and the leadership challenges faced by the principal in articulating curricular programs for academic success was important. Further, it was essential to discern the perceptions of the principal regarding academic accreditation programs and moral and character initiatives in a high-stakes testing arena because student achievement has been measured annually and character education has not, although both have been deemed important for the growth of the nation's future citizens under the NCLB Act of 2001.

The study involved a purposively selected K-12 rural public school principal in one designated rural school district from the 133 school divisions of the State of Virginia. A letter developed by the researcher (Appendix A) was sent to the superintendent of the school district to secure permission to conduct the study. After permission was secured,

an acknowledgement of approval from the school district was e-mailed to the rural school principal to request volunteer participation for the study (Appendix B); the e-mail included acknowledgement of the research purpose as well as proposed procedures for school observations, individual interviews, vignettes, and review of documents, lesson plans, and audiovisual materials.

Next, a participant agreement form was sent to the participant (Appendix C) explaining expectations and confidentiality. A confirmation agreement form (Appendix D) was also sent with explanations of direct and indirect benefits and the opportunity to withdraw at any time during the study without consequence or negative effect. Another e-mail communication (Appendix H) requested dates and times for scheduling school site visits with the principal for document review. The researcher also reconfirmed participant confidentiality, explaining that all information would be secured in a separate file cabinet in the researcher's office. Additionally, participants were apprised that any review of instructional materials regarding lesson plans, notes, and materials would have no impact on personnel evaluations for employment; nor would transcripts, memos, and other files contain identifying features connected with the data. Any findings from the study would be presented in aggregate to maintain participant anonymity.

A triangulated method for collecting and analyzing data consisted of the following protocols: site observations of the school, a recorded interview session with a standardized open-ended question-probe format about the critical incident, vignettes, focus group, and review of documents, lesson plans and audiovisual materials. Educational materials and resources were reviewed to provide support and confirmation of purposefully planned goals and methodologies for the character education

implementation (Creswell, 2007). Communication with the study participant revealed a perspective and allowed rich insight into the thoughts, ideas, and feelings of the principal when leading and making decisions and when developing implementation proposals for educational instruction of character education programs. Bulletin boards, wall art, student art, word messages, and photographs assisted in understanding the ethos and atmosphere as well as the attitude and perceptions about character education held by the principal, as the leader of the educational program of the school. Documents and audiovisual materials highlighted the contextual process for character education pedagogy within the instructional environment (Patton, 2002).

Delimitations of the Study

This study had several delimitations. It was delimited to the conceptualization of perceptions of one principal's attitudes about character education with regard to leadership and decision-making efforts, implementation, and the relationship between character education and student achievement in a rural public school district in Virginia, a state requiring character education through its Standards of Learning (SOL). The participant was a K-12 principal, the school administrator of a rural public school in Virginia. The study was delimited to the assumption that the school principal was the curricular leader in the school, which might not have been entirely accurate as deans, counselors, department heads, or particular faculty members could have been representative of the principal's emphasis on leadership and implementation efforts of character education pedagogy or their own interests in the initiative. Nevertheless, the school principal had to approve curricular programs in the school. Therefore, a rural school principal was surveyed for opinions regarding perceptions about character

education. This individual represented the case unit for the rural school site in this single-case design approach. Due to the vast categories of character development programs, this study was delimited to a comprehensive character education program (whole-school initiative) and modular character education activities (in one classroom or a single event).

The demographics of rural school districts facilitated the single-case design approach for the theoretical investigation in this study. With regard to the complexities of rural public schools, the Virginia Standards of Learning initiatives encouraging and establishing the expectations for schools to not only provide a strong academic program but also foster moral and character development for student populations were explored and described. Therefore, the design of this study was delimited to a time period of 3 months for administration of interviews, observations, site visits, document review, focus group, and data collection; it was further delimited to one rural public school principal. School administrators serving other rural school populations in the state may consider the results when addressing the needs associated with implementing character education as established by the Standards of Learning mandates for Virginia public schools.

Summary

Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, educational institutions are expected to meet federal and state obligations with annual yearly progress reports of acceptable math and reading test percentages. This focus demands that schools demonstrate annual achievement by raising those percentages and narrowing gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Since 1994, however, the nation's public schools have been expected to address moral and social development programs for

their students and encouraged with opportunities to receive support from federal grants and state initiatives for character education.

Principals are the key leaders for mobilizing resources and personnel for programs and for motivating and inspiring change for moral and character development in the school culture and climate. Lickona (1993) stated, “Not to teach children core ethical values is a grave moral failure” (p. 9). Therefore, rural public schools with their distinct and challenging issues are in need of principal leadership with innovative methods to improve academic achievement, school safety, and the development of morally educated students. These expanded roles, responsibilities, and expectations create demands for school administrators (Copland, 2001).

Organization of the Study

This qualitative case study is organized into five chapters. After chapter I, a review of the literature is presented in Chapter II, a description of the methodology in Chapter III, data analysis of results in Chapter IV, and discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations in Chapter V. References and appendices are also provided.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Throughout this literature review, the researcher presents the evolution of character education in schools, the impetus for its becoming an integral educational component, and the moral developmental framework for implementation into the learning environment. The discussion continues with a description of complexities surrounding character education pedagogy and the movement supporting instruction for the moral and character development of K-12 students. Additionally, the review contains an explanation of evaluative difficulties in research investigations involving character education programs due to myriad types of programs, variances in implementation methods, and pedagogical strategies.

Next, the researcher presents an overview of developmental theories that encouraged a plethora of character education programs with goals to decrease violence, absenteeism, and dropout rates and to improve achievement in the nation's schools (Was, Woltz, & Drew, 2006). The discussion continues with a description of support from federal and state funding sources for character education programming, explaining the effectiveness, conclusiveness, and inclusiveness of those program initiatives throughout the nation, as well as the mixed conclusions of evidence for those programs that worked and those for which evidence of effectiveness was less supportive.

Additionally, the researcher presents concerns regarding the lack of research on rural school districts and the challenges they face, even though they represent 30% of the nation's schools (Hardré, 2008). The researcher continues with an explanation of the influence of a principal's leadership on the success or failure of a character education

program based on the principal's perceptions and beliefs regarding implementation efforts in the educational environment. Finally, the researcher describes the many challenges school principals encounter in today's high-stakes testing environment with regard to expectations to provide a rigorous academic program, meet SOL requirements, implement an effective character education program, attain state accreditation standards, and support the moral and social development of the nation's future citizens.

Goals of Character Education Instruction

Character education is an umbrella term describing approaches and efforts to teach moral development and character formation to children in schools. The premise of character education promotes teaching children the virtues of performance character (doing your best) and moral character (being your best in relationships). It is based on introducing lessons, events, and experiences that encapsulate empathy, caring, respect, responsibility, and ethical behavior with the goal that children will contribute as future citizens more positively to their communities. Lickona (1991) identified the following objectives of character education programs:

Direct teaching of character values within the school curricula; high expectations; a process for implementing positive values when making decisions; visual reinforcement of character values; a school culture that fosters positive peer recognition and empowers the school community to exemplify behaviors consistent with respect and responsibility, and parent, student, and community involved in decision making of the character education programs. (p. 2)

The popularity of character education waxed and waned over the past decades with regard to implementation in America's schools. In 1992, a group of educators,

youth leaders, and ethicists gathered for a discussion on character education at a summit conference sponsored by the Josephson Institute of Ethics (2011). The goal was to develop ideas about character vital to the morals and ethics of all people, regardless of individual differences. The discussion focused on what the group deemed the most important values: Trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship became the founding virtues for the “Six Pillars” of character education in the CHARACTER COUNTS initiative. Based on the approach that character comes from within, one would be successful using the Six Pillars to guide thoughts and actions for making right and wrong decisions. More than 40 states embraced the Six Pillars approach, making it a hallmark program nationwide (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2011)

Since the 1990s, the federal government has embraced the idea of character education in public schools, and grants have been made available to create, develop, or pilot character education programs. Media attention has focused on the state of schools with regard to behavior, violence, and moral decline, and the political community has aligned with educational institutions to encourage integration of character education into school environments (Muscott & O’Brien, 1999). Society began demanding that something be done about declining morality in student behavior, and educational institutions became the arenas to implement teaching and facilitating moral development for the character formation of their student populations (Lickona, 1993).

The opportunity to encourage students to be morally sound, honest, fair, and caring individuals resulted in character education’s becoming a primary goal in addition to the rigorous academic expectations placed on the schools (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). This new goal required schools to plan, prepare, and implement programs that would

present effective pedagogy to impact moral and character development of their students (Lickona & Davidson 2005). According to Williams (2000), character education promotes deliberate approaches for school leaders, the community, and parents to assist children in learning how to incorporate integrity, compassion, and responsibility in their behavior and decisions. As a result of this new goal, the impetus to improve moral and character development of the nation's school populations has promoted an increased effort for character education, which has expanded exponentially. Lewis (1998) reported that schools had "packaged character education into kits or curricula" (p. 100) events, activities, and resources available to parents and educational institutions.

Currently, there are numerous programs available for schools to implement, and many offer a wider range of methods to achieve character education goals than their earlier predecessors. Some target specific behavioral issues such as bullying and conflict mediation, whereas others are more comprehensive (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006a). A very popular modular method in schools involves the use of literature featuring sports, science, social studies, or language arts curricula (WWC, 2006). Other comprehensive methods promote words of the day, week, or month, or an event highlighting a specific virtue or trait for the school population (WWC, 2006).

A majority of schools have implemented character education pedagogy, but definitive pedagogical techniques of integration or implementation models have been unclear (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). It has been difficult to implement effective character education due to varying skill levels of personnel facilitating the programs, disagreement regarding the goals of character education (Berkowitz, 1997), and the lack of guidance and preparation of novice educators (Berkowitz, 1998; Jones, Ryan, & Bohlin, 1999).

These factors have contributed to the multitude of implementation methods for character education programs. Additionally, considerable confusion surrounding the constructs and concepts defining character education has been puzzling for educators (Berkowitz, 1997; Dalton & Watson, 1997), and information about the appropriate scientific pedagogical methods to use has been vague (Berkowitz & Grych, 2000).

Many character education programs share practices and strategies, but empirical evidence, despite the emergence of the field in this arena, has been less than supportive or not yet been studied (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006a). Even those programs with defined curricula, conceptual ideologies, and implementation processes have presented pedagogical difficulties in the comparison of programs due to the diversity and nature of philosophical methodologies (Dalton & Watson, 1997). School leaders are under pressure to attain the academic accountability required by federal mandates and state Standards of Learning benchmarks. Therefore, efforts to understand character education and its importance for the academic environment contribute to the range of variability in constructs, definitions, and impact of character education pedagogy (WWC, 2006). Nevertheless, there continues to be a swell of support promoting character education pedagogy for educational integration, but insufficient empirical knowledge and unclear information about the impact and effect of moral and character development programs have led to the complexities of character education in schools (Benninga & Wynne, 1998).

Complexities of Character Education

Character education programming has been viewed as ancillary to academic curricula with regard to federal and state mandates holding schools accountable for

educational achievement each year (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Smith, 2006). The Virginia benchmarks, known as the Standards of Learning or SOL, quantify a school's academic effectiveness and accreditation status each year.

Accountability to those figures has become paramount for school accreditation, and the marginalization of character education programs has disempowered schools to the point of making curricular decisions based only on state quantitative standards, not whole child development. Therefore, federal and state obligations and accountability pressures have led to less consideration of implementation of character education initiatives (Schaps, 2010).

When a school decides to integrate character education initiatives, implementing a program can create difficulties for several reasons: lack of common goals among character education programs; effectiveness concerns; conflicts of definition, objectives, and methodology; and diversity of standards, assessment, and needs of the school community. Support for character education implementation has been provided mainly through anecdotal or subjective reviews (Howard, Berkowitz, & Schaeffer, 2004) or has been relegated to data on attendance, conduct, and grades. Therefore, with as many schools as there are character education programs, administrators and school personnel entrusted to facilitate an initiative must choose tested and effective implementation approaches that match the needs of the school.

Most programs have access to commercially made materials for the character education initiative; others are hybrids of various components manifested through personalized school programs. Most commercial programs are not peer reviewed, thereby resulting in those programs' impact being founded on subjective information and

information regarding effectiveness being attributed to the commercial developers of the programs themselves (Revell, 2002; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). With the national movement's creating more interest for instituting character education initiatives over the past 10 years, a plethora of programs have been scientifically studied, but many have not; therefore, it has remained unclear whether one is more effective than another (WWC, 2006).

A majority of schools use a set of words or a virtue of the day, week, or month; yet, the effectiveness of this approach has not been confirmed empirically (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Other schools use commercially made products. The shortage of empirical knowledge contributes to the lack of consensus regarding what really works in character education pedagogy and reflects another reason that measuring the effects or impact of character education programs continues to be difficult. Another factor lacking in character education pedagogy is the professional development of teachers and school administrators for school initiatives. Instructions on how to implement most initiatives are negligible. Training would provide a more comprehensive approach in promotion of character education in educational environments (Calabrese & Roberts, 2001; Calabrese & Roberts, 2002).

Bulach (2002) maintained that the effectiveness of a character education program can be less successful because it depends on the skills of the facilitator and the extent of autonomy and level of authority allowed for implementing a modular or comprehensive program. Therefore, the growth or success of any character education initiative becomes dependent on the principal's leadership philosophy and the person the principal entrusts

to lead the character education initiative, usually a teacher or school counselor for implementation in the school.

Rural school administrators must make difficult decisions about what programs to implement in the school curriculum based on the challenges and multiple roles they perform in addition to accreditation standard expectations. Principals face enormous challenges when trying to orchestrate rigorous curriculum, motivate faculty to increase academic performance, and meet accreditation obligation pressures resulting from the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002).

Additionally, educators lament numerous student behavior problems stemming from a lack of moral, ethical, responsible, and sound judgment and requiring principals to meet the complex needs of their students with small budgets and few resource reserves. Preventive approaches for the wide range of contemporary problems coupled with principal responsibilities for academics create the dilemma regarding how much importance should be placed on character education integration and implementation efforts within the instructional environment (Battistich, Schaps, Watson, Solomon, & Lewis, 2000). Schaps (2010) maintained that character education programs having empirical evidence and providing support for growth of moral and character development are critical for students' academic engagement and achievement, as well as their healthy overall development and avoidance of problem behaviors. Nevertheless, various character education programs, empirically supported or not, have gained momentum for educational implementation with many different designs and targeted age groups.

Moral Development Framework for Character Education

Acknowledging the limited amount of peer reviewed literature on character education, it was important to understand that much of the research was generally vague, anecdotal, and subjective (Howard et al., 2004) with regard to its framework for education. Moral education for student character development focused more on facilitating character through the atmosphere of the school environment versus fostering the art of teaching character (Berkowitz, 1999). The following notations on a moral development framework provided as much empirical information as possible, but the researcher found it difficult to develop a substantive character education framework paradigm. Nevertheless, the researcher attempted to provide the most relevant constructs for the basis of this study of principals' perceptions of character education and its implementation and impact on academic achievement in public schools.

The Swiss psychologist Piaget (1932, 1965) based most of his work on children and their thoughts and beliefs when choosing right and wrong behavior, factors relevant to the concept of moral development and its contemporary counterpart, character education. Piaget believed the moral reasoning of children could be a maturational process and thought schools' providing supportive environments to engage students in problem solving and decision-making opportunities founded on fairness would benefit social interaction (Piaget, 1965).

Modifying Piaget's theory, Kohlberg (1969) provided an avenue for his theory of moral development, comprising six distinct moral stages and grouped into three levels, each more substantive in responding to a dilemma or problem than the previous stage. The theory was founded on the philosophy that individuals have the capability to reason

by using justice as the basic characteristic for moral reasoning. Kohlberg believed that educators, instead of just using value traits such as honesty and fairness, should present a “moral dilemma” for students to determine and justify the best course of action a person should take. This activity would provide an optimal opportunity with reflection for students’ moral growth. Based upon that theory, Kohlberg and Higgins (1987) established a *just community* model for schools to implement.

The just community program model provided an environment in which teachers facilitated opportunities for students to establish common behaviors with rules and policies and plan activities as a group, all based on fairness, positive values, and a community founded on equity and consequences for all individuals. Results indicated positive effects on students’ individual moral judgments and choices, perceptions of school norms collectively shared, and perceptions of the value of the school as a community (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989).

For many years, a central theme in schools was the social and moral development of children (McClellan, 1999). Schools fostered a caring and kind atmosphere and encouraged students to have greater character development (Developmental Studies Center, 1998; Power et al., 1989). In a study of delinquency, the social development model (Hawkins & Weis, 1985), which was based on the units of family, school, and peers, hypothesized that behavior was learned through opportunities of involvement, skills, and reinforcement. The model stressed helping students to erase problem behavior through the promotion of social development methods valued by society (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992, p. 87). This study supported the importance of the school’s

environmental influence in shaping character development. In addition, it was an example for the design of the Child Development Project.

Designed to foster children's social, ethical, and intellectual development, the Child Development Project (CDP) centered on the idea that providing a caring community model and using strategies and techniques of cooperative learning, class meetings, conflict resolution, and prosocial skill development would encourage children to adopt, internalize, and behave with those same qualities (Solomon, Battistich, & Watson, 1993). A number of positive results focused on several variables: conflict resolution, moral reasoning, self-esteem, and democratic values. A follow-up study, which was conducted 20 years later, applied the same methodology with more schools and reported that modeling habits of a caring community resulted in positive effects with regard to student outcomes, academic attitudes, and academic motivation (Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 2004).

With students spending so many hours in school each day, the educational environment became the arena for affording more opportunities to foster character formation and moral development. Influencing social skills, cooperation, responsibility, empathy, and self-control supported the development of a caring classroom model called the responsive classroom. Using the responsive classroom framework, a study of 212 schools in Washington, DC (Elliott, 1995) found gains in students' social skills, improved academic achievement, and a decrease in problem behavior. Based on the commitment to community values in the responsive classroom program, the school environment influenced appropriate examples of decision making, self-esteem, academic success, and citizenship. Thus, a common goal to effect changes in attitudes, behavior,

and skills with social emotional learning and character development became important for schools to integrate into the school curriculum and environment.

In the State of Washington, the Seattle Social Development Project examined the influence of social–emotional learning in encouraging students to build social bonds with school and family and to provide positive versus negative experiences for themselves (O'Donnell, Hawkins, Catalano, Abbott, & Day, 1995). Eighteen elementary schools participated in the study, which revealed positive effects on persistence, study skills, academic achievement, and delinquency. A follow-up study conducted with the same students at the age of 18 (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999) produced similar findings: Students who had participated in the comprehensive character-based program (whole school) attained positive commitments to academic achievement.

The conceptual framework studies provided evidence supportive of the notion that implementing comprehensive character education models produces positive outcomes for character formation and moral development in student populations. Thus it appears that character-based programs can facilitate and create a positive atmosphere in schools, enhance academic achievement, and promote healthy social and prosocial behaviors. Results from various studies suggested that character-based initiatives needed to be comprehensively implemented to promote school reform and academic improvement. The Josephson Institute of Ethics (2002) concluded that effective character education programs are intentional, are school-wide, involve school personnel, permeate all aspects of school life, are comprehensive, and involve students in all aspects of the program. Nevertheless, schools interested in implementing character education initiatives must choose programs facilitating goals and objectives for the needs of the student community.

Federal and State Support

Even as the needs of society loomed large with the weakening family structure, societal violence, and increased complexities in raising children, considerations for character education programs continued not to be a priority in school curriculum. The Josephson Institute's 2008 Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth surveyed nearly 30,000 students in public and private high schools across America. Results indicated that 35% of males and 25% of girls had stolen from a store within the previous year, more than 83% had lied to a parent about something significant, and 64% had cheated on a test during the year, up from 60% in 2006. With statistics indicating moral decline of student behavior, Lickona (1992) maintained that the provision of well-designed learning programs of character education would increase student learning, enhance relationships, and affect the community positively.

The democratic values of the nation provided another thrust for character education pedagogy support in public schools. During the 1980s and 1990s, proponents of character education proposed the idea of character education's being more central in school environments, recommending that school leaders purposely partner with school communities to develop guiding principles and values or virtues for character education initiatives (Glanzer & Milson, 2006). This character education model of value-laden traits became popular and garnered much success in schools in which teachers used literature to extol specific virtues or highlighted students' exemplifying specific traits. Based upon the success of this model, many states enacted legislation to mandate character education programming in the schools. Between 1993 and 2006, legislation

addressing character education and moral development programs for public school children was passed or modified in more than 23 states (Glanzer & Milson, 2006).

A national program supporting comprehensive character education in schools and a leader in the movement was the Character Education Partnership (USDOE, 1994). The CEP is an organization serving as “a nonpartisan coalition of organizations and individuals, dedicated to developing moral character and civic virtue in our nation’s youth as one means of promoting a more compassionate and responsible society” (CEP, 2005a). Leading the effort, CEP developed The Eleven Principles of Effective Character and the Character Education Quality Standards (CEP, 2005a, 2005b), which provided guidelines to support effective comprehensive character initiatives for educational implementation. The Character Education Partnership and the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education have continued to be hallmarks for schools wanting to emulate and implement character education programs.

CEP (2000) urged states to use at least six guidelines consistent with the eleven principles when advocating a state’s character education legislation. The guidelines included the following:

- 1) Legislation should encourage character education generally rather than specify a particular character education approach or program.
- 2) Legislation should be drafted to insure that character education is thoughtfully integrated into existing state programs and framework.
- 3) State leaders should encourage comprehensive approaches to character education that involve all aspects of school culture and curriculum.

4) School leaders should be encouraged to include all of the key stakeholders in the community—especially parents—as they develop a comprehensive character education mission and program.

5) It is important that character education legislation should be reinforced through a child's education.

6) It is essential that character education legislation be tied to staff development money in order that administrators and teachers may get training and materials they need to create effective schools of character. (CEP, 2000)

Increased encouragement and support for character education was also provided by the United States Congress with the development of the Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Projects (USDOE, 2006):

Subject to availability of funds, grants comprised opportunities for grantees to collect no less than \$500,000 and meet the criteria of educational eligibility entities. Program initiatives need not exceed 5 years, include evidence of evaluative measurement, have the availability of materials and program development curricular, teacher training materials, implementation and integration of secular character education initiatives, and the inclusion of selected character elements or values of caring, civic virtue and citizenship, justice, fairness, responsibility, trustworthiness, giving, and any other elements deemed appropriate by the eligible grantee. Factors measuring success of the character initiative could include discipline issues, academic achievement, participation in extracurricular activities, parental and community involvement, faculty and administration involvement, student and staff morale, and overall improvements in school climate for all students, including students with disabilities. (NCLB, 2001)

Between 1995 and 2001, communities received over 45 million dollars in grants that supported growth and initiatives of character education programs addressing community issues and concerns (USDOE, 2007b). Funds helped create materials and resources needed to accompany programs for integration and implementation success. Furthermore, requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) regarding funding eligibility for any character education initiative in public schools mandated that schools had to “provide information that demonstrated the program for which the grant was sought to have clear objectives based on scientifically based research” (NCLB Section 531 [E] [2][A]).

At the state level, the Virginia Board of Education (1998) established criteria for character education programs in the public schools:

- a) To assist school divisions in implementing character education programs and practices that are designed to promote the development of personal qualities as set forth in this section and the Standards of Quality and that will improve family and community involvement in the public schools. The Board of Education shall also establish, within the Department of Education, the Commonwealth Character Initiative.
- b) The Board shall provide resources and technical assistance to school divisions regarding successful character education programs and divisions information regarding such programs and practices and potential funding and support sources.

- c) The Board may also provide resources supporting professional development for administrators and teachers in the delivery of any character education programs.
- d) The Board of Education shall award, with such funds as are appropriated for this purposed, grants to school boards for the implementation of innovative character education programs. (“Chapter 725,” 1998)

In 1999, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation and established character education in public schools with goals to improve learning environments, promote student achievement, reduce disciplinary problems, and develop civic-minded students of high character. The law stated,

Character instruction may be used to supplement a character education program: however, each program shall be interwoven into the school procedures and environment and structured to instruct primarily through example, illustration, and participation, in such a way as to complement the Standards of Learning. (“Character Education Required,” 2004)

Three school divisions in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education received a federal government grant for the Virginia Character Education Project (USDOE, 2000). The partnership involved planning comprehensive K-12 character education programs that included implementation, assessment, and delivery procedures for the school initiatives. The goal was to pilot character education constructs and strategies for schools in metropolitan, suburban, and rural locations. Research maintained that character education models with local ownership were usually more successful in meeting their goals.

Supporting that view, the State of Virginia provided leeway for schools to facilitate and choose their respective character education models. Thus, each school division developed, implemented, and assessed a program effort complementing its school community. Guidelines for the three year project followed the Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2003) for program development and resource choices. Assistance and direction from the state department enabled sharing program designs, instructional strategies, and connection with the “safe schools initiative” as well as various activities to support the school environment.

Results (USDOE, 2003) concluded that successful schools implemented a comprehensive model into every aspect of the school environment in areas of behavior, service learning, and academics. Another result of this collaborative model was a training module titled *Educating for Character: A Virginia Tradition* (VDOE, 2004). The training module shared instruction on the most effective methods for infusion of character education pedagogy into the educational environment.

Standards proposed by the National Youth Leadership Council (2008) released the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice providing support for character education outcomes through the promotion of meaningful service, reflection, valuing of diversity, and demonstration of persistence, determination, and personal reflection with instructional lessons. Still, many schools viewed character education as supplementary and had not actively promoted or incorporated character education initiatives into the school environment. Nevertheless, during the past few decades, character education reemerged as a pedagogical theme for the intentional integration of goals and objectives into the educational process by schools (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006a).

As educational policies conceptualized school programs, an increasing amount of research suggested the implementation of social, moral, and character development in addition to academics (Elias, 2009). For any program to be effective, the theoretical perspectives about character education need to be comprehensive and aligned with instructional approaches (Williams, 2000). Lickona (1992), author of *Educating for Character*, recommended that

a school committed to character education should support ethical values such as respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring, defining them in terms of behaviors that can be observed in school life; models these values, studies them; celebrates these manifestations; and holds all school members accountable to standards of conduct consistent with the core values. (p. 2)

The goal of character education is to encourage, nurture, and support the formation of moral and character development that can provide benefit for public, private, religious, charter, urban, suburban, rural, small, or large school environments. According to Berkowitz and Bier (2006a), academic goals and objectives are enhanced by high-quality character education. To enhance academics, schools need to implement character development initiatives to promote learning for support of the moral and character development and training of their student populations. As public schools continue to be held accountable for test scores and accreditation, and as the national focus continues to demand confirmation through academic performance, the complementary focus to this scrutiny becomes character education.

Rural School Needs

In comparison to their urban and suburban counterparts, rural public schools have lacked the same attention regarding meaningful rigorous studies (Gándara et al., 2001). According to Hardré (2008), only 6% of research has been conducted in rural schools, even though 30% of schools in the United States are located in designated rural communities. More focused research on rural school districts would be beneficial not only for character education integration but for other needs as well.

Rural is most widely defined as an area with undeveloped land and a population less than 2,500 (Arnold et al., 2007). As classified by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture grant program, “rural area means an area not classified as urban (i.e. both urbanized areas and urban clusters) as determined by the last available decennial census” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2007, p. 36). Due to the unique complexities and educational needs of rural schools across the United States, the federal government has continued to struggle in developing a uniformed, concrete definition of what constitutes a rural designation.

Representing only one third of the public schools and one fifth of the student populations, more than 50% of the nation’s schools are considered rural (Provasnik, 2007). Rural school districts share many of the same qualities as their urban and suburban public school counterparts, but there are also distinct differences. Rural districts comprise 20% of the nation’s 2,000 worst achieving high schools (Tucci, 2009) and comprise large pockets of distressed minority populations as well as single-parent families with disparate educational and socioeconomic levels (NCES, 2004). Compounding this problem are the vast numbers of students experiencing

intergenerational poverty. Of every 100 rural high school students, 25% fail, with lower rates for minority students (Swanson, 2009), and college degrees account for only 17% of the adult population (Whitener & McGranahan, 2003).

A 2007 report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Youth Development Grants Program indicated that some of the following issues are faced by rural youth; these youth

- experience less community interconnection of people due to long commute times of parents to work and children to school which leads to a) lack of first hand observation of potential career opportunities; b) fewer adult role models for civic responsibility and volunteering; and c) more unsupervised time, generally after-school. In addition, they experience geographic isolation due to distance between homes and towns, and a lack of public transportation; are impacted by new populations moving into rural areas, increasing diversity; fewer physical locations in which to interact with peers and adults; limited programs and opportunities, especially meaningful employment; increased isolation and alienation due to high teacher turn over; live in cultures characterized by prejudice, ethnocentricity, and intolerance to nonconforming ideas that could lead to violence; experiment with negative behaviors; have seen a threefold increase in gang-related activity in many places; have less access to health care, services and resources necessary for healthy development; have access to technology at school, but not necessarily at home; are more likely to live in poverty; and are part of a growing epidemic of childhood obesity. (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2007, p. 7)

With the dropout rate 50% higher than the national average in the remotest of rural schools (NCES, 2001), low student motivation for academic success, and fewer supportive and extracurricular programs than nonrural schools (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995; NCES, 2004), use of resources and programs that enhance academic achievement and character development, in addition to the identification of best practices, could possibly make a difference.

Rural schools are unique in their constitution because community values play a major role, influencing the attitudes and beliefs of the families and students regarding educational and career opportunities (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Gándara et al., 2001). Community values, funding limitations, and geographical isolation create problems for rural school districts in meeting the needs of at-risk students: those contending with pregnancy, drug concerns, membership in gangs, and other acute issues that impair educational success, self-esteem, and future employment exploration (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). The challenge of inappropriate student behavior continues to inhibit academic success.

Some studies support the notion that violence can be decreased with effective character education programs, either through the school culture or some form of moral development instruction. In central Missouri, Reynolds (1998) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the opinions of rural school superintendents regarding the effectiveness of the public schools. Of the 106 superintendents responding, 50% stated that the nation's schools were deficient in teaching moral values, 92% believed character education should be in the curriculum, 94% wanted some form of character education pedagogy in their districts, and 75% perceived that the school culture and environment

were not sufficient to influence positive moral and character development of their students.

Cumulatively, the persistent poverty of many rural school students creates complex problems in meeting the academic and social needs of the school population. A study by Hardré, Sullivan, & Crowson (2009) found that students in 10 rural public high schools were significantly affected by the environmental factors of the school in accordance with teacher support for student interest in academic subject matter. Setting personal goals and believing in one's competency predicted interest, achievement, and effort for intention to graduate from high school. With regard to the relationship between character development and academics, Elias (2006) stated, "When schools [implement] high-quality social emotional learning programs and approaches effectively, academic achievement of children increase[s], incidence of problem behavior decrease[s], the relationships that surround each child are improved, and the climate of classrooms and schools change[s] for the better" (p. 5).

Consequently, implementation and integration of character education initiatives established comprehensively and tied to community values can be an enhancement to the school atmosphere to support student achievement. Thus, rural educators constantly balance meeting the demands of state and federal assessment percentages while possibly narrowing curriculum options, thereby undermining efforts to assist the moral and character development of their unique and complex community to prepare and improve students' academic achievement, future employment options, and citizenship.

A four year comparative study of rural, urban, and suburban students (Bulach, 2001) investigated the implementation of character education initiatives in 25 elementary,

middle, and high schools. The schools under study were assigned by districts: 10 rural schools in one district, 12 suburban schools in another, and 3 urban schools in the third district. All schools had the opportunity to develop and implement their choice of character education program, and each school chose something different, with many using the “word or virtue of the week.”

The investigation involved discernment of best practices of the character education initiatives and identification of significant differences among rural, suburban, and urban public schools. Best practices were determined by student perceptions about other students’ behavior as well as faculty and administrators’ perceptions of the climate and culture of the school. How the character education program was implemented into the school environment was also measured. Results revealed significant difference in school type, with elementary schools’ practicing character education pedagogy more than the upper grades. Rural schools exhibited a more positive climate overall than suburban and urban schools. Although implementation of character education was deemed important by the school administration, the program played a lesser role in improving student character.

Funded by the West Virginia Department of Education Office of Healthy Schools, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools and the Partnerships in Character Education Grant Program (USDOE, 2004b) conducted a three-year collaborative, quasi-experimental investigation of “an intervention that sought to integrate character education framework into the ethos of the schools’ climates and philosophies” (p. 3). The independent variables, described as dimensions, comprised student character development, faculty–staff and parent character development,

community engagement, school climate, professional development, school leadership, and student educational attitudes. The dependent variables included intended outcome measures of adequate yearly progress, student achievement scores, grade point average, behavior and discipline reports, and attendance. Quantitative (e.g., academic achievement) and qualitative (e.g., attitude) assessments were measured to discern the basis for development of character education.

A random sampling method was employed to select eight rural middle and high schools to participate in the study. Four were assigned to the control group and four were assigned “to develop and practice an intervention process model rich in character education” (USDOE, 2004b, p. 2). The conceptual framework for the study “defined character education as a process; not a program, product, or a practice but more of an educational foundation supported by theory and approached as a science” (USDOE, 2004b, p. 21). Results revealed significant differences between the control schools and those participating in the character education experiment. Student data indicated significantly positive results between levels of character and educators’ perceptions, school environment, and academic success.

Character Education Initiatives

It has been purported that children will develop character when productive character education is implemented (Berger, 2003; Lickona, 1991), the educational environment will become more positive and improve (Lickona & Davidson, 2005), teachers will provide better pedagogy and instructional practices (Grove & Schneider, 2006), administrative leaders will try innovative avenues (Williams & Taylor, 2003), and students will entertain more positive attitudes for educational success (Berkowitz & Bier,

2005). Since 1995, the U.S. Department of Education has provided seed money for character education through its Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Projects; 36 states, including Virginia and the District of Columbia, have received a combined total of approximately \$27.5 million through the grant process. Programs such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers and Safe and Drug Free Schools have materialized.

The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE, 2005) provided a grant titled the Partnership in Character Education to five public districts, including K-12 rural, urban, and suburban schools, to implement or support existing character education programs. Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) evaluated the longitudinal study and concluded through survey data that improvement in character-related behavior was noted but that relationships between behavior and character were inconclusive. Findings revealed a pronounced implementation level of the program at the school, improvement in character-driven behavior, and lowered suspension rates at schools with greater implementation of character education than at schools with lesser implementation. When schools embraced a program as important, the level of implementation increased even though there was inconclusive evidence supporting the impact of character education on academic achievement.

A 2000 report of findings from a 4-year review of a character education initiative in South Carolina that was funded by the U.S. Department of Education revealed 60% to 90% improvement in scores reflecting attitudes, behavior, and academic performance of students and adults since implementation of character education (Charlottesville Wellness Center, n.d.). Lickona and Davidson (2005) identified 24 schools throughout the nation

that had been acclaimed for distinctive character education qualities. All types of private and public schools that supported “promising practices” for the most effective environment of character were categorized by “six principles” for developing such a community. Results from the investigative analysis provided additional support for the benefit of character education in school settings.

Aligned well with the former study is *What Works in Character Education* by Berkowitz and Bier (2006b). The reviewers analyzed 33 character education programs, those with scientific evidence supporting a demonstrated effectiveness for encouraging character development in students. Outcomes provided information for schools interested in implementing character education to review regarding the prosocial competencies, school-based outcomes (academic success), and general social-emotional wellbeing of the program components. Programs reviewed by Lickona and Davidson (2005) and Berkowitz and Bier (2006b) included information about their effectiveness, characteristics, procedures, and specific practices. According to Berkowitz and Bier (2006b), character education was implemented in the schools for various reasons: violence, risky behavior, lying, defiance, stealing, cheating, and lack of ethics; they indicated that, with any intentional and skillful focus, character education programs should have had a positive influence on the student populations approximately half the time.

The U.S. Department of Education established the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) in 2002. The WWC provided and continues to support research on educational programs and initiatives with rigorous scientific exploration to document their effectiveness, while meeting criteria established by the WWC. The WWC (2007)

reviewed those “programs that had an intentional approach to develop students’ character by teaching values, and had most if not all of their lesson plans or prescribed activities, directly related to instilling those values”(p. 3). As reported by the U.S. Department of Education, the limited amount of peer reviewed analyses and scientific inquiries provided little evidence regarding the efficacy of character education initiatives and program activities (WWC, 2007).

Since the mid-1990s, the Character Education Partnership (CEP) has celebrated the annual National Schools of Character awards program recognizing K-12 schools and districts demonstrating outstanding character education initiatives. Every year, 10 elementary and secondary schools each receive a cash prize and national recognition for having established an exemplary character education program yielding positive results in student behavior, school climate, and academic performance; as of 2006, 180 schools had won this coveted award. Through the efforts of the CEP, a vast amount of information has been collected regarding the most effective character education programs and techniques for educational utilization (Schwartz, Beatty, & Dachinowicz, 2006).

To discern the effects on fourth-grade student behavior, academic performance, and attitudes in rural schools in Florida and Louisiana, Dietsch, Bayha, and Zhen (2005) conducted an experimental, randomized research study of a literature-based character education reading series. Results revealed a significant difference in student behavior, character education language, and attitudes, as well as applications to daily interactions regarding cognitive reflections about the stories they experienced in the classroom environment. Bulach (2000) purported that improvement of student behavior should be enhanced by a skilled and effectively implemented character education program; further,

if a character education initiative were successfully implemented, the school climate and student achievement should change for the better (Bulach, Malone, & Castleman, 1995).

The Josephson Institute of Ethics (2002) described effective programs as intentional, school-wide, involving school personnel, permeating all aspects of school life, comprehensive, and involving all aspects of the program. Integrative standards proposed by the National Service Learning Cooperative (1998) provided support for character education outcomes by promoting communication and interaction skills, valuing diversity, and requiring demonstration of persistence, determination, and personal reflection with instructional lessons.

The purpose of school-based character education programs is to facilitate students' moral and character development. Because of the large number of character education programs, the myriad of conceptual constructs, different types of methodology, and less than reliable and valid assessment outcomes for such programs, it has been challenging for researchers to discern relevant programs with rigorous systematic research methods for comparison so that educators can choose the best fit for their schools.

A review by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2003) examined 242 programs encompassing wellness, prevention, and youth development activities to assist educators. Results from this investigation produced "Safe and Sound: An Educational Leadership's Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs." Nationally, this publication reviewed more than 80 procedural programs for educational instruction in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms regarding character education initiatives to support academic achievement, wellness, and

social behaviors, and to prevent substance abuse behaviors. Even with the guide, however, discerning empirically studied programs was challenging.

Person, Moiduddin, Hague-Angus & Malone (2009) decided to compare character education programs categorized by specific constructs to build a resource “that [could] inform measurement selection for conducting rigorous, cost effective studies of character education programs” (p. 1). The purpose of the study was threefold: “a) to record concepts measured in character education programs; b) scaffold procedures for assessment of character education outcomes; and c) for evaluators, create a resource to assist in the identification and selection of measures of character education program results” (Person et al., 2009, p. xv). The researchers maintained the importance of assessing and measuring outcomes of character education programs due to the requirement of character education pedagogy in more than 14 states throughout the United States. The requirements demanded that each program show evidence of effectiveness, and grantees from the U.S. Department of Education were required to provide evaluative data (Roth-Herbst et al., 2007).

Between 2003 and 2007, researchers studied data from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) 2007, and the What Works in Character Education Project (WWCEP). All three research groups collaborated with the Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and the Character Education Partnership (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006a, 2006b), in addition to reviewing state funding and grant reports from the Partnerships in Character Education Program (PCEP). Of 68 character education programs, researchers examined 36

programs based on category of program, grade level, and type of program (comprehensive or modular) at the school site.

Conclusions revealed extensive variances in program outcomes. Of the 36 character education programs, 34 based their student-level outcomes on cognitive, behavioral, and academic content, with staff morale, school climate, and parent participation measured most often in the other outcomes domain. In addition, various measurement scales were used to assess the character education programs. According to Person et al. (2009), the different scales created problems in “reporting the psychometric properties of the character education measures due to inconsistencies of mixed reliability across contexts and validity factors addressed less often” (p. xvi.). Nevertheless, the collaboration assisted future researchers and educators in choosing empirically studied character education programs and provided the following recommendations:

Outcomes can be influenced by character education programs, but frameworks or clear theories would benefit understandings and identification of how the program goals or components are connected to the specific effects the program is supposed to affect; using reliable and valid measurement tools would better support comparison of programs and provide a broader understanding of character education pedagogy, and an alignment of operational definitions or conceptual constructs to measurement outcomes would benefit both research and educational communities. (Person et al., 2009, p. xvii)

School Principals and Accountability

As principals focus on meeting state and federal accountability requirements with obligations to lead their schools to successful academic achievement, expectations to

improve students' moral and character development have created an additional curricular component for instructional integration. How rural school principals fare under the high-stakes testing pressures and contend with the difficulties in retaining teachers and economic inequities for mobilizing resources, while assuming multiple roles, has created dilemmas in providing a strong academic program and implementing character education initiatives at the same time.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and the State of Virginia Standards of Learning (VDOE, 1999), character education is required. NCLB Strategic Objective 3.1 requires "our nation's schools to be safe and drug free and that students are free of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs" (USDOE, 2002-2007).

Strategic objective 3.2 requires "schools to promote strong character and citizenship among our nation's youth" (USDOE 2002-2007). In addition, strategies for objective 3.2 include the following recommendations: "1) Launch a campaign for character; 2) promote effective discipline strategies; 3) partner with faith-based and community organizations; 4) support and evaluate character education pilots; 5) promote the teaching of American history, and 6) highlight opportunities for civic awareness" (NCLB, 2002, pp. 48-49).

Virginia gives its public schools autonomy to choose character education programming by matching needs of the school environment and specific goals for intended student results. This autonomy assists schools, especially with the countless categories of comprehensive and modular character education programming, in the selection of initiative, implementation, and assessment methods. Under the tutelage of the school principal, the ultimate decision as to what level of character education

becomes integrated into the school environment depends on his or her administrative leadership. Therefore, leadership goals and mobilization of resources for character education programming become contingent on the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of the principal.

A qualitative investigation of 11 schools by Budge (2010) explored the high-stakes standards movement while reviewing support for academic success and needs of the rural community. Findings indicated that rural school principals perceived being caught in the middle between faculty resistance to change their teaching and the pressure from state and federal mandates for higher test score percentages within specified timeframes. Another finding revealed a lack of opportunities to educate and prepare students on how to live well locally and socially even though school leaders considered those skills important for the development of productive and contributing future members of society. Also, administrators appeared to be conflicted on how to balance local concerns for their students' civic responsibility, community-based education, and service learning initiatives with the need to meet testing mandates, even though improved test scores had been correlated with those factors (Sobel, 2004). Thus, implementation of character education into the educational environment presented a dilemma for rural school principals when competing with the need to improve yearly achievement scores.

Modern principals are stretched in more ways than had ever been imagined 20 years ago, and they are expected to do so much for so many in the nation's public schools. A principal's leadership in making decisions and influencing supervisory and instructional outcomes is considered central to school reform. Tension abounds with internal and external influences of state and local accountability expectations that either

support or inhibit principal leadership. Marks and Nance (2007) conducted an investigation surveying more than 8,500 principals, representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia. They examined “within and across the educational context of accountability and reform (state, local school boards, teachers, parents, district)... principals’ perceptions of their actual influence on school curriculum and instructional decisions, and principals’ perceptions of their actual influence on school supervisory decisions” (Marks & Nance, 2007, p. 11).

States were ranked from low to moderate to high state control. Demographically, in low-control states, 54% of rural school principals believed they had influence on curriculum and instructional policy decisions compared to 16% of urban school principals. Similarly, with supervisory policy in low-control schools, 70% of rural school principals believed they exercised influence compared to 13% of urban school principals. As state control increased to moderate and high, however, rural and urban school principals’ percentages in moderate-control states (22%-28%) and high-control states (29%-30%) were not significantly different across states (Marks & Nance, 2007, pp. 15-16). Results indicated that different accountability domains of state or regional control could affect decision-making processes and influences of school principals regarding curricular initiatives.

School leaders began feeling less influential but pressured by accountability demands for student achievement. A number of studies presented evidence that a school community in which students felt connected to their school produced positive results in meeting accountability standards, in addition to increased academic motivation, social understanding and competence, altruistic tendencies, appropriate conduct in school, and

trust and respect for teachers (Osterman, 2000). Rouse, Hannaway, Goldhaber, and Figlio (2007) maintained that accountability pressures regarding those issues have the potential to improve student test scores in low-performing schools and that such pressures can induce school administrators to change their behavior in educationally beneficial ways.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2003), “improving the social and emotional climate of schools, and the social and emotional soundness of students, advances the academic mission of the schools in important ways. Satisfying the social and emotional needs of students does more than prepare them to learn. It actually increases their capacity to learn” (p. 10). Thus, offering a comprehensive character education program to students complements schools’ academic success. The opportunity to influence, lead, and create an environment focusing on the facilitation of students’ social and moral development and their connection to school requires principal leadership.

Research documented that most character education programs are usually implemented in elementary school sites (Davidson, Lickona, & Khemelkov, 2007) despite being educationally debated for the needs of secondary students (Brannon, 2008; Hayes & Vivian, 2008). A program called Rachel’s Challenge was implemented into a school district with recognition for its educational acumen and high academic testing. The school district believed implementing a character education program was important for building trust and respect with secondary schools and developing relationships between the district and the community (Burton, Boyd, & Hollingshead, 2009).

Researchers concluded that principals should prepare to monitor and facilitate any change process in their schools due to the affective viewpoints of those implementing the program (Hollingshead, 2009). Principal leadership can guide and influence the change process of character education within the school environment; however, any evidence that character education produces positive classroom results, especially for disadvantaged students, makes it important to recognize that the emotional component of student development must be tied directly with academic rigor for successful results (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Therefore, no matter what level programs are implemented, educational initiatives either succeed or fail due to the amount of assistance or support the implementers are afforded once the initiative is in progress (Moffett, 2000).

With constraints of time and training, principal leadership can establish conditions necessary for character education initiatives with regard to the teachers, curriculum, methods of teaching, student activities, behaviors, connection with students and community, and climate of the school. So it is with character education; whether mandated by state requirements or a hybrid program developed by the school, focused leadership of the program ultimately benefits the student population. DeRoche (2000) maintained that principals should be risk takers for character education leadership and organization, even with the pressure of accountability, because “the risk taking principal actively identifies and solves problems...and taking risks can motivate teachers to higher levels of competency and success” (p. 45). Because rural communities are greatly affected by location, resources, and the economy and have less access to influential programs, “it will be contingent on the principal’s leadership to meet the needs of

students regarding diversity, drug education, violence, character education, and so forth” (Hausman, Crow, & Sperry, 2000).

The 1995 Accountability Law of Alabama required the state to adopt character education pedagogy. Strategic development planning designated the teaching of character education by grade levels in the schools. A study conducted by Baker (2004) examined high school principals’ perceptions of character education initiatives with regard to program implementation, importance, effects, leadership styles, and knowledge concerning character education pedagogy. Results indicated that principals were very supportive of character education and revealed overall positive effects on school climate and student achievement.

Another study examined 126 high school principals’ perceptions of character education in South Carolina (East, 1996). The investigation analyzed personal and professional characteristics of the principals’ level of acceptance with character education, level of training with character education, and effective methods in managing discipline for the character education initiative in the public high schools. The analysis provided recommendations to enhance the exposure and professional development of principals with character education pedagogy.

As more and more states required character education, a qualitative study of 347 middle school principals in Georgia assessed their views on the relationship between the levels of character implementation, their personal characteristics, and their perceptions of character education. The study indicated that the level of character education in the school varied according to the importance the principal placed on the program, the professional development exposure the principal received, and the ethnicity of the student

population. Results conveyed that the level of importance of the character education initiative varied according to the amount of pedagogy training, school ethnicity, and percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (Ellison, 2002).

A dissertation study by Van Orden (2000) measured the perceptions of 125 California principals of elementary schools with large student populations, twice the amount of most rural schools, regarding character education. Results acknowledged that principals believed character education programs helped students with discipline problems, civility, and respect and that collaboration and a connection with the school's community was central in enhancing and supporting moral and character development of students. Principals trying to balance accountability needs and moral and character education implementation without compromising academic achievement could find it difficult to initiate character education reforms to complement academic success. Sustaining change is critical for school improvement efforts but also needed is substantive empirical research to enhance its viability for school principals to lead faculty in sustaining the character education initiative and its importance.

An analysis of a character education program, Positive Action, examined Grade 6-12 students enrolled in a rural district in Utah; the study focused on the categorization of physical, intellectual, social, or emotional development, divided by two domains: behavioral and feeling (Ji et al., 2005). The authors wrote, "The study measured and distinguished categories and domains from each other to empirically demonstrate that character-based interventions could improve a wide range of student outcomes" (Ji et al., 2005, p. 110). Using a survey to compare the results of students in the program to those in the control group, the researchers found that behaviors and good feelings about oneself

could be measured and distinguished from each other, a student's character could be measured, and the effects of character-based intervention programs on student character translated to other outcomes such as pro and antisocial behaviors and academic achievement (Ji et al., 2005, p. 119).

Thirty-one principals responded to a survey involving implementation and sustainment factors for instituting change in elementary and high schools recognized and selected by the Character Education Partnership (CEP) as National Schools of Character between 1998 and 2006 (Borda, 2007). Because the school leaders played a crucial role in instituting change for academic performance and other curricular initiatives in their schools, the researcher concluded that principals who employed strong, central leadership represented the most successful factor for character education pedagogy. Visionary principals who used consensus; recognized, developed, and mobilized talent; monitored progress; and provided ongoing support proved the most successful. Additionally, principals who empowered others were the most effective leaders, and over time, sustainment of change initiatives increased when principals employed the leadership strategies. Therefore, for character education to be comprehensive in the school, the educational community must conceptualize it comprehensively with effective principal leadership.

Summary

This chapter has described the phenomenon of character education and the debates and complexities for implementation efforts in the nation's public schools. A chronological path of the social and moral framework regarding the development of character education pedagogy in schools for student populations was discussed. Federal

- and state mandates set forth the requirements and availability of support for character education instructional programs in schools throughout the nation. A definition and view of rural schools with descriptions of problems and advantages of these distinct, geographically located sites conveyed the needs of the school district and student populations. The fifth section explained character education initiatives and provided information on categories of programs and evidence of effect on student populations. Dilemmas encountered by rural school principals in meeting state and federal accountability obligations regarding academic achievement and yearly accreditation while trying to discern the best character education efforts exemplified the tensions between the two issues. Ultimately, the importance of nurturing and enhancing students' moral and character development, in the context of a principal's leadership and the needs of rural schools, in addition to the sustainability factors needed for a comprehensive character education initiative in the school environment, were explained in the context for the continuous investigation needed in this area of research.

The researcher provided an overview of the history of character education entailing the influence of a school principal for curricular development, accountability standards in a high-stakes testing environment with NCLB (2002) requirements, implementation and methodology initiatives, and problems measuring the effectiveness and impact of character education pedagogy on student populations. Additionally, the researcher provided an impetus for this research based upon the gaps in the literature and lack of research on the plights of rural school districts with regard to character education implementation initiatives. Therefore, the necessity of a case study benefited the

completion of this research on a principal's perceptions of character education in a rural public school district.

Chapter III

Methodology

The design of this research process focused on exploring and understanding the perceptions of a principal in a rural public school with regard to a character education implementation initiative. The methodology selected for this study involved a qualitative single-case design approach with a within-case analysis. The goal was to acquire knowledge of how a rural school principal perceived character education, how those perceptions affected leadership and decision-making processes for the implementation of such a program, and how the principal perceived the relationship between character education and student achievement, in a state mandating that public school districts establish character education pedagogy.

In scientific research, the utilization of qualitative case study methodology has been a popular methodology for many academic disciplines, such as psychology, social sciences, and education (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Merriam (1998) recommended using qualitative research approaches with educational investigations, and Creswell (2007) described case study research as “a methodology, a type of design, or an object of study, as well a product of the inquiry” (p. 73). Using a qualitative investigative approach, the researcher examines a delimited case or several delimited cases.

To gain information about the case in this research, the researcher employed a multimodal methodology of data collection throughout this investigation for critical review assurances. Data collection techniques comprised observations, individual interviews involving the critical incident technique, vignettes, a focus group, audiovisual materials, member checking, and review of documents and reports emphasizing details of

the topic. A thorough examination of the data resulted in a descriptive report of emergent themes during the research investigation.

There has been much prejudice against case study research and its methods. In the scientific community, case study methodology often has been repudiated for its lack of scientific rigor, deficiencies in empirical procedures and supportive quantitative data, length of time needed to complete the study, volumes of notes, field work, and hours of coding and transcriptions, as well as lack of generalizability (Yin, 2009). Yin's (1981a, 1981b) technical definition of case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (1981a, p. 18). Platt (1992) followed Yin and enlightened the scientific community with the definition that case study begins with "a logic of design...a strategy to be preferred when circumstances and research problems are appropriate rather than an ideological commitment to be followed whatever the circumstances" (p. 46).

Therefore, employing a qualitative case design approach enhanced the exploration of this phenomenon to understand a rural school leader's perceptions of character education, affording knowledge of current and future implementation of character education pedagogy, especially with the legislative mandates for character education standards in Virginia's public schools. The bounded case analysis provided an opportunity to learn about the rural school in the purposeful sample, its activities and functions, its happenings and contexts, in addition to observing, noting and describing emerging patterns of commonalities and differences in a rural school with regard to character education pedagogy.

The researcher considered a bounded case design to be the best method for this study versus a phenomenological approach for several reasons. Although perceptions are closely related to phenomenology, using a bounded case study, the principle difference is that the focus of study is the individual case and not the whole population of cases. It is not based on generalization but on understanding of the particulars of the case and its complexity. According to Yin (2009), “the case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (p. 18). In addition, a case study explores a system so it can be comprehended in its context (Yin & Davis, 2007). Therefore, a case study methodology was chosen as the most appropriate for this research investigation.

Given the influences of principals in schools, some studies have shown that character education is congruent with academics and can make a difference in school environments, but less attention has been paid to character education due to the demands of state accreditation with accountability standards. This investigation of how a principal perceived and conceptualized character education in the school was devoted to understanding these factors and how they affected the leadership and decision making of character education implementation, as well as perceptions of the relationship between character education and student achievement in a rural public school district.

Case study methodology requires the investigator to focus on the careful selection of research questions (Yin, 2009). Therefore, research questions were selected to clarify

the nature of the investigation and review the literature regarding a principal's perceptions of character education, how those perceptions affected program implementation in the school, and the relationship between character education and student achievement in a rural school district with state-mandated requirements. This qualitative study investigated the following questions.

Research Questions

Overarching question

How does the rural school principal perceive and conceptualize character education in the school?

Subquestions

- a. How does the rural school principal's perception of character education affect program implementation in the school?
- b. How does the rural school principal perceive the relationship between character education and student achievement?

Role of the Researcher

According to Stake (1995), the researcher plays myriad roles throughout a case study research investigation. Depending on the particular tasks within a qualitative study, the researcher can operate in various roles such as "teacher, participant observer, interviewer, reader, storyteller, advocate, artist, counselor, evaluator, consultant, and others" (Stake, 1995, p. 91). The teacher role relies on the ability to relay information by encouraging and guiding others to learn, comprehend, interpret, and understand. The researcher constantly needs to make decisions about the limits of her participation, the dilemma of assuming an expert stance or not, and how much to share, criticize, evaluate,

or stay neutral, while deliberating the depth of interpretation and how much should be shared for future readers (Stake, 1995). Ultimately, the pressures of the research project circumstances dictate what roles to perform; however, the researcher should always ensure an honest and ethical path in the most important role of the case study tradition.

Yin (2009) believed the researcher should be skillful in asking good questions, be able to interpret answers, have good listening skills, and be responsible in making certain assumptions so that biases do not overshadow the integrity of the investigative methodology before the study begins. Additionally, the researcher needs to be flexible and adaptive to new situations as they unfold in the study, having a strong understanding of the topics being explored.

Nevertheless, there is a caveat from this researcher regarding the views on character education initiatives in rural public schools. The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the perceptions of a rural school principal regarding character education, how those perceptions affected leadership and decision-making processes for program implementation, and the perceived relationship between character education and student achievement. Based upon the existing research, there appeared to be a lack of substantive or conclusive evidence that principals' perceptions of character education affect the implementation or student achievement according to their beliefs about character education pedagogy. Because there appeared to be as many types of character education programs as schools, either the research had not investigated this specific issue or the inconsistency of implementation in schools contributed to the lack of rigorous research on this specific component of character education.

Therefore, one cannot conclude that a principal's perceptions of character education are not important, especially with the state's expectation for accountability with the Standards of Learning. The need to identify the perceptions of a principal, as well as the principal's leadership and decision-making processes in mobilizing character education in the school and the relationship between character education and student achievement for rural public schools in Virginia, encouraged an investigation to explore the implementation and integration of character education in the school environment. Finally, it was possible that researcher bias might emerge regarding prior teaching experiences with character education in various private and public Virginia schools, in addition to beliefs that character education pedagogy is a curriculum all schools should implement. Nevertheless, all results are presented in an impartial, fair, and accurate manner with appropriate research methodology and participants in the investigation.

Case study research has been increasingly used in educational investigations and applied to a variety of instructional situations (Tellis, 1997). The following are advantages of employing a qualitative case study research design: It provides more in-depth and comprehensive information and uses the information and observations to describe constructs under consideration, as well as the interactions in the contextual setting. Conversely, the subjectivity of such a design leads to challenges in establishing the reliability and validity of the approach or minimizing perceptions of existing researcher bias (Campbell, 1975).

The strategies this researcher used to maintain objectivity consisted of the following: construct validity, multiple sources of evidence, and triangulation of data, in addition to establishing a chain of evidence and the participant's member checking

information for accurate reporting. Second, it was important to establish internal validity by matching patterns, looking for correspondence between two or more categories within the case (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, the researcher needed to thoroughly explain the shared characteristics and variances within the case (Yin, 2003).

Finally, generalizability needed to be considered with the use of a comprehensive case study protocol for replication logic: “generalizations that people can learn from the case either for themselves or to apply to a population of cases” (Creswell, 2007, p. 163). Last but not least, to enhance reliability of the design, an accurate and complete database of the case approach provided assistance in negating any objectivity and subjectivity considerations. These distinctions needed to be clearly made, especially to ensure appropriate protocol for discernment of this case study investigation, and were accomplished through the following procedures. An audit trail consisted of a timeline of the research activities, a narrative of the research activities, participant contacts, informed consent forms, observation rubrics, interview protocols, checklists, field notes, memos, audiotapes, vignette script, transcriptions, coding efforts, artwork, and photographs (Creswell, 2007).

Research Plan

This investigation employed a single-case study design approach to understand how the perceptions of a principal in a rural public school with obligations to state mandates affected character education pedagogy and implementation of such programs. The study intended to discern how a principal’s perceptions conceptualized character education in the school, the leadership and decision making for program implementation, and the perceived relationship between character education and student achievement for

the school population. The study included a purposeful selection of one principal in a K-12 rural public elementary school, chosen from the 133 public school districts in the State of Virginia. Using a purposeful sample provided an effective method to obtain the opinions about character education in the school from the targeted case.

A letter of intent (Appendix A) requesting permission to conduct the study was sent to the superintendent of the school district. After securing permission for the study, the researcher e-mailed a communication (Appendix B) requesting participation of a K-12 rural public school principal in the study, with acknowledgement of the research purpose and the procedures involved in the research investigation. After securing the study participant, a confirmation letter of agreement (Appendix C) was sent including a reiteration of the research purpose and an explanation of expectations. Another communication (Appendix D) described the direct and indirect benefits of participation in the research and acknowledged opportunity to withdraw at any time during the study without consequence or negative impact on employment. After agreement was confirmed, the principal received another e-mail communication (Appendix G) requesting times and dates for site visits and individual interviews. Two methods of interview were offered for the participant's convenience: Skype/Adobe Connect, an Internet computer program, or on site, in person with the researcher. In addition, dates and times were requested to review documents and audiovisual materials for the case design.

To assure confidentiality, the researcher kept information from the case secure in a separate file cabinet in the researcher's office. Plans, notes, and instructional materials had no impact on personnel evaluations for employment, and transcripts, memos, and

other files did not contain identifying features connected with the data. Any findings from the study are presented in aggregate to maintain participant anonymity.

A triangulated method of collecting and analyzing data consisted of the following protocols: school site observations, a critical incident technique with a recorded interview session incorporating a standardized open-ended question–probe format, a vignette methodology describing a hypothetical character education scenario, an accompanying checklist to supplement the research and factors that influenced decisions regarding relevant situations (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003), a focus group with school personnel involved in the character education initiative, and review of documents and audiovisual materials. Additionally, review of educational materials, such as the school improvement plan and instructional resources, supported and confirmed the purposeful planned methodologies regarding the perceptions of character education pedagogy in the rural school district (Creswell, 2007).

Access to various types of communication provided a perspective and rich insight into the thoughts, ideas, and feelings of the rural school principal in Virginia, a state with a legislative mandate for character education, when planning, collaborating, and developing proposals for character educational pedagogy. Bulletin boards, wall art, student art, and word messages within the school environment assisted in understanding the atmosphere the principal had promoted in the educational site. Documents and audiovisual materials highlighted a contextual process, approach, or technique within the instructional environment with regard to character education pedagogy (Patton, 2002).

As a follow up to the study, an online connection through Skype or Adobe Connect computer program was proposed for a discussion on character education with

the principal and focus group participants regarding the facilitation of character education programs in the high-stakes testing arena, providing another avenue of information about character education pedagogy. The online discussion was an optional piece to the research design. If the study participant discerned that the online follow-up method was an unfavorable communication format, an on-site meeting was offered. However, due to time constraints and an earlier culmination of the school year schedule, the online connection was not offered or utilized for data collection. Therefore, the electronic component was omitted as a data analysis component for the research design methodology.

Before any of the data collection could begin, it was important that this research design be reviewed and approved by the Old Dominion University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to assure that subjects in this study would be treated ethically. A formal application was submitted for committee review to ensure that the study was exempt based on the following components: investigation conducted in an established and accepted educational setting; involved normal educational practices; used survey procedures, interview procedures and observations of public behavior; included the collection of existing data documents, records that were publically available, recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects could not be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and not federally funded. The application provided information on research protocol pertaining to the abstract, statement of purpose, literature review, research methods, data, sampling, data collection, study documents, and human subject considerations. It also addressed any possible risks to the subjects, sources of materials, potential adequacy of protection against risks including recruitment

and informed consent, potential benefits of the research to the subjects and others, importance of the knowledge to be gained, authorized use of the data, approval to conduct the study at the school, data management, human subject certification, and references (Old Dominion University, 2004).

Additionally, before data collection began, an explanation of the data collection instruments, surveys, and other information needed to conduct the study were provided to the IRB. Furthermore, the application included the following: confirmation of acknowledgment of informed consent; reasonable and comprehensible explanations of the study to the participants noting that there would be no fraud, force, deceit, or risks; assurance of the opportunity to withdraw participation at any time; discernment of costs; procedures and protocols; minimal-risk information; explanation of nontherapeutic research benefits; and an offer to answer questions and inquiries about the study at any time. After receiving exempt status from the IRB committee, data collection began.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher used a triangulated methodology with convergence of data from multiple sources to investigate and understand a rural principal's perceptions of character education (Denzin, 1978). First, the researcher developed an audit trail and amended the records throughout the study in an effort to keep a coherent and cohesive timeline of research activities. These records included participant contacts, consent forms, demographic statistics for the rural school, interview protocols, checklists, field notes, memos, coding methods and notations, transcriptions, instrument development guidelines, video or Internet discussions and audiotapes, artwork, and photographs. The

audit trail assisted the researcher in organization and approach within the case investigation of character education in a rural school district.

Observations. To identify activities and programs at the school site, an observation protocol, comprising character education events, lessons, and activities was employed. The protocol consisted of morning or afternoon visits at the school to observe instructional periods during specified times arranged and approved by the school principal. During school observations, the researcher used the Observation Coding Protocol forms (Appendices E and F) and a notebook to write field notes and was a passive participant by not interacting or participating, but assuming the role of spectator of the current instructional entity. The protocol form assisted the researcher in noting specific categories and subcategories of character education components during the observation. Each category helped provide a more in-depth perspective and understanding of the setting, climate, and instructional purposes, in addition to instructional strategy or techniques used in character education pedagogy. The goal was to gain a holistic view of the leadership influences and decision-making processes regarding character education pedagogy based on the principal's perceptions. Gathering comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information about the case of interest provided a broader view (Patton, 2002) of character education efforts at the school site.

Document and audiovisual review. An e-mail communication (Appendix H) was sent to the principal participant to reconfirm a review of educational documents and audiovisual materials, along with a request to schedule a date and time for the examination. Document reviews encompassed character education lesson plans, meeting notes, instructional materials, photographs, art, messages, strategic planning, materials,

school Web sites, the school improvement plan, and the school's annual yearly progress in student achievement, based on the current year's Virginia Standards of Learning pass rates, as well as any records specifically related to educational planning and preparation.

The researcher also developed a document–audio visual protocol checklist (Appendix I) for the following categories: (a) instructional materials, textbooks, lesson plans, teacher's manuals, and charts; (b) technological materials, including Web pages, software, CDs, and films; (c) communication, including lesson plan notes, grade-level meeting ideas, letters, and e-mails; (d) visual materials, including charts, bulletin board themes, photographs, student art, and messages; (e) expenses, including school supplies, games, and music; and (f) academic achievement data, including the school improvement plan. The checklist enabled the researcher to note reviewed materials and add field notes during the review of documents. It also provided assistance for comparison and contrast of support within this case investigation (Patton, 2002).

Focus group. After gathering and perusing school documents, especially the school's improvement plan, a focus group involving current school personnel was conducted with those individuals either facilitating the character education initiative (critical incidents) or supporting the school program. Morgan (1993) wrote,

A focus group can help the investigator know the language that the population uses to describe their experiences, but can acquaint the investigator with the population members' values and styles of thinking in communicating about the research topic. They can be helpful in a research effort with populations that are understudied, because they demonstrate to the population that the investigator is

not just treating them as numbers but is truly interested in listening to them. (p. 117).

The researcher facilitated a focus group of 5 voluntary school personnel in an audiotaped session, at a mutually scheduled time, for 2 hours. Participant respondents were apprised that their involvement in the focus group would not generate any identifying indicators of specific individuals and that all data would be reported in aggregate. The researcher presented the character education topic and its purpose for exploring thoughts and beliefs of the group regarding character education pedagogy. Due to the researcher's prior perusal of documents regarding the school's improvement plan, a list of dimensions and events of character education incidents was shared with the participants regarding the frequency and nature of character education events occurring in the school. Next, the researcher moderated the focus group with an open-ended question and probe format (Appendix J). The data were coded into textual files and then into major topics and subtopic categories. This process enabled the researcher to correlate statements that shared a specific nature to be coded more easily (Morgan, 1993, p. 45).

Critical incident technique. The researcher arranged to interview the rural school principal at an agreed-upon time. A standardized open-ended interview questionnaire format was used for the reporting system. Before the interview the participant received an e-mail communication from the researcher (Appendix C) to reconfirm purpose, participant agreement, confidentiality, and acknowledgement that any findings from the study would have no identifying participant features. A 60 minute interview, on site, was scheduled. Before the interview began, the researcher reminded the participant that the session would be audiotaped for reconfirmation.

During the session, interview questions comprised a standardized open-ended question and probe format, with the researcher's taking notes on the interview protocol form (Appendix G). The researcher had reviewed the school improvement plan and discerned any linkages to instructional goals and objectives for possible character education implementation program initiatives in the school. The researcher also had reviewed documents, the school site, and instructional programs.

Therefore, using prepared questions about character education allowed a more focused, systematic approach, and supported an organized order and comparative analysis for the interview (Patton, 2002). The standardized open-ended format also assisted in discernment of answers to the overarching research question and two subquestions:

How does the rural school principal perceive and conceptualize character education in the school?

- a. How does the rural school principal's perception of character education affect program implementation in the school?
- b. How does the rural school principal perceive the relationship between character education and student achievement?

Advantages of the critical incident technique include use of the real words of the participant and a focus on the ordinary, unusual, or extraordinary of the "incident" rather than usual data. Additionally, it does not relegate the participant into any format. Being an inexpensive and flexible technique, it helps identify events or occurrences that might not be observed or recorded in daily activities. The technique highlights components that might make a character education initiative susceptible to failure or possibly support major benefits.

Nevertheless, in addition to advantages, there are disadvantages to this technique. The participant might be reluctant to express true feelings when discussing students' moral and character development because it could reflect poorly on the principal as a school administrator. Additionally, the incident is noted after the fact and participants may state stereotypical ideas versus the actual character education event and their true beliefs. The method could create bias based on the memory of a recent incident because the most recent are those more easily remembered. The reliability of this technique might also be considered rather weak because the daily issues of the character education initiative or incident might be missed in the data collection. In this case, the researcher described the situation, accounted for and listened to the actions of the key player, the principal, and reported factually, comprehensively, and objectively the outcome or result of the principal's beliefs regarding the character education incidents in the school environment. The critical incidents were interpreted according to the value or emphasis placed on the character education incident and its importance to the school population (Appendix G).

Vignettes. According to Greenhaus and Powell (2003), the use of vignettes can be a supportive method for understanding perceptions and beliefs that are not always easily accessed with other research approaches. Because participants can answer a researcher's interview question in a stereotypical manner, character education pedagogy can be reintroduced by placing it in a contextual setting with vignettes. Employing a character education vignette helped create a framework for the case study research and supported the unit of analysis for the investigation.

Additionally, exploring character education in detail through the use of vignettes assisted in collecting the important information needed for understanding how the principal perceived and conceptualized character education in the school environment. The methodology provided a portrait of the school principal and presented perspectives that could transform or negate character education initiatives in schools. For this study, the vignette presented a hypothetical character education dilemma in the school environment, whereas the principal had to recognize and answer questions on issues involving the engagement of critical, reflective, and comprehensive beliefs about character education pedagogy in schools (Appendix K).

Data Analysis

The principal researcher of this study, currently an administrator of a school, had been a school administrator for more than 13 years and a guidance counselor for more than 20 years and had taught and developed character education programs in several elementary schools. The researcher had a personal interest in the investigation of character education implementation and leadership influences that affect the pedagogy. Therefore, to validate the accuracy of the study, the researcher employed triangulated methods of data analysis for the case study research design, using various protocols: school site observational visits, recorded interviews using the critical incident technique, focus group, vignettes, and review of documents and audiovisual materials.

During site visits, the researcher wrote field notes on the Observation Protocol (Appendix E) about the physical setting and atmosphere, voice tone and body language of those personnel espousing the character education effort, purpose of lessons, instructional methodologies, representative resources and materials, leadership and decision-making

influences with character education. Within each observation category, a deliberately planned effort was used to gain in-depth perspectives and understanding of the character education initiative.

A color-coding schema was used for specific assignment and categorization of emerging themes from the data collection. The use of colors as categorical identifiers created ease in identification of themes but assured anonymity for the unit of analysis in reported findings. Furthermore, the color-coding schema and the written transcriptions were analyzed for similarities and differentiation within the case as themes emerged from the data.

Recorded interviews were conducted with the use of a standardized open-ended question format protocol outlining core questions and probes related to the research questions designed for investigation of the principal's perceptions of character education. The interview questions explored participants' definitions and preferences related to character education: beliefs, attitudes, and influences, as well as the principal's perception regarding the relationship between character education and student achievement. The participants were assured that there were no wrong answers to the questions and that responses would be confidential. Transcription of each taped interview was checked for accuracy against the original tape recording with the principal and focus group participants.

For access to documents, audiovisual materials, and student achievement reports, the researcher requested a scheduled period approved by the school principal. This process allowed even more in-depth inspection, organization, and thematic groupings that aided the previously described color-coding system for each study participant. The color-

coding system provided a visualization of emerging themes and patterns, as well as conditional matrices before permanent ones were formed for within- and across-case data analysis.

Verification procedures. In a qualitative case study design methodology, it is essential to ensure trustworthiness regarding the research investigation. Guba and Lincoln (1985) described four components a researcher should use to verify the integrity of the research analysis: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To ensure credibility of this research design, the researcher employed a triangulation methodology, a multilayered approach involving the use of a critical incident technique individual interview, site observations and document review, a focus group, and vignette methodology versus a one-way avenue of inquiry. Additionally, the researcher's appendices provide access to protocols, forms, and interview procedures that were used throughout the analyses, identifying the paper trail of procedures for the investigation that supports the issue of transferability. Furthermore, dependability and confirmability were verified through member checking with the study participant for accuracy of narratives, in addition to the independent audit of the dissertation chair and committee overseeing and assessing the researcher's audit trail, investigative analytical procedures, and the dissertation itself.

Summary

A qualitative case study is an investigative method to provide a detailed interpretation of a unit of analysis, discerning an understanding of the relevant facts of the participant in the analysis. Defining the beliefs, leadership, and decision-making influences of character education and its relationship to student achievement required the

researcher to use various modalities to discern the shared characteristics and differences of the principal's thoughts, opinions, and perceptions on character education program implementation in a rural public school.

This detailed investigation provides a comprehensive report regarding the challenges and difficulties of a rural school, the support and complexities of character education, the leadership and decision-making influences of a principal with character education programs, the challenges to meet state achievement standards, and the requirements to mobilize resources to promote and implement character education pedagogy. This study offers a unique perspective of a school principal regarding character education and state requirement mandates in conjunction with the tension associated with accountability obligations for state accreditation and academic achievement in a rural public school district in Virginia.

Chapter IV

Analysis of Results

The moral and character development of students has become a national focus and impetus for schools to develop curricular initiatives and pedagogical approaches for the educational environment. For character education, whether a broad, overlapping, or hybrid-type activity, the instructional pedagogy comprises the moral and ethical values of responsibility, respect, caring, fairness, and citizenship; additionally, “it can refer to the demonstration of these values in behavior, reasoning, and emotions” (WWC, 2007 p. 1). Despite the impetus for character education, the needs of rural schools and the curricular leadership decisions of principals, the current high-stakes standardized testing arena, and the pressure for accountability and attainment of successful benchmark percentages have promoted direct competition for curricular implementation of these complementary programs to academics in rural schools. Meier (2000) wrote,

State standards and high-stakes tests will not help to develop young minds, contribute to a robust democratic life, or aid the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens. By shifting the locus of authority to outside bodies, it undermines the capacity of schools to instruct by example in the qualities of mind that schools in a democracy should be fostering in kids—responsibility of one’s own ideas, tolerance for the ideas of others, and a capacity to negotiate differences. (pp. 4-5)

Nevertheless, President George W. Bush declared,

These historic reforms [No Child Left Behind Act of 2001] would improve our public schools by creating an environment where every child could learn through real accountability, unprecedented flexibility for states and school districts,

greater local control, more options for parents, and more funding for what works. (USDOE, 2004a).

Therefore, the most comprehensive reforms of state standards for public education since the 1960s presented problems for current school principals in making decisions about the implementation of character education programming when test scores hinged on the level of adequate yearly progress (AYP) for school accreditation.

Coinciding with those tensions, rural schools found themselves at disadvantages with the testing pressures regarding high percentages of low socioeconomic students, fewer resources, reduced tax bases, and the drain of qualified personnel staying at their schools. These forces presented far-reaching implications for school principals to consider when making decisions for curriculum interventions such as character education. The need to increase adequate yearly progress percentages and meet the benchmark requirements for the nation's public schools unintentionally provided competition for the implementation of character education programs despite their being mandated by the state's Standards of Learning. For that reason, rural school principals faced considerable pressure and difficult decisions in implementing additional curricular programs, even those that fostered moral and ethical values of character and citizenship development of students, due to the competition for time and space for programs resulting from the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation and the need to increase academic performance in the high-stakes testing arena (Catalano et al., 2002).

In an attempt to comprehend the issues faced by rural public school leaders in the current standardized environment, a single-case research design was selected to investigate the perceptions and conceptualizations of a rural school principal regarding

character education in the high-stakes testing arena, in light of its being mandated by state Standards of Learning. Moreover, the researcher of this study had taught and developed character education programs and, thus, had a personal interest in the investigation of character education perspectives of rural school administrators.

Therefore, to validate the accuracy of the study, the researcher employed a triangulated method of data analysis with the use of various protocols: the critical incident technique, a recorded individual interview with a standardized open-format questionnaire, prerecorded video vignettes for review and response, facilitation of a recorded focus group, site visits, and review of documents and audiovisual materials. Within the protocols, the researcher made a deliberately planned effort to gain in-depth perspectives and understandings of how the rural school principal's perceptions of character education affected program implementation, in addition to the relationship between character education and student achievement in a rural public school district.

Research Questions

To discern the perspectives, the research question and subquestions were developed to identify the principal's perceived character education ideas and how those beliefs affected the leadership implementation decisions for curriculum integration within the school environment:

How does the rural school principal perceive and conceptualize character education in the school?

- a. How does the rural school principal's perception of character education affect program implementation in the school?

- b. How does the rural school principal perceive the relationship between character education and student achievement?

Procedure for Analysis

Site selection. A PreK-7 elementary school principal from a rural public school district comprising two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school, all located in a small coastal community, volunteered to be the participant for the qualitative study investigation. The decision to study this particular school was based on its locality, population statistics, and its representation of descriptors similar to those of other rural schools throughout the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (USDOE, 2004a), the school had a locale code of 7 or 8: located outside a core-based metropolitan statistical area with a population of fewer than 2500 people and a poverty level of at least 20%. The site was a designated Title I school with fewer than 600 students of whom approximately 80% were eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program. The collected data concerning this elementary school confirmed the demographic characteristics.

Advertising literature on the school Web site described the school:

...committed to student academics, extracurricular activities, and parent and community involvement with a mission to create and maintain a school where the staff and community work closely together to support and nurture children and where education is of primary importance to all. Our school promotes a safe, orderly, caring, supportive environment, and positive relationships with other students and staff to foster each student's self-esteem. We educate our students to

become confident, competent, responsible, and productive citizens through diverse learning experiences in a positive structured environment.

Before arriving at the designated rural school site, the researcher stopped at a local food market for directional assistance. A smiling-faced woman responded to the researcher's predicament. She said, "Oh, I don't know any of the names of the streets, even after living on the shore my whole life, but I can tell you how to get there. Just turn around, go back down the same road, and turn left when you see the goats." Trying to make sure there was no misunderstanding with the information and "goat" path guidelines, the researcher reversed direction, turned left by the herd of young goats and discovered a bright and welcoming elementary school with shiny yellow buses resting not far from the pasture of bleating, horned, and furry animals.

A U-shaped driveway provided a relaxed path to the front entrance of the small, rural, coastal community public school, which facilitated an accessible admission area for parents, students, and guests. Parking spaces for the principal, the assistant principal, and other administrative personnel of status within the school community shared specific signage and designations. Built in 1993, the contemporary, red brick elementary school building was considered relatively new. Tall, large columns stood like a box of crayons, painted in bold primary colors of red, yellow, orange, and green and provided anchor for the covered walkway, welcoming visitors into the wide sun-filled lobby. Standing in the middle of the school lobby, visitors note similar floor-to-ceiling glassed areas affording space for administrative offices and the 10,000 book-filled library to the right and left, respectively. Hallways winding east and west guided visitors and community members

to preschool through seventh-grade classrooms where there were children in specific uniform attire.

Approximately 65 people worked at the school as teachers, assistants, or instructional support staff. The instructional staff consisted of 40 full-time teachers with 63% having bachelor's degrees and 32% master's degrees. According to the 2009-2010 state's division report card, 23% of the teachers of core academic classes did not meet the federal definition of highly qualified, with 21% provisionally and conditionally licensed. In addition to having a student-teacher ratio of 14.5, the instructional faculty taught a diverse student population consisting of 28% Caucasian, 50% African American, 21% Hispanic, 1% other, and 10% migrant children. The school leadership consisted of a principal, assistant principal, and guidance counselor supported by an administrative bookkeeper–secretary, resource personnel, and faculty committees.

In 2010-2011, the Virginia department of educational statistics reported the school and school division to be in their third year of failing to meet annual measureable objectives with scores of 79 and 81 in mathematics and reading–language arts, respectively. Additionally, the school was under pressure after accruing another year of being designated as Accredited with Warning for failing to attain the benchmark standards for successful adequate yearly progress. According to state literature (VDOE, 2010), a school failing to meet accreditation standards for three consecutive years is expected to provide improved methods for academic achievement correction. Being unable to meet successful achievement benchmarks had forced school administrators, faculty, and staff to consistently work with advisement from outside experts to develop a plan for major restructuring relevant to failures in the testing objectives. The welcoming

school building, idyllic rural site, and positive Web site advertisement appeared to be in direct contrast with the level of conflict the entangled school was currently experiencing while trying to achieve satisfactory distinctions.

Data collection. The researcher employed a triangulated method of analysis with the use of the critical incident technique referencing the school's character education program. To discern the participant's perspectives and concepts about character education, a recorded interview supplemented with a standardized open-ended question format protocol outlining core questions and probes was used. The participant, the school principal, was assured there were no wrong answers and that all responses would be kept confidential. Furthermore, transcription of the taped interview was checked for accuracy against the original taped recording. To gain even more insight, the school administrator was asked to view prerecorded vignettes for reflection, reaction, and leadership decisions and respond to pre and postvideo questions about character education scenarios.

In addition, faculty members participated in an audiotaped focus group about character education. After interview completion, the transcription of participant responses was checked for accuracy against the original tape recording. The written transcriptions were color coded for similarities and differentiation as themes emerged from the data. Furthermore, site observations, as well as collection and review of school artifacts, materials, and program documents, provided even more in-depth inspection for organization into thematic groupings.

School Leader

The principal. Centrally located in the main entrance of the school was the administrative office. All visitors were expected to sign in for acknowledgment as safe and trusted individuals before traveling elsewhere within the educational facility. The principal's office was located within the larger central office, past several smaller offices, including teachers' mailboxes and the faculty lounge. Like most administrative worksites, the principal's space contained the usual work tools: desks, bookshelves, computer, file cabinet, chairs, and academic certificates on the wall. Nearby, a more personalized collection of neatly framed family pictures revealed smiles for the principal's visitors. Most elementary schools have a large presence of children's artwork on the walls; however, this principal's office seemed devoid of "cutesy" elementary paraphernalia. Sitting behind a large desk, the school administrator offered the researcher a seat to begin the interview appointment. Not overly friendly but not unfriendly, the principal presented a cordial, business-like attitude and demeanor.

After introductions, the researcher inquired whether or not the principal had reviewed previously sent electronic communications regarding consent forms, preparation, the research investigation rationale, and his role as the study participant. The school leader looked at the researcher and answered with a substantive, "No." Realizing the demands and pressures of school administrators with the culmination of a school year, it had been difficult communicating with this school leader as prior communications of phone messages, voice mails, and emails had been either unanswered or ignored. Nevertheless, the principal's answer seemed to reflect a lack of concern or responsibility, especially after his original agreement to be the study participant, and sounded somewhat

obligatory about his role as the main focus of the research investigation at the rural elementary school.

Feeling like a powerless student awaiting an imaginary consequence while sitting in the principal's office, the researcher regrouped, thanked the principal for giving up valuable time, especially with the school in the midst of SOL testing, and began anew the interview procedures. The provision of extra consent forms and a reiteration of the purpose and tasks for which the principal would be responsible, in addition to a practice of the audiotape machine for use during the interview provided a friendly and less stilted communication exchange between the principal and the researcher. After a few minutes, an articulation of the study purpose was reconfirmed, consent forms were signed, and the interview began with a push of the audiotape button.

A Vietnam veteran, the principal indicated that his experience as a teacher and school administrator transcended more than 35 years. Formerly retired from the State of North Carolina, he relocated to the small, rural coastal school district while one of his children attended a state university; and became the appointed principal of one of the elementary schools in the district. Previously a middle school teacher, his expertise related to the subject matter of social studies and language arts. Describing himself as an administrator of all types of schools, his educational journey began as a teacher, but the pathway into administration was based on a phone call from one of his former teachers at his childhood school:

He wanted me to be an assistant principal in my old school, the one I attended as a kid. I was a male, that's what he really wanted. I had no clue what I was getting

into...I just wanted to teach, so I got kind of thrown into it...administration right off the bat.

As he reminisced about how he started, the researcher probed, “Obviously, you seem to still like being an administrator after all these years in education.” The principal responded, “Yes, I had good mentors along the way.”

Currently, in his second year as principal of a school struggling to improve its third year of failing state standard benchmarks for not meeting annual yearly progress status, the principal believed his mission was “to get the school out of improvement” and up to standards. To support and improve the school’s rankings, the school was linked with state universities—Old Dominion University and the College of William and Mary—for advisement and assistance to improve the school’s performance regarding the unsatisfactory test scores.

Expectations. Regarding the principal as the school’s curricular leader, the researcher inquired about his expectations relevant to pressures the faculty and school community faced because of the negative scores. With a pensive look, sitting back in his chair, the principal stated that he believed faculty expectations could be either formal or informal, depending on the task. When asked for an elaboration of what that meant, he said, “It was difficult to be a professional today, basically adhering to all of the ethical standards for teaching, which were outlined for every educator no matter what district or state they’re employed. In fact it’s changed over the years, I can say that.” The researcher interjected, “So, if you believe it’s hard for educators to adhere to all of the standards today, what are your thoughts on character education? Is that problematic, too?”

Mindset. The principal began with his thoughts about character education:

I think we've always taught character education in schools; we just name things differently now. Different programs have come through in my 35 years plus, even in my 12 years as a student, and I attended public schools. However, it has changed over time. It changes constantly.

He continued by stating,

- Values are there, depending on the mood of the country, mood of the community, and depending on the swing of the state; that changes those things. There are a lot of outside factors that play important roles of what you push in schools. Today the focus is bullying. That's a national topic. However, a lot of time the push comes from outside the school community for things that are happening within the community, which occurs in the schools, but not only in the schools.

The principal continued with more opinions about character education.

For example, two years ago, it was violence...when you think of Columbine and Kentucky where kids were setting up or shooting their fellow students and bringing explosives to school, there was that swing...the tolerance policy that was created in different states and because of it led to the zero tolerance policies. Zero tolerance tied our hands and put law enforcement more closely aligned with schools at that time. I'm seeing a trend where that is separating right now and part of that trend is due to the economy. We had a School Resource Office here in my school part time, but due to budget constraints, that was removed, but I think you still see that in a lot of places, especially in secondary schools, but I think that concept is moving away from the elementary area...things change.

To inquire and refocus a more specific discussion about the character education perspective, the researcher asked, “If character values are with some of those national topics that are pushed in schools, do you think character education is worthwhile in the schools?” He replied,

Sure, schools teach a little bit of everything, and I know teachers and educators are doing more and more and more for the community and parenting more and more, but I believe in my 35 years of doing this we did character education when I started. Our teachers did with us when we were kids. We have always asked teachers to do that part...it’s more defined now. I think teachers did it then because they felt it was a part of what they do.

He continued, “Today, we have programs, PBIS, Positive Behavioral Intervention

Support, or ESD, Effective School-Wide Discipline. They are systems that reward kids, but have consequences in place if it goes outside the rules.... Most schools, public and private, have a standard for a code of conduct and those standards are set by their boards and or teachers for students and the community over time. We also work with Old Dominion University and TTAC, the Virginia Department of Education’s Training and Technical Assistant Center program, which is a statewide initiative to support positive academic and behavioral outcomes for all students.” The previous principal had implemented the ESD program, and the current principal continued the use of it with his entire faculty and staff to discern and effectively manage student behavior because it was based on extensive research.

The Effective School-Wide Discipline Program, ESD. Effective School-Wide Discipline, an initiative for schools in the State of Virginia, was developed to support positive academic and behavioral outcomes for all students. It presented a “practical way for schools to respond to group–individual needs, to define, teach, and reward acceptable student behavior at the school-wide level, at the classroom level, in non-classroom settings, and at the individual student level” (VDOE, 2008, p. 7). The goal of ESD purported the use of a comprehensive universal language by principals and school personnel in reference to behavioral expectations for students within the school environment. Additionally, the program literature claimed that ESD promoted proactive perspectives and attitudes in efforts to reduce behavioral disruptions in the classroom, affording more opportunities to engage instructional time.

The ESD program was initiated and implemented in 2008-2009 at the school under study, before the current principal’s tenure as the school’s instructional leader. Therefore, the principal’s responses might have been deduced or personalized. Descriptive examples of the ESD program appeared to focus on a behavior modification system; however, the current principal considered the program to be the school’s character education program based on its focus for students to choose better behavioral decisions with problem-solving skill sets. The principal said, “I’ve always done it [character education], and teachers have always done this, but now it’s formalized, canned, and made into a program for schools to use.” Furthermore, the principal believed the program emphasized prevention, comprised proactive strategies, and focused on teaching and rewarding appropriate student behavior.

ESD program literature promoted goals of raising students' academic achievement levels by decreasing the use of punitive disciplinary practices and increasing school personnel's reliance on more positive intervention plans. To accomplish those goals, guidelines for direct teaching, role playing, and modeling positive behaviors for students, in addition to a notebook with lesson plans, were provided for teachers to use with their classes. Program goals also encouraged teachers to share lesson plans, if they developed a specific example, for teaching a particular expectation to enhance positive student behavior.

The principal opined,

It was a formalized program that everyone could use and use the same language from classroom to classroom. ESD program is well defined, but has to be tweaked to fit your school. You build the rules, you build the standards and the consequences are, as we call them, the major and minors, versus discipline issues. We use splash bucks...our mascot is the dolphin, therefore, the reward of splash bucks for our students. Other schools use different names, usually based on their mascots, but present the same principles for program incentives.

The principal continued,

It allows teachers to build their own little program in their room with their students; that's what encourages students. Teachers use the program for their students to build and set the standards. It's like when you sharpen the pencil; there are rules when you go the restroom, when you're off task, when you get pulled back on...all those kinds of things. Basically, it's like the three "R"s. of

our “Kipper Crew” motto: Respectful always, Responsible for ourselves and our materials, and Ready to learn.

Posters, throughout the school building, visually displayed and constantly reminded students of the behavioral expectations. Probing further, the researcher inquired whether or not the principal believed the faculty used the program in their classrooms. “Yes, everyone does it in the halls, classrooms,” he said emphatically. “The kids call it ‘Splash Bucks,’ but ESD is a positive academic behavioral support program.”

The ESD model emphasized prevention and consisted of proactive strategies that focused on educating and rewarding good behavior. The principal said,

You look for the good behaviors, the positive behaviors. You see someone being good and you give ’em a “buck.” The thing about the program...you see a kid who is using good manners and you reward them. If you see a kid who is off task, you redirect or use those things you know, but the training comes with it, which really helps the teachers along with the standard posters posted throughout the school for the kids to see every day that we do this every day.

Critical incident. The researcher asked the principal for a particular or specific catalyst that created the need or interest for the ESD program implementation into the school environment. “Really, the impetus to implement this program was discipline,” said the principal. After further probing, the principal added that implementation of the ESD program was based on the former school administrator’s leadership decisions and not his own. Because the ESD program focused on student behavioral issues and was similar to a program at his former school, the principal had not implemented a character

education initiative due to his belief that the ESD program was a character education program.

Student expectations. Posted on doors, hallways, and classrooms to encourage students to be “respectful always, responsible for ourselves and materials, and ready to learn” in all areas such as buses, cafeteria, and playground was the “splash pledge.” According to the splash pledge, students earned splash bucks by

- being respectful when following directions, kindness to others, walking quietly in the halls, keeping hands, feet, and objects to yourself, giving privacy to others, using quiet voices and practice good table manners, and include and encourage others by taking turns, always doing your best, know and following the Code of Conduct, be on time, walk single file in hallways, use appropriate restroom manners, enter and exit quietly and in an orderly manner and play and share school equipment safely.
- being on task, have needed supplies, follow directions, carry planners and appropriate hall pass, have lunch and/or money and clean trays and tables at lunch, listen to directions, be on time, and when choosing a game or activity, return equipment to appropriate place.

Program benefits. The principal liked the ESD discipline information because of the availability of data for specific student discipline reports. The program also supported the opportunity to input data into a compatible quantitative computer program titled SWIS (School-Wide Information System), a student management system from the University of Oregon. After data were input, the program generated output information referencing major and minor categories of student behaviors according to behavioral

infractions by the time of day, and the who, what, when, and where of the discipline infractions occurring in the school. Moreover, the system provided both a broad and a narrow review of specific components. If a teacher continually experienced behavioral issues in the classroom, it generated specific details about that particular individual. Additionally, “if one teacher, over time, consistently had student referrals, you could train that person to have better classroom management to deal more effectively with the students,” said the principal. He continued, “The information is easily accessible and useful, especially with at-risk children in reviewing and assessing what and where the discipline percentages categorize and distribute.” As the principal discussed his admiration of ESD as the school’s character education program, the researcher asked for clarification about this perception with the numbers of at-risk children the school population served.

At-risk school population. The school community consisted of a diverse student population: 50% African American, 21% Hispanic, 28% Caucasian, and 1% other. In addition, the principal reported, within the academic program, 35% of the students were considered at risk, and economically, 80% participated in the free or reduced lunch-price program. Additionally, a large transient base of Hispanic children entered and exited the school between family work obligations on farms and other agricultural areas throughout the state. About 10% of those students were from migrant families, and in the summer, the school provided a program for the students to support their educational needs. Attendance, however, was not a problem: “Our kids come to school; we feed them twice a day, and in my experience, low socioeconomic students come to school. Our

accountability with attendance is better than 95%. They come to school,” affirmed the principal.

To further understand the principal’s beliefs about the diversity of the student population and the problems that plagued certain demographic groups, the researcher probed, “If this program wasn’t working, and obviously you believe ESD is, who would you ask to help or what would you do to enhance it, enrich, fix, or remediate this program?” He responded, “There is a committee with a chair and two other people who go to training in the summer, and three or four times a year, at the university, with several other school systems to garner more support of the school-wide program. There is a constant updating, reshaping, and reviewing of what’s happening in the schools...if there is a problem, the university training can come and help your school.”

“So, it’s train the trainers to come back and teach the faculty?” asked the researcher. The principal responded, “Faculty workshops are instituted, and we meet monthly with the team and review what’s happening and plan with the school what it can do to alleviate or better student behavior. In other words, we look at the behavioral trends over time in the school year, and that’s what we’re doing now.” According to the school administrator, ESD helped the faculty notice if a child was behaviorally awry as the program generated a report referring to the day, month, problem, location, time, and name of students. It provided more information and a comprehensive review of the overall behavioral issues of students. “I believe the program is good, helpful, and effective because it provides a lot of feedback for the administrator regarding individual students and the school as a whole,” said the principal.

The principal stated that the generated behavioral data provided opportunities to meet with the faculty and share where issues seemed to be most troublesome, thereby promoting a discussion among staff to determine what needed to be done as a school. He said,

I believe it is eye opening for the teachers because if a teacher is writing a lot of discipline referrals, it might be the teacher's approach or the class makeup could have something to do with it, but over time and over the years, what it tells you...maybe we need to help this person with their classroom management, send them to a workshop program, which might help present strategies on how to deal with kids in the classroom and so forth.

The researcher probed, "So this program not only helps teachers approach issues proactively, but provides the administration information, too?" "Yeah, I think it helps tremendously," replied the principal.

All on board? As in any organization, consensus can be somewhat difficult to attain in a school; the researcher wanted to know if the majority of the school faculty were "on board" with the program because the principal stated earlier in the interview that faculty participation in the program was without exception. "Do you have teachers resist the program that is currently in place?" the researcher inquired. The principal responded,

Well if we do, we show them our data report and work with them...send to workshops, the TTAC university program. If you go in a classroom and don't see The Kipper Crew 3 R posters espousing responsible, respectful, and ready to learn behavioral expectations in the room, you know the behavioral program is not

being used in that classroom and the data will show it, too. So I would say most of our teachers are pretty much on board. In fact, over all...well managed.

Although the principal shared his beliefs that the program was well managed by his faculty, the researcher probed to discern alternative challenges or inhibiting factors that could create obstacles for program efficacy, even with positive behavioral interventions from the teachers with the students.

Challenges. One of the main challenges the school faced, with or without the ESD program implementation, was cultural disparity. Because the school was located in an isolated, rural area, some of the faculty and staff never lived anywhere else other than the small, rural, coastal community. The community had its own long-standing culture, values, and traditions. “It is hard, and I’m a ‘come here;’ that’s what they call folks who don’t grow up here. You have to work hard to be accepted in the community,” said the principal.

The school faculty comprised a majority of Caucasian teachers; this composition conflicted and contrasted ethnically and culturally with the diverse school population. In addition, the principal said,

Because this area is so diverse, we have a migrant population...good folks, good kids, but can’t help their circumstances. They are bright kids but have a huge language barrier. The kids usually learn the language very quickly, but in the homes, it is Spanish and a cultural struggle because they are not immersed in English due to the faculty not being versed in Spanish.

Another challenge involved retaining qualified educators to work and reside in the rural location where the lack of businesses and cultural activities left little to do

recreationally. The principal explained, “There are not a lot of things to do here to keep people anchored in the community to sustain committed residency. Many young teachers will come out, work a couple of years, and go elsewhere.” Currently, the school community and local residents interacted with a very small number of businesses and companies located outside or somewhat near the rural school district.

Without the surplus of businesses, a low tax base further impeded funding for the school at a high level and reinforced the continuation of low socioeconomic populations in an already isolated rural community. Some schools within the rural location closed or consolidated because of the lack of additional revenues from businesses. Without additional funding and monies for schools, it had proved difficult to garner resources in efforts to expand programs or initiate new ones. The school received federal funds, but all of that money was earmarked and relegated for instructional purposes. Therefore, programs needed to support students in other ways were annulled, thereby negatively impacting the school with regard to implementation of other educational initiatives.

Mandates. The thrust from the United States Department of Education through the Partnerships for Character Education encouraged schools to incorporate initiatives. Many states took the charge and mandated school districts to implement programs for the moral and character development of their students. Because the rural school under study was in a state that mandated character education, it was important to understand how the principal perceived those requirements. The researcher inquired about the principal’s opinions of the state mandates for character education, the recommendation for public schools to implement and incorporate character education initiatives, and the Standards of Learning expectations for integration of character education into the school environment.

When asked the question, the principal developed a serious look on his face and replied,

The state does a lot of things as does the federal government, called unfunded mandates. For example, obesity is a current trend in schools, in which the state mandated we have so many minutes of physical education for every child.

Unfortunately, the bill was not signed and put into effect, but because it was, “those mandates”...they have put no monies behind that mandate for schools to hire more physical education teachers for implementation of those types of PE classes. We looked at this mandate, but we’re losing staff and so is everyone else due to cuts in budgets at the state and local level.

“So, are you saying, without the funding support, character education programs will cut into instructional programs and cannot be added unless there are additional funds?” asked the researcher. The principal indicated that for his school and other systems to support basic instruction, the money needed to be readily available to develop other initiatives:

It’s not that we don’t need it because it would support another component for character building in our students, especially with the nation’s childhood obesity issues. Being physically fit is important; students feel better about themselves; they gain confidence and perform better. That builds character.... It doesn’t take a lot of studies to see that.

Balancing the tensions. Due to the lack of funding for extracurricular initiatives and the state’s SOL mandates for moral, social, and character development education of children, principals are faced with tough curricular decisions competing for instructional space within the high-stakes testing environment of the No Child Left Behind Act of

2001 requirements. The researcher asked the principal to reflect on what school leaders could do in the implementation of character education pedagogy to more or less align these issues and balance the tension between academics and the moral and character development of their students. The principal said, “Well, we have to have character education to have order in the classroom...so it’s got to be there; you’ve got to teach the students the appropriate behaviors”; however, the principal continued,

You’ll hear educators complain that it’s the parents’ job, and we’re parenting the children. We are “in loco parentis” and we’re teaching skills; educators have been doing more with less for the last 20 years. It’s all important, but look at the programs that haven’t been fully funded: Title I, No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top. For example, Title I has never been fully funded by more than 20%, but we spend billions of dollars on defense in our country and no one asks questions. I am a veteran, and I say this because the politicians say schools are failing. No one wants to fire the soldiers, but they want to fire all the teachers. I don’t say that in an ugly way because I am a veteran of Vietnam and very proud of this country, but the politicians look at school funding as a big pot of money...meaning where they can cut funds. They won’t cut defense funding. Our current education system only affects those folks who have children, which represents less than 30% of our population...so other people don’t care. So to answer your question, we manage the tension by doing the best we can and by doing more with less here year after year.

The principal believed public school teachers were doing more and “working smarter” than ever in their lives as educators. He said,

I believe the public doesn't respect teachers and if people really looked at education, there are a lot of students coming out of public education that are doing pretty good [*sic*]. Public schools are probably doing a better job today with less money than they did 25 years ago, as far as the achievement piece...that's why I believe our behavioral program is our character education program. It's tied to respect for self, others, and property. It certainly helps us look closely at the high-risk students and puts in place strategies to problem solve as to what to do for them. It provides positive feedback, with a formal process that offers a lot of resources to help student behavior and academic achievement.

Vignettes. In qualitative research, the use of vignettes presents opportunities for a respondent to judge scenarios according to his or her own ideas and actions, as if actually involved in the situations. Furthermore, the exploration of sensitive topics through vignette methodology promotes a less intimidating way for exploration and clarification of an individual's judgments and behaviors (Barter & Renold, 1999). Thus, the use of the vignette methodology provided another path to discern the principal's perspectives about character education.

The principal was given a CD prepared and scripted by the researcher and asked to watch and review five scenarios about character education. The principal's task was to review, reflect, and respond with his ideas, beliefs, and leadership actions regarding each scenario situation. Accompanying the vignettes (Appendix K) were six prevideo and five postvideo questions to assist in exploration of deeper reactions, perceptions, and constructs of the principal's decision-making approach with character education. Each

scenario presented an overview of a situation for the study participant to read and then react to the interaction and dialogue between a “teacher” and a “school principal.”

The goal of the vignette review was to provide an exploration of the rural school principal’s perceptions about character education and leadership decisions involving such curricular initiatives. The principal’s responses to the five scenarios represented judgments, beliefs, and decision-making ideas regarding what the principal in the vignette should do in response to the scenario teacher’s character education implementation proposal idea, while the demands of school accreditation requirements created pressure for principal leadership decisions.

Prevideo issues. The principal was asked to read six questions (Appendix K) prior to watching the video and to answer them privately on his own time. After question completion, the principal was to forward his responses to the researcher. The following were the prevideo questions:

1. Do you have any concerns about legislation for schools to implement character education?
2. Pressures exist in every educational setting.... Can you think of ways your school programs are compromised? Briefly explain these ways, or if your answer is No, briefly explain how they are not.
3. Have you ever felt your concerns for what curriculum programs your school needs are dismissed?
4. Have you ever been required to implement curricular programs about which you had reservations?

5. Recall a time when you questioned your judgment about character education.
Briefly describe your emotions and thoughts.
6. Have you ever felt obligated to make adjustments to curricular programs
based on testing pressures?

For some unknown reason, the principal did not respond to the prevideo questions. The researcher was uncertain why the prevideo responses were not completed. Furthermore, it wasn't until after the postvideo responses were received that the omission was noted. The opportunity for response to those inquiries was after the fact and too late to remedy the situation. Several reasons could possibly explain the nonresponse to the prevideo questions. First, a miscommunication of directions from the researcher to the respondent could have occurred. Second, the principal could have unintentionally overlooked the questions. Third, the principal might have thought the questions were similar in orientation, subject matter, and question format to the one-to-one interview with the researcher; because of time constraints, he might have chosen to answer only the postvideo questions for the study investigation rather than respond to both sets of questions.

Because the prevideo questions should have been answered first, it appeared fruitless to resend the questions to the principal in an effort to garner answers when screening and completion of the postvideo questions had already occurred. Additionally, it was also the study participant's option, as stated in the agreement to participate, to respond or not respond to any or all questions at any time in the study (Appendix D). Nevertheless, the research investigator believed the specific prevideo questions to be different in nature from the original interview questions. Those beliefs resonated

regarding the possibility of difference between the principal's private versus public reflections of character education programs coupled with his own interwoven experiences, emotions, and judgments regarding current curricular decisions. If the prevideo questions had been answered, the responses might have included a completely different theme, an additional descriptive insight or a similar belief system about character education in the data collection. Nevertheless, due to the use of multiple data collection avenues, the omission was small enough to not obscure the investigative purpose of understanding a principal's beliefs with character education in a rural public school.

Postvideo questions and responses. After watching the vignettes, the principal was asked to answer the following questions, including his reflections regarding what he believed the scenario teacher and principal should do based upon the dialogue between the two vignette characters in each scene.

Scene I. The state has mandated that character education is expected in the public schools, and your school district struggles with resources, low-income communities, and being accredited annually. A faculty member tries to persuade the principal that character education is needed in the school; the principal listens but briefs teacher on the SOL needs and reinforces the requirement to work with those students to pass the SOL.

Question. Although the teacher is supported for her character education idea, can you identify any additional questions she might need to ask to make the initiative become more important for curricular implementation?

Principal response. “The principal is pushing the data and concerned about the time and implementation of the program. However, he should be open to finding out how this program may help.”

Scene II. Principal briefs teacher on needs of school for yearly accreditation; teacher argues school needs moral and character development, too.

Question. Think about the principal’s role in this scene. What do you think he should do?

Principal response. “The teacher should have been better prepared and come with a group of staff who will do some of the work involved in getting the program off the ground.”

Scene III. A week later, the teacher is frustrated because her time is only allotted to remediation and there has been a cheating incident and argument between students in the classroom. The teacher talks to the principal about the students’ behavior and their actions.

Question. The teacher is at an impasse. Briefly describe her options. Is there something else she can do with the administration and her belief about the moral and character development of students?

Principal response. “The teacher should have an outline and tasks laid out if she really wanted a program implemented.”

Scene IV. Teacher decides to work with her students in the new character education model she is excited about without administrative support. The students like the approach, but the character education initiative is not encouraged by other faculty members, even though some like it.

Question. When the teacher tries to share her new ideas about the program, it is not well received due to impending SOL requirements. What should she do?

Principal response. “She needs to present an idea of what it would look like, and how it would help. Additionally, she should have proposed brief points on how it could help testing and academics as well as school morale.”

Scene V. The teacher vents her frustration to the principal. He explains his thoughts about character education, but asks, “How is the school going to implement another curricular program?”

Question. Briefly describe the actions the principal and teacher should take in this situation for the eventual outcome of this incident.

Principal response. “Bottom line: She should have done her homework and involved fellow staff in the process (if she is serious about the program) and brought the proposal forward to the school improvement team for approval and possible implementation.”

In summary, the principal and teacher appeared conflicted as to who should lead the character education initiative regarding procedures for acknowledgement or implementation in the school setting. It appeared that the teacher was expected to shoulder the burden of proof regarding character education program benefits for the initiative to be a consideration. Although he was open to listening to the teacher’s proposal, the principal’s perspective focused on achievement standards and his stance that new initiatives needed to follow a trajectory of appropriate procedures before leadership engagement would be considered.

The teacher desired support and leadership from the principal, even though the principal's comments placed the burden of proof on the faculty member to lead the proposal. Even though the principal listened and appeared interested in the teacher's character education proposal, the principal seemed to blame the teacher for procedural failures to enlist other faculty to be supportive. It also was not established whether the principal supported or did not support the character initiative. Without a definitive administrative decision regarding the character education initiative, a noncommittal leadership strategy seemed to be employed rather than a collaborative supportive approach to guide the teacher with the proposal idea. If the character education programming could possibly complement student achievement for the moral and character development of students, the leadership support of the principal would need to be the catalyst for curricular implementation. The principal's reflections indicated neither direct nor indirect support for promotion of character education integration in the instructional curriculum.

Focus group. Another method employed for data collection was a focus group. Facilitation of a focus group with several of the school's teachers allowed exploration of ideas, thoughts, instructional components, perspectives, and activities related to the topic of character education with another group of stakeholders at the educational facility. Using the focus group method provided additional information about the current ESD program, its impact, and whether the impact was positive or negative with the faculty who were expected to implement the program into their classroom environments. It also offered the opportunity for the researcher to hear a different viewpoint from those school

personnel who purportedly used or did not use the program constructs, methods, or activities.

For assistance, the principal referred one of the team leaders of ESD to converse with the researcher about the program and the development of a focus group of faculty members. Due to an unusual school schedule, the SOL testing began a week later than regularly scheduled, and the school year dismissed a week earlier than expected due to the addition of extra minutes to each calendar week throughout the school year. With every minute of the day, from the beginning of the school year till the end, regimented and mandated by state testing requirements, scheduling a focus group, much less obtaining volunteers to participate, presented obstacles for additional data collection. Due to the end of the school year's timeframe and scheduling constraints, the group was limited to the wide range of faculty members willing and available to take the time to volunteer for focus group participation.

When the researcher arrived at the school for the focus group facilitation, the number of people who would actually participate in the group meeting had not been confirmed. Five faculty members volunteered to be participants in the focus group. With the culmination of the current school year, the faculty members were on their first day of summer vacation, but they readily agreed to share their viewpoints about character education and their roles as teachers at the school. At a meeting in the school library, the researcher opened with the usual introductions and thanked the participants for their generous offer of time to share their perspectives about character education at the school. After acknowledgement of the study purpose, the focus group participants were informed that all data would be configured in aggregate with no identifying features for any one

participant. After the participants signed their participant agreements, the focus group began.

The Faculty

Teachers. Demographically, the focus group included five female, Caucasian educators having a range of 9 to 33 years of teaching experience. The participants taught at different grade levels within the PreK-7 school and were employed as classroom teachers, instructional support personnel, or resource personnel. Each participant had an advanced degree, with one member's pursuing an educational specialist certification. The faculty members became teachers at the school with varying histories of experiences within and outside the state's educational institutions. One participant proudly shared that she had never been anywhere else and had experienced her 33 years of teaching in the rural school district.

The focus group participants confirmed their permission for responses to be audiotaped, guided by the use of a standardized open-ended question format, which outlined core questions and probes facilitated by the researcher (Appendix J). The questions explored participants' views about the current ESD program, the school's challenges, leadership, and character education. Participants were assured that there were no wrong answers to questions, responses would be kept confidential, and all data would be reported in aggregate. Additionally, transcription of the taped focus group was checked for accuracy against the original tape recordings, and written transcriptions were color coded for visualization of similarities and differentiation between participants as themes emerged from the data.

Mindset. The teachers were asked to share and discuss their opinions regarding moral development concerns, those that appeared to be most problematic in the school. Participants bantered back and forth, but the topics of respect, lack of self-control, and cultural barriers between the student population and their teachers became pervasive subjects throughout the interview as they referenced students' moral development in the school environment. One teacher said, "We believe in it [moral development] because it is so lacking in our children." Another offered, "It would be better if we [the school faculty and staff] got together and addressed it in a formal and sustainable way."

Teacher B explained that the guidance teacher focused on a pillar of the month or a character trait when she came to the teacher's class for lessons:

I listened and participated, but in my classroom as a teacher, if it, a problem developed, it was handled naturally. For example, if there was bullying going on at recess, it was a teachable moment to relate back to what the guidance counselor had presented in the lesson. However, I don't ever remember planning any lessons to purposely focus on it. I never planned for it or wrote a lesson plan around character education.

Teacher D said, "I don't think I know a teacher or anyone who has written a lesson plan or taught it as a curriculum." Teacher A added, "Those values you heard as a child, but perhaps the children have not; we know here that the children are not hearing or hear those things at home."

Teacher E, a former guidance counselor said,

My lessons surrounded a focus or a pillar of character, and we had announcements on the news every day that had to do with different aspects under

the theme such as responsibility, different focuses...like a thought of the day.

However, I believe, like Teacher D, that teachers handle character education as not necessarily part of their instructional program, but handle it as behaviors come up, in other words, as needed.

Teacher C added,

I would agree that I used [character education] informally in the classroom and addressed it [the behavior] when it arose. Simple things like getting kids to face each other and talk to each other rather than yelling or talking to the teacher at the same time and saying, “Ok, now, I want you to look at each other in the eye, tell each other what happened, tell them what the problem is, and try to mediate by shaking hands, say you’re sorry...,” and little things like that.

Teacher A did share that because of the age of her students, a circle time was scheduled each day: “During circle time, I set up a scenario each morning. For example, this person doesn’t want to be your friend...how does that make you feel? I try to do that every day, to set up a different kind of scenario for them to address.”

A quieter member of the group, Teacher C, explained that the school used the ESD, Effective School-Wide Discipline program, which related to character expectations somewhat because the program was supposed to be consistent; Teacher C said,

I believe most of the teachers do that; however, it is an external reward program and we’ve never tried to measure that internal component, and when do we reach the point, the end goal, for the students to do things without expecting a reward...so it becomes internalized and part of their character?

Feeling strongly about their teacher roles, the participants shared that the children they taught were lacking in many character-related skills and that the school needed a direction, even with the use of the current ESD program.

Critical incident. The focus group participants agreed that the ESD program had been implemented as a school-wide initiative for student conduct regarding behavior management and positive reinforcement strategies. The respondents said that the current principal had not implemented the program but liked it due to the similarity of another behavioral program used at his former school. Furthermore, they concurred that the integration of middle school grades, six and seven, into the school building and the previous use of the program at the middle school level, were catalysts for implementation at the elementary school. Teacher A stated,

We had already tried the ESD program; it didn't work, and we didn't have buy-in...so we kind of dropped the whole program. Then, when the middle school students arrived, we were told we had to do something from the administration and ESD kind of progressed. It's almost like a token system; it's very similar to that. I believe this year has been the most established.

Teacher B chimed in, "However, at the same time, people are getting tired of it and not really seeing it as improving behavior, although this year our referrals are down from last year."

Expectations. Deep breaths and elongated sighs began the next conversations, which seemed to encapsulate the teachers' feelings when expressing their frustrations about the many pressures and expectations required of faculty, especially in the midst of the school's unsuccessful adequate yearly progress status. "With our students, we're

expected to show them how to have good manners; we're expected to do so many things, but we're also expected to teach children how to learn and enjoy learning, to make it fun, and I think that's where it gets frustrating," said Teacher E. Teacher D stated, "Behavioral expectations are one thing because the children's expectations at home may be different from the expectations at school, and that's a very difficult thing to change, because you have to have parents and other stakeholders on board."

Teacher C expressed angst about the expectation to have the knowledge and coping skills to handle behavioral problems: "I would cry in the afternoon in my car because I didn't have the skills to take care of the problem." Additionally, Teacher A shared that the expectations to meet the behavioral and academic issues were difficult; she declared, "Yes, we look at academic readiness of students coming to school, but we don't look at any other form of readiness." In reference to that issue, another teacher reported that faculty members were willing to ask for help if academic issues were prevalent, "but [didn't] want to ask for help [for] a descriptive problem because that had a different connotation in their mind." The researcher probed for further explanation. The teacher said,

It's hard to ask for help...you are admitting there is a need, and they'll [the teachers] readily ask for help with academics versus behavioral problems. When I was a classroom teacher, it was pretty well known you didn't send your student to the office—you take care of it yourself because if you had to send the kid to the office, the principal is coming after you, not after the child. I was a nervous wreck and scared they'd [administration] think I was not a good teacher.

In addition, continued the teacher,

There are balls that are dropping because we're on fire or we're sinking and sinking fast. What are you going to save now? I think that's how the staff feels: I can't take one more thing...I can't or you can't give me anything else to do.

Pensively, Teacher E looked at the group and said,

Our staff...the morale is very low; they feel beaten down by the whole school improvement process and of course there are requirements and expectations from the school improvement process, which does push the ESD program down a little bit.... I think that's how the teachers feel...they're supposed to give a lesson on that and in theory should fix that...but we're stuck on the second day of school testing our kids academically to read.... Our school is not making it...so we're drilling, drilling, drilling; the teachers are stressed out from SOL tests.

Program benefits. Based upon the premise that the ESD program was being used consistently in every classroom, the teachers were asked about their opinions on the benefits of the school's program. Teacher C stated,

The ESD program, in its nature, is what the school needs, because through the program, you are supposed to be providing lesson plans on modeling good behaviors on what and how this look like for students. It is supposed to be part of your classroom environment...especially in the beginning of the year and even periodically throughout the school year.

"There are benefits to the program, but the teachers need more training; there was never enough time to share at faculty meetings," said teacher A. Teacher E added,

Extrinsic rewards, I'm not so sure helps [*sic*] the kids internalize, especially the kids who really need to build their skills, but what it does for us as a staff, we're

all on the same page...this is what you do and you have steps to take when a child is misbehaving or having a problem...like defiance, name-calling.

Nodding her head, Teacher B agreed, with a silent, pensive look.

At-risk population. Because the rural school was designated as a Title I school and 80% of its students were categorized as free or reduced-price lunch program participants, a low socioeconomic status characterized the school population and its community, with federal funds supporting those needs. Furthermore, economic and cultural barriers between the student population and the Caucasian, middle-class teachers seemed to promote a tension of opposing standards and values between the students and their community and the educational staff. Teacher B said, “The values we grew up with are not the same ones the children receive or give to their parents. It’s very different and it’s difficult because we [the teaching staff] have different standards and values and trying to bring the two together clashes.”

Teacher D shared that she had students who did not respect school property:

The things in the classroom, the books, materials, etc.; their attitude was... “you know...you’ll get the check and you can buy another one.” I felt if it’s accepted at home...is that going to make a difference in the classroom? In fact, I was really in a quandary this year of how to get that character trait of respect through to the children.

Additionally, Teacher E was upset with the attitudes of many of the children with regard to the responsibility of using, borrowing, and returning library books. “Some of the students don’t realize or understand that debt follows them all the way through their

school levels if they don't pay for what they didn't return to the school," she uttered exasperatingly.

All on board? In accordance with the principal's perspective, the ESD program was a beneficial program-utilized from classroom to classroom throughout the school building. Teacher A said,

It's supposed to be consistent throughout the building, and I believe most of our teachers do that, but it depends on the personality of the teacher and how they [*sic*] would handle a particular situation. Someone could take something very small and blow it [a behavioral issue] into something very big, which turns into a huge office referral, where in another classroom, it would have been handled with humor or a different way and diffused and then talked about. So that is based on personality and teacher experience; old school versus young school teacher, that comes into play, too.

Teacher A continued, "You might have one classroom where the kid comes with all the splash bucks [the reward for behaving appropriately], giving bucks for academics and behavior, but another teacher never implements or gives them [the bucks] to the students at all." Teacher D added,

So in order to build consensus, we need to get input, but also come back and present, "This is how it could work." ESD is touching on what we need; it's just not built into our curriculum and garnered everyone on board or the same page. Most teachers don't want their time wasted; they want.... How is it going to work? Why is it going to work?

Teacher C said, “At this time, they will push back and where we are now and what we’re going through, the AYP, adequate yearly progress issues, they would not be accepting, and I don’t believe even though it, ESD, and or character education is needed here.”

Challenges. Asked to ascertain the barriers to alleviating the school’s problems, the focus group participants responded with several ideas. “The teachers need to be invested, but we also need parental investment; they need to be involved with what we’re doing here so we can be together,” said Teacher C. Teacher A shared, “Because we had an assistant principal who was well known in the community, that made a huge difference because a large majority of our parents felt safe; she was African American.... I do believe parents are very concerned about their children’s education, they don’t know how to get across to us—the white folks...they’re fearful.” Teacher E said,

I believe trust issues are a big part of it. Our staff is Caucasian and there is defensiveness from the parents. Not sure if the parents see us as friends or foe. Our school population is diverse and it automatically appears they [the parents] have a mindset that we are out to get them or you are prejudiced, so it’s hard to get past it. So we have trust issues and cultural issues, too, which I’m not sure all our teachers are aware.

“That’s a national trend,” said Teacher D; “rural schools look like we do...we have the minority population and middle class teachers.”

Another challenge facing the school with regard to the ESD program or a character education program was noted by Teacher D:

Many teachers in the school are unwilling to change, and I could hear the teachers right now saying, “You can’t add anything else right now.” They’ll say, “This is

an additional thing; our school is in trouble now, we don't have the time, and they're probably going to make us do this, this, and this," and I think it would be very difficult to get across to them that it, character education, can be submerged into what they are already doing. I know when the ESD program came on board, many fought it.... In fact, you still hear grumbling about it, even when you go in classrooms and they are utilizing the program consistently.

"Yes," said Teacher C. "And many are worried about the AYP status, adequate yearly progress benchmarks," commented Teacher B, who added,

Because the teachers are constantly in conflict as to teaching to the test or stopping to do other activities to prepare students for life, which would be good, they realize that many have thrown away their creative things they know how to do because they have now just turned it into drill and skill stuff. I think we've created some of the behaviors and problems because of that. We've actually thrown out the creative teaching because many people feel they don't have the time to do it or cover the curriculum materials.

The teachers were asked to respond regarding what would help them with some of their frustrations. Teacher E offered, "A place to go to give me any ideas and feedback on what's going on and how to respond to the situation. It seems to be the only interventions we receive are for academics." Teacher B stated, "I would like more training. There needs to be an awareness of the behaviors and interventions to assist you with it." "Consistency would be good, too," said Teacher E.

In addition, the participants agreed that the problem of retaining highly qualified educators to live, work, and stay in the school district was an obstacle for the school

district and community due to the limited resources and businesses to provide support and amenities for the community residents. Nevertheless, they believed, if the school district offered more compensation for its teachers in comparison to its larger school district counterparts, it might stem the teacher drain and make the school stronger in its program at the same time, even with limited resources and businesses. As the focus group members lamented the lack of qualified teachers and resources for the community, Teacher B changed the direction of the conversation and asked her cohorts, “So how are we helping our kids build leadership skills and character in themselves?”

The other teachers turned to her as she shared her concerns:

I believe it gets back to formative assessment and meaningful feedback this year.

We need to ask ourselves, do our students or could one of your students tell you what makes you a good student or what keeps you from being a good student?

That meta-cognition, that self-awareness is what we need to be doing.

Another group member reemphasized, “I’m not so sure the ESD program helps the kids internalize what they are doing and we can’t add anything else. There’s just not enough time, even for the kids to get to know each other. That cohesive classroom needs to be nurtured just like a family, but there is so much pressure from the administration.

Teacher D said, “The vibe I got...it was a general statement made that first day after I spent working with the kids on goal setting and getting to know them and them each other...but the second day, I was told I had to get on academics.” The researcher inquired further, “So, that activity was viewed as unnecessary?” An affirmative YES was emphasized with head nodding for added confirmation.

Mandates. Teacher C voiced frustration over the federal and state mandate expectations for school accreditation. She asserted that the benchmark standards took precedence over everything, especially with the school in its third year of unsuccessful progress. Teacher D uttered, “You’re told your evaluation and pay are going to be based on test results. So there are a lot of factors, I think, with the testing, but also the instruction feeds a lot of the behavioral issues we have at the school.” With regard to morale, Teacher A said, “Our staff, the morale is very low, they feel beaten down by the whole process and, of course, there are requirements from the school improvement process, which does push the ESD program down a little bit.” Teacher E added,

We’ve had 6 or 7 years of constant ICTs, instructional consulting techs, IST, instructional support teams, and now RTIs, response to interventions....an even narrower focus to help the school improve. I know it is one of the things that burned me out....it was like I was split in so many different way.

Balancing the tensions. After the group expressed their frustrations regarding the constant mandates and pressures upon the school due to failing test percentages, they were asked if they believed there was any character education pedagogy to assist those issues and if so, why or why not it was helpful. It appeared that balancing the tension between academics and character education was difficult, especially for moral and character development of students. Representing the strongest voice in the focus group, Teacher A said,

Even if teachers see a need for it—character education—and wanted to say I’m giving a CE lesson tomorrow because I’m not happy with how they [the students] are acting...YOU CAN’T DO IT! because they want lesson plans and it’s not part

of the curriculum. It would need to be part of the curriculum with proof to all of the many visitors, those people we've had this year, helping to improve AYP status, and will have more next year.

Teacher E added,

I think grades one and two have circle time, and that's a good venue for bringing kids together, but we've been told too much song and too much talking and not enough language arts has forced our circle time to evolve and find a way to insert the language arts to be more pronounced in those moments, but I do believe from the start of school to mid-October...we've got more time to implement the character stuff...getting the children to learn to work together as a team.

Teacher B was quick to add,

But I think we're unaware when mentioning character education programs that we actually mean one with our students. We have instruction, but culturally, I see that character education could be so part of our school. It shouldn't be additional; I think we could all do it, but it would be frowned upon by our administration. I do, I believe that!

Teacher D opined, "I still think that you would find resistance with teachers, too, because they would see it as a waste of time, unfortunately." Teacher E lamented, "Finding connections between people is more important...in fact they are the keys. That's what the whole school system should be about."

Data from Documents and Artifacts, Collection and Review

District Elementary School Handbook. In the school district's Elementary Handbook, 46 pages referred to communication to the district's rural constituents of

shared district goals in efforts to forge relationships with the school's parental community. The overarching goal, established by the district's philosophy statement, purported that

academic and physical skills, study habits, and freedom with responsibility in a democratic society should be taught at all levels; and opportunities for development of creativity and cultural enrichment should support the development of self-discipline, critical thinking, and the ability to contribute to the environment. (____ Elementary Handbook, 2010-2011, p. 5)

A welcome letter from the district superintendent to school parents promoted a positive message about bridging relationships between school personnel and the parent community for collaborative opportunities to help and support transitions of school procedures and activities into routines for maximizing student potential and success. Furthermore, the handbook contained vast amounts of information, including important procedures and policies for parental acknowledgement of school-wide expectations regarding attendance policies, transfers-withdrawals, homebound instruction, school hours, bus transportation, and conduct expectations for students and parents.

Additional handbook information communicated school policies with transparency and clarity including directory information and stated expectations for uniform dress codes, student wellness, parent-teacher conferences, grade scales, homework amount per grade level, emergency guidelines, Title I parental involvement, No Child Left Behind Act, school breakfast and lunch, discipline, building security, Internet safety, academic services, activities, and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act information, legislation enacted under NCLB 2001, which ensured that all

children experiencing homelessness have equal and successful access to public education and other services.

School Improvement Plan, 2010-2011. Further analysis determined the goals of the school's yearly comprehensive improvement plan report for the state. Assisted by the state department of education, the school received support for administration of programs sanctioned by the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. According to ESEA, the school was expected to set annual objectives and goals to enhance student achievement. Annual testing in Grades 3-8 measured achievement benchmarks in core academic subjects—mathematics and reading—established as Adequate Yearly Progress, AYP. ESEA also required identification of schools not making AYP.

Therefore, per the *Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia*, 8VAC 20-131-310,G, and Section 116(b)(3) of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, a school in the Title I school improvement arena was required to develop a 2-year plan based on scientifically based strategies to address academic issues in the school. Standards required the school to include plans for all student groups to meet the skill levels of achievement, use not less than 10% of funds for excellent professional development to meet academic achievement issues, and indicate how funds would be implemented, while setting objectives for a progressive continuum for student groups of chronically low-performing schools.

The rural school's improvement plan for 2010-2011 included accountability indicators, plans on the current level of development, target dates, tasks, goals for task completion, and implementation percentages of task completion with descriptions

detailing experience, sustainability, and evidence for performance-related goals to attain proficiency or better in reading–language arts and mathematics. The plan also described the school’s level of development with specific improvement categories: school leadership and decision making, curriculum, assessment, instructional planning, and classroom instruction. The indicators depicted in Table 1 represent intended improvements for achieved task completion levels within the school year according to the school improvement plan.

Table 1. Intended Improvements for Achieved Task Completion

Domain	Indicator
School leadership and decision making	<p>Indicator: IF04 – Professional development for teachers includes observations by peers with evaluation criteria and professional development</p> <p>Percent task complete: 100%</p>
Curriculum, assessment, and instructional planning	<p>Indicator: I IB04 – Teachers individualize instruction based on pretest results to provide support for some students and enhance learning opportunities for others;</p> <p>Percent task complete: 0%</p> <p>Indicator: I IB05 – Teachers reteach based on posttest results</p> <p>Percent task complete: 50%</p> <p>Indicator: I ID08 – Instructional teams use student-learning data to assess strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and instructional strategies;</p> <p>Percent task complete: 40%</p> <p>Indicator: I ID09 – Instructional teams use student-learning data to plan instruction</p> <p>Percent task complete: 33%</p>

Indicator: I ID10 – Instructional teams use student learning to identify students in need of instructional support or enhancement

Percent task complete: 100%

Indicator: I ID11 -- Instructional teams review the results of unit pre/posttests to make decisions about the curriculum and instructional plans and to “red flag” students in need of intervention (both students in need of tutoring or extra help and students needing enhance learning opportunities because of their early mastery of objectives)

Percent task complete: 100%

Classroom
instruction

Indicator: IIIB06 – All teachers systematically report to parents the student’s mastery of specific standards-based objectives

Percent task complete: 0%

In summary, the school improvement plan provided information about valuable preparatory strategies the administration and faculty had tried to implement by identifying and analyzing instructional and organizational goals and objectives affecting student achievement, with some being more effective and substantive than others.

- Because the school was in its third year of unsuccessful adequate yearly progress, the comprehensive report described the current levels of development, attempts to incorporate those plans, procedures to support the tasks, and data gathered to prove whether those goals and objectives had been successfully executed to meet state accountability. In addition, this academic document review revealed no indications of character education pedagogy.

Effective School-Wide Discipline program, ESD documents. Review of the school's ESD documents revealed the intended goals, objectives, procedural applications, and implementation plans regarding administrative and faculty expectations for the behavioral program. Being a state initiative, the Effective School-Wide Discipline program focused on proactive approaches to thwart disruptive student behavior; pertinent data were collected twice, at midyear and year end. In addition, ESD literature supported goals of a consistent process and procedures for discipline issues, a school-wide expectation for all students, and acknowledgement of appropriate behavior and discouragement of inappropriate conduct. The school considered the program an approach to reduce discipline issues and time spent in the office with student referrals so the teachers could spend more time and tasks on teaching rather than disruptive behavior in the classroom. In addition, the program provided a guide for educators to access

resources and tools, along with training opportunities to promote “positive academic and behavioral outcomes for students” (VDOE, 2008)

The former principal implemented ESD in the school in 2008. Teachers shared with the researcher binders filled with documents that included goals and guidelines for using the program. There were instructions regarding how to make splash bucks (rewards for good behavior), where to store them, a pledge for students to recite to receive more of them, procedures for their distribution to students, and designated behaviors approved for receiving the coveted splash bucks. Additional literature provided scripts for teachers when offering verbal praise and specific skill encouragement to a student exhibiting the behavior to receive the reward. The program was designed to reward students for presenting the appropriate behaviors. Posters in classrooms and hallways promoted visual reminders of expected student behaviors for specified areas of the school building; students were reminded to be respectful, responsible, and ready to learn.

Teachers also were given a sheet of prompts described as “a continuum of responses to expected behavior,” which listed the most appropriate strategies for reminding students, reteaching rules, correcting, prompting, cueing, and recognizing student effort. A binder provided for every teacher with examples of games, charts to monitor the behavior management process, definitions of students’ major and minor behavioral infractions, intervention or referral forms and procedures, skit planning guides, lesson objectives, and a step-by-step review of a classroom lesson to ensure that students understood the goals and objectives indicated support of program objectives and goals.

In summary, the state literature described the ESD program as a system requiring 3-5 years for full successful implementation. At the time of the study investigation, the school was in its third year of participation. Being a systematic approach and not a curricular or character education program initiative, the ESD program included a process of strategic methods to involve school faculty in managing student behavior collaboratively and cohesively. In this school, however, ESD appeared to be employed unevenly from classroom to classroom and between grade levels. It appeared that the system's effectiveness depended on the emphasis the school administration, the individual teachers, or both placed on the proactive behavioral program within the classrooms.

Artifacts–Wall art. Displayed brightly in various sizes, shapes, and forms throughout the school building and taped, pinned, or stapled in hallways, on bulletin boards, and doorways were positive, inspirational messages encouraging students to read, believe, connect, and grow. Poster messages declared “Think before you Talk,” “Don’t Trash the Planet,” and “Everyone Smiles in the Same Language.” These aesthetically pleasing posters were just a few of the inspirational words used to motivate the K-7 student population to behave appropriately and encourage the inclusive idea that everyone was more alike than different at the school. Other encouraging posters conveyed positive messages: “You Never Know How Much You Can Do Until You Try,” “The Sky’s the Limit,” “We Can!” and “This is a Positive Thinking Area.” The goal was to provide students with the ideas that a positive school environment could be beneficial for everyone within the school community.

Furthermore, student art created for the Memorial Day holiday honored military personnel with brightly decorated hearts and stars shining with respect and patriotism. The pictures displayed colorful American flags and reflections of thanks for their military service to the nation. Centrally located was another inspirational board. It acknowledged names of those students in Grades 3-7 who had achieved academic honor roll status through hard work and determination.

Preliminary Standards of Learning status, 2010-2011. It was important to review the school's latest adequate yearly progress data, especially with regard to the accreditation rates based on student achievement on Standards of Learning assessments, as the school was in its third year of Accredited with Warning status. This status resulted from the school's passing rates that were lower than the achievement levels required for full accreditation by the state. A school designated with below-standard scores must undergo continued academic reviews and develop improvement plans for academic success that are backed by substantiated research. Because this school was required to provide, prepare, adopt, and initiate a comprehensive improvement plan, reviewing the plan and results presented a more in-depth view of the struggle the rural elementary school continued to experience. The rural elementary school continued to try to overcome the academic issues with attempts to improve the school's achievement records and implement corrective action, as mandated by the state, for successful benchmarks in reading and mathematics.

Emergent Themes

Through further review of the data for a more in-depth interpretation of the qualitative analyses, thematic clusters were identified and constructed from the

audiotaped interviews with the principal and teacher responses. Themes of efficacy and ideology categorized the descriptive feedback. Furthermore, the use of the prerecorded vignettes offered opportunities to discern the principal's opinions and leadership mindset for character education pedagogy through the postvideo question responses. Those insights provided additional information to support the themes. Subsequently, a cross-case analysis enabled the researcher to compare and contrast the two respondent groups according to the emergent themes of academic data, understanding character education implementation, and a perceptual ESD disconnect. These final descriptions enhanced an understanding of the results, which revealed primary perspectives of the school's administrative leader and teachers' opinions about the moral and character development of the students at the school.

Efficacy. The principal shared pragmatic ideas about character education in his public interview with the researcher and appeared even more candid during postvideo and vignette question responses. In the face-to-face interview, the principal stated that he believed the Effective School-Wide Discipline initiative was the character education program at the school. He deemed it worthwhile due to the output of available data and categorization of student behavior in classrooms or other locations in the school building. Because some of the components embedded in the ESD system represented character traits of respect, responsibility, and readiness to learn, in addition to providing techniques, approaches, role plays, and dialogue for teachers to use, the principal believed character education was addressed in the classrooms, even though not directly as a separate character education initiative.

The principal supported the use of the Effective School-Wide Discipline program at the school as a similar program had been used at his former school. He supported the continuation of ESD at the rural school, even though implemented by the former principal, based on his perceptions that it met character education goals with the school population through behavior management. The principal claimed, "It certainly helps us look closely at the high-risk students and puts in place strategies to problem solve as to what to do for them. It provides positive feedback, with a formal process that offers a lot of resources to help student behavior and academic achievement." The school leader appeared to not desire any other program, because ESD was working; it was effective, and if a character education initiative was implemented, it needed to be funded or have funds provided for the school to use before he would integrate an additional curricular initiative. "I believe the program is good, helpful, and effective because it provides a lot of feedback for the administrator regarding individual students and the school as a whole," said the principal.

With the school in its 3rd year of being ranked unsuccessfully with Adequate Yearly Progress distinctions, the principal appeared to believe his role as the school administrator was to move the school from improvement status into successful academic achievement categories. Thus, for the principal to integrate any curricular initiative, whether character education or not, the program goals must indicate how the initiative would enhance or support academic achievement for the diverse student population served at the rural elementary school. It appeared that without data to support a character education initiative, the principal would keep the current ESD program in place and not

add anything new because the behavioral management program currently fulfilled those expectations in the rural public school.

With the vignette methodology, the principal privately shared his ideas after viewing scenarios reflecting a dialogue between a teacher and principal about the teacher's proposal for a character education program at the school. Again, the principal expressed his support of character education but did not directly or indirectly reveal a leadership mindset about the program unless the teacher was more prepared for the initiative. The principal said, "The teacher should have been better prepared and come with a group of staff who will do some of the work involved in getting the program off the ground." As the vignette scenes progressed, the video principal wanted the teacher to allot her time to school accreditation issues. The rural school principal, the study participant, again transferred the burden of leadership for such a program to the teacher: "The teacher should have an outline and tasks laid out if she really wanted a program implemented, and she needs to present an idea of what it would like, and how it would help testing and academics as well as school morale." The mindset of the rural school principal, however, was not representative of a collaborative or supportive leadership role to help the teacher. Although the administrator was open to listening and hearing about character education pedagogy, his stance focused on achievement standards before leadership engagement would be considered for a curricular implementation initiative and did not directly support goals of such programs, events, or activities.

The principal's perceptions appeared to imply a noncommittal leadership strategy and indicated lack of support for character education unless procedures for submitting the proposal were followed. Nevertheless, the emphasis for implementation of any curricular

initiative in a school comes directly under the school administrator's leadership, and the principal's statements implied less support for such an initiative due to his stance of placing the leadership burden onto the teacher. Furthermore, the teacher does not have the administrative power or leadership permission to make curricular decisions without the collaborative or full support of the principal. The rural school principal's leadership perceptions and decisions could promote support or the demise of character education initiatives at the school. Therefore, it appeared that the current school leader believed what was in place for the moral and character development of students was appropriate, nothing further was needed, and no decision would be made unless the teacher followed procedures he deemed suitable for character education implementation.

Ideology. The five focus group participants, classroom teachers who worked in the struggling, rural public school, expressed honest, emotional, and realistic opinions about their efforts with character education pedagogy. During the discussion, each teacher espoused the notion that the moral and character development of children was important because it was so lacking in the students they taught. The following statement was representative of their collective sentiment: "It would be better if we [the school faculty and staff] got together and addressed it [character education] in a formal and sustainable way." The teachers noted, however, that there were no specific approaches embraced or encouraged by the school's administration for the delivery of lessons, programs, or events related to character education instruction. Furthermore, the teachers agreed they were unaware of any classroom teacher in the school who taught or developed lessons comprising instructional character education activities for their students in the K-7 school.

Additionally, the Effective School Wide Discipline initiative, ESD, a systematic behavioral modification program, was good enough, but not deliberately or consistently used throughout the building, even though the administration expected the behavioral system to be used reliably in every classroom throughout the school. “It is an external reward program and we’ve never tried to measure that internal component, and when do we reach the point, the end goal, for the students to do things without expecting a reward...so it becomes internalized and part of their character,” exclaimed one of the focus group participants. The teachers believed that “people are getting tired of it and not really seeing it [ESD] as improving behavior.”

Feeling overwhelmed, teachers expressed frustrations with the administrative expectations for them to have the knowledge and coping skills to handle the behavioral problems and academic achievement problems, especially with the school designated as unsuccessful according to state achievement percentages. Expressing angst, a teacher shared, “We’re sinking and sinking fast...I think that’s how the staff feels: I can’t take one more thing...I can’t or you can’t give me anything else to do. It would be difficult to get across to them that it, character education, can be submerged into what they are already doing.”

Nevertheless, one teacher revealed that there was so much pressure from the administration for academic achievement and additional activities, to build cohesive classrooms with character education pedagogy would be viewed as unnecessary due to the push for academic accreditation improvement. Benchmark standards took precedence over everything, and teachers felt overwhelmed and beaten down by the whole process, despite knowing their evaluations and pay were based on test results.

Teachers believed that even if they wanted to convey character education pedagogy in their classrooms, it currently was not part of the curriculum, and based on the improvement status process, anything different from what had already been approved for instructional usage would not be permitted. Most of the teachers perceived that if character education became part of their instructional curriculum, they would need to be introduced to effective programs, activities, and events. They also expressed the need to have training, professional development for implementation strategies and techniques, and, most of all, administrative support to successfully embed character education into their instructional pedagogy because of the perceived disconnect between them and the principal, the students, and the rural school community.

Cross-Case Analysis

The cross-case analysis assisted the researcher in looking for similarities and differences in the data (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, it was important to compare and contrast the perceptions of the principal and teachers' about the school's academic data, the problematic issue of how to deliberately and effectively implement character education pedagogy, and the utilization of the Effective School-Wide Discipline system within the school.

Academic data. The principal believed his role was to lead the school into successful achievement status through leadership and decision-making domains comprising professional development, curriculum, assessment, instructional planning, and classroom instruction as referenced by the school improvement plan. The teachers believed their role was to adhere to all of the state-supported intervention assistance, which provided instructional support to improve students' academic performance. The

administration, however, mandated that specific instructional time be focused on academic achievement, and teachers felt pressured, overwhelmed, and concerned that personnel evaluations and pay were based on the success of their students' academic performance. Administration employed what the state mandated, but teachers felt disempowered, frustrated, and alone with the constant pressure for successful academic achievement percentages for a school designated for the 3rd year as Accredited with Warning.

It appeared that balancing the tension between academics and character development was difficult due to the constant demand for school improvement. One teacher said, "I know it is one of the things that burned me out...it was like I was split in so many different ways." Because of the tension between the thrust for academic achievement, the constant support for improvement, and teachers' feeling they were doing all they could do to improve academic achievement, especially with the low socioeconomic community's lacking businesses and resources to support the school, the teachers and administrators, although working toward the same goal, appeared to be limited in what else they could do to improve student performance for acceptable state standards. Thus, a character education initiative might have been viewed as important, but such programs were marginalized by the federal and state mandates for successful benchmarks.

Understanding character education implementation. The principal and focus group teachers all expressed support for character education at the school, but conditions seemed to negate implementation efforts. First, pressure to meet academic achievement benchmarks focused all instruction on accomplishing that goal. Second, the principal

already perceived that character education pedagogy was part of the school program through the ESD system. Teachers, however, did not use ESD reliably from classroom to classroom and wondered if the ESD program could be described as a character education program simply because it had some character traits embedded in it. Third, teachers believed professional development would provide them the knowledge to choose effective comprehensive or modular character education initiatives for successful instructional delivery. Therefore, one teacher's statement seemed to represent the teachers' general sentiments: "A place to go to give me ideas and feedback on what's going on and how to respond to the situation would be helpful.... It seems to be the only interventions we receive are for academics. I would like more training." Another teacher shared, "With our students, we're expected to show them how to have good manners; we're expected to do so many things, but we're also expected to teach children how to learn and enjoy learning, to make it fun, and I think that's where it gets frustrating." Thus, the teachers believed that a character education initiative would be beneficial if it were allowed and that professional development would be very helpful in implementing a moral and character development program.

Perceptual disconnect with ESD. The principal and classroom teachers had differing perceptions with regard to the Effective School-Wide Discipline program. The principal considered the program to be beneficial to the school for the monitoring of student's behavioral infractions in any location in the school. He also preferred the data generated by the program to discern where most of the behavioral problems occurred, by area, time, student, or teacher. The principal said,

I believe it is eye opening for the teachers because if a teacher is writing a lot of discipline referrals, it might be the teacher's approach or the class makeup could have something to do with it, but what it tells you...maybe this person needs help with their classroom management, send them to a workshop program, which might help present strategies on how to deal with kids in the classroom. I would say most of our teachers are pretty much on board.

The teachers' perceptions, however, revealed a different viewpoint: "The program was implemented by the former principal with the impetus of behavioral management. We had already tried the ESD program; it didn't work, and when the middle school students arrived, we were told we had to do something from the administration and ESD kind of progressed. It's almost like a token system."

ESD was supposed to be part of the classroom environment, but one teacher shared her ideas: "I am not so sure it helps the kids internalize, especially the kids who really need to build their skills, but what it does for us as a staff, we're supposed to all be on the same page." Another teacher indicated that ESD was supposed to be consistent in the school building, but "ESD is not built into our curriculum...most teachers don't want their time wasted; they want...how is it going to work? Why is it going to work? Thus, disconnected perceptions persisted in the viewpoints of the principal and the teachers, depending on the emphasis and importance they placed on the ESD system.

Conclusion

This study was designed to investigate one research question and two subquestions. The document review and artifact observation revealed the school's plans and preparations for improvement because of a third year of unsuccessful accreditation

status, as well as the lack of character education initiatives. The findings were consistent with the literature reflecting the problems with which rural schools struggle, including the purposeful focus of the school administration and faculty on the school improvement needed to raise achievement in English–reading and mathematics. The principal’s responses and the teachers’ focus group responses documented their thoughts about character education for their school environment with emergent themes of expectations, mindset, the ESD program, the critical incident, program benefits, at-risk population, all on board, challenges, and balancing the tensions with competing state mandates of academic success and character education.

The research question asked, “How does a rural school principal perceive and conceptualize character education in the school?” The principal’s postvideo questions, in addition to the teachers’ focus group comments, documented that the principal believed in character education but perceived it more as a system of monitoring behavioral infractions than a comprehensive and cohesive philosophical approach for curricular implementation into the school. The teachers shared their frustrations about the academic achievement issues and the cultural divide between the teaching staff and the students and community. They also believed they did not receive the time or encouragement from the school’s administration to initiate character education in the classrooms. Program artifacts revealed that the school was not actively engaged with a character education initiative, even though they considered it important for the students they taught. Time was the constant inhibitor.

In addition, analysis of the school-wide discipline program, ESD, employed to encourage appropriate conduct and to monitor and intervene with a student’s disruptive

behavior, was viewed by the current principal as a character education program due to its emphasis on expectations for students to be respectful, responsible, and ready to learn.

ESD was described as a systematic process of interventions, however, not a program or a character education initiative. The teachers, who were expected to implement the ESD program, considered it to be a discipline program that was unevenly implemented in the classrooms throughout the school. They also thought the school could benefit from a character education program if time were allowed.

The document review provided further support regarding what the school continued to do through the school improvement plan to improve the benchmark scores and the unsuccessful accreditation standards. The teachers voiced their frustration about the constant pressure to perform despite a cultural disconnect between the students and their families, representing an economically disadvantaged population, and the middle-class faculty. Many worried about their jobs because of student performance related to the accountability standards and accreditation rankings of the state. They also believed they had no time to do anything else, especially with character education initiatives accompanied by the accreditation tensions.

Teachers shared their dissatisfaction regarding the school administration's viewing character education components within their instructional lessons as "fluff," as well as the "message" that instructional time should be focused on the academic Standards of Learning. Furthermore, even though the principal and teachers all said they believed in character education and that it would benefit their students, they needed training on how to implement such an initiative effectively. Additionally, the faculty believed a character education program would need to be approved by all of the current

academic teams supporting the school for improved academic achievement before implementation could occur. Thus, due to the school's third year of substandard accreditation and the constant pressure to succeed with state standards, those pressures continued to permeate the instructional atmosphere of the school administration, faculty, and students they served, with character education's competing with academic needs for an opportunity to enhance students' moral and character development.

Chapter V

Discussion

Character education constitutes a program, method, or virtuous trait purposely promoted with the goal of teaching moral and character behavior through the influence of teachers and peers; problem-solving techniques, self-control, high expectations for academic excellence, conflict mediation, and positive attitudes regarding peers and school are encouraged and facilitated through the educational environment (WWC, 2006; Williams & Schnaps, 1999). Through the United States Department of Education Partnerships in Character Education Program (1994), approximately \$25 million was awarded to states for character education initiatives (NCEE, 2009), and with that infusion of funds, 28 states encouraged or mandated some form of character education for the public school environment (Roth-Herbst et al., 2007). With this momentum and encouragement from the federal government, various character education programs were developed with goals to decrease violence, absenteeism, and dropout rates, and to improve student achievement in the nation's public schools (Was et al., 2006).

The State of Virginia (1999) legislated character education instruction for its public schools, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 increased support for character education to an even greater degree. Moreover, the *Code of Virginia* Character Education Standards of Learning developed criteria, information, and support for character education with funding and professional development for administrators and teachers ("Character Education Required," 2004). Yet, schools struggled with implementation efforts due to the demands of academic standards, obligations to meet

state and federal accreditation requirements, time constraints, decisions regarding type of program, training for articulation and facilitation, and choices for the level of importance in the educational curriculum. In addition, according to Navarez and Lapsley (2008), schools wrestled with the professional development of faculty to foster a positive-based program with goals and objectives most conducive to meet the needs of their student populations.

Existing literature emphasized the unique constitution and complexities of rural schools and the issues confronted by most rural school principals in their efforts to overcome declining enrollments, disparate educational and socioeconomic levels, economically deprived communities, limited programs and opportunities, and geographical isolation. Furthermore, pressures and expectations to meet state-required adequate yearly progress benchmarks, obligations to promote rigorous academic curriculum, and legislative character education pedagogy mandates supporting students' moral and character development increased the curricular leadership decisions of the school principal. Thus, character education initiatives, although supported by the state's mandated legislation, presented leadership dilemmas regarding placement and emphasis of such programs in educational curricula.

In this study, these conditions seemed to influence the principal's leadership decisions but also appeared to force a disempowered school's leader to develop instructional goals and objectives based more on state benchmark standards than whole child development. Accordingly, Sobel (2004) noted that school administrators appeared to be conflicted when trying to balance local concerns for the student population with programs in civic responsibility, community-based education, and service-learning

initiatives, even though improved test scores correlated with their use. Further, it appeared that a principal's goals and plans influenced and impacted the success or demise of any type of instructional program depending on the vision and implementation strategies mobilized by the school leader. Therefore, a principal's choosing character education initiatives that do not recognize the instructional programs and needs of the school environment or his or her lacking the leadership skills needed to facilitate successful program implementation can lead to failure in these crucial associations.

Character education requires the principal to have vision, beliefs, attitudes, and appropriate leadership for the success of pedagogical implementation, even with obligations for federal and state Standards of Learning expectations and requirements (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Today's principals must assume many roles in their administrative positions regarding the challenges and expectations for instructional pedagogy to successfully mobilize resources to meet required state and federal standards while contending with the demands of the high-stakes testing environment. In this study, not only did the principal have to struggle with the aforementioned challenges, but he also contended with the state benchmark designation of the school's being in its third year of Accredited with Warning status, which generated supplementary demands for successful instructional pedagogy. These obligations and demands forced the rural school principal to facilitate, articulate, and execute the most effective instructional strategies to remove the school from improvement status, toward successful benchmark distinctions.

Furthermore, those pressures compelled and generated competition and marginalization of character education program initiatives and efforts, despite their being

mandated by the state Standards of Learning. Schaps (2010) maintained that those forces promoted and encouraged less consideration of program initiatives for character education pedagogy due to the principal's enormous challenges to incorporate rigorous curriculum, motivate faculty to enhance academic performance, and meet accreditation obligations with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Catalano et al., 2002).

Schaps (2010) asserted that character education programs, those having empirical evidence and providing support for student growth, were the main components for academic engagement, student achievement, and healthy overall development and avoidance of problem behaviors (p. 21). Glanzer and Milson (2006) argued further that character education should become more central in the school environment, with school leaders' purposely partnered with school communities to engage and develop guiding principles for character education initiatives. Similarly, Lickona (1992) had presented the notion that well-designed programs of character education would enhance student learning and relationships and affect the community in a positive manner. Berkowitz and Bier (2004) acknowledged, however, that character education was viewed more as a practice than a science, and Lickona (1993) maintained that positivism could be scientifically proven, whereas values, feelings, and personal expression could not.

Thus, this dissertation was designed to examine a principal's perceptions of character education in a rural public school challenged by federal and state academic achievement requirements, in a state where character education was mandated, in addition to demands that possibly compromised principal leadership. The treatise also discerned the opinions and educational practices of faculty about character education in the struggling rural, coastal, community school, currently in its third year of Accredited

with Warning status. This concluding chapter comprises a recap and review of the research problem, research question, methodology, and findings of the investigation. In addition, a summation of the results, including educational recommendations and suggestions for future research, is included.

Statement of the Problem

Thirteen million children and adolescents attend school in rural communities and isolated towns (Rural School Matters, 2009). More than a third (36%) of Virginia's schools are designated as rural; they reflect geographical isolation, impoverished communities, economic concerns, faculty retention problems, declining enrollments, and challenges in meeting accreditation benchmarks. Additionally, with the requirements mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the nation's public schools are expected to attain high academic student achievement by reaching successful adequate yearly progress percentages. Furthermore, within the last decade, momentum for character education pedagogy emerged as a valuable complement to instructional practices and academic achievement. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2003) maintained that "satisfying the social and emotional needs of students does more than prepare them to learn; it actually increases their capacity to learn" (p. 10).

Thus, expectations for school principals have required leadership to facilitate strong academic curricula as well as programs that foster students' moral and character development through character education pedagogy. Therefore, the attempts to implement and integrate character education pedagogy to help students become thinking, moral, and contributing citizens were important to understand with regard to how a

principal perceived character education and how those perceptions increased or decreased successful implementation of character education initiatives in a rural public school having many challenges and being located in a state requiring character education pedagogy.

Expectations for a strong academic curriculum and character education pedagogy have been mandated by the Standards of Learning in Virginia. Academic achievement has been measured annually for adequate yearly progress, whereas character education, although mandated, has not been measured. Nevertheless, the state enabled schools to receive funds for character education initiatives with provisions that the program be analyzed and data collected to measure its impact. The moral and character development of the student population continued to rest on the principal's (or his or her designee's) leadership decisions regarding how, when, where, and if it should be implemented into the school curriculum. Hence, responsibilities to mobilize resources for character education initiatives to enhance the character development of students have remained under the auspices of the school principal or designee.

Consequently, the purpose of this study was to investigate a rural school principal's perceptions of character education and leadership implementation of such programs, in addition to the relationship between character education and student achievement in a rural public school, operating under state mandates requiring character education pedagogy. This single-case design analysis was used to describe the principal's perceptions of character education, how they affected leadership and decision making for program implementation, and the perceived relationship between character education and student achievement. Wynne and Walberg (1985) acknowledged that

academic excellence and character development were not solely isolated from each other but were complementary. Thus, research findings present insights regarding the rural school principal's attitudes and beliefs about character education and his leadership and facilitation for implementing character education pedagogy in the instructional environment.

This analysis discerned the pressures faced by a rural school principal in efforts to meet federal and state percentage benchmarks with the challenges of time, training, and implementation (Romanowski, 2005) and requirements of the high-stakes testing environment, in a state legislating and mandating both academic and character education Standards of Learning. To study this problem, a research evaluation was conducted, and a research question with two subquestions guided the investigative study:

How does the rural school principal perceive and conceptualize character education in the school?

- a. How does the rural school principal's perception of character education affect program implementation in the school?
- b. How does the rural school principal perceive the relationship between character education and student achievement?

Review of the Methodology

The researcher employed a multimodal data collection methodology for critical review assurances, using the critical incident technique, vignettes, audiotaped interviews, site observations, a focus group, and review of documents and reports illuminating and emphasizing details of the study and inquiry questions. All audiotaped interviews were conducted on the school site, including both the principal interview and the faculty focus

group; data were transcribed, coded, and categorized to establish emergent themes. Furthermore, prerecorded vignettes facilitated an in-depth examination of the principal's perceptions about character education so as to comprehend his leadership decisions after watching and reflecting on the scenario presentations. In addition, the postvignette question responses provided opportunities to compare the principal's private responses about character education (answering prepared questions while alone) versus his public reactions when interviewed face-to-face by the researcher using a standardized open-ended question and probe format methodology.

Supplementary data comprised school site documents: the Effective School-Wide Discipline program (ESD), written plans and goals for the discipline program, the school improvement plan, referral and discipline forms, and reward incentives. Artifacts included parent communications, the school district handbook, guidelines for students and parents, contact logs, student behavior management procedures, intervention referral forms, definitions of major and minor behavioral infractions, school-wide expectations, incentive ideas, role play activities for appropriate behavior, and code of conduct expectations. In addition, audiovisual materials consisting of wall art posters manufactured commercially or by students displayed slogans posted throughout the school, which offered additional information regarding the efforts of the administration and faculty to foster the moral and character development of the student population. Compiled in aggregate, the data supported substantive connections to the research question and two subquestions of the case study analysis.

Finally, the bounded case study analysis provided discovery opportunities within the purposeful sample to examine activities and functions, happenings and contexts, in

addition to observations, notations, and descriptions of emerging patterns to discern commonalities and differences in a rural school with character education, located in a state with legislative mandates for character education pedagogy. Gathering comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information about this case of interest supported a broader view (Patton, 2002) of the character education efforts at the school site. Thus, the investigation of how a rural school principal perceived and conceptualized character education in the school was devoted to understanding those factors: how they affected the leadership and decision making related to character education implementation, and the perceptions of the relationship between character education and student achievement in a rural public school district.

Findings From the Research Data

Rural school. Rural schools face enormous problems in comparison to their urban counterparts. In fact, rural schools have not garnered the same attention in meaningful rigorous research (Gándara et al., 2001). Only 6% of rural schools have been the subject of research, even though 30% of schools in the nation are designated as being located within rural communities (Hardré, 2008). Rural schools comprise 20% of the nation's 2,000 worst achieving high schools (Tucci, 2009), contain large pockets of distressed minority populations and single-parent families with disparate educational and socioeconomic levels (NCES, 2004), and have a 50% higher dropout rate (NCES, 2001) than schools in other communities. Therefore, resources and programs enhancing academic achievement and moral and character development could possibly make a difference, beginning in the elementary grades and extending through high school.

The Virginia department of educational statistics (2010-2011) reported that the rural elementary school, the focus of this case study analysis, was in its third year of failing to meet annual measurable objectives in mathematics and reading–language arts. Factors contributing to these issues included the location of the rural public elementary school in an area with a shrinking tax base due to limited businesses and economic activities in the district, declining enrollments, disproportionate federal and state funding, problems in retaining high-quality and effective teachers, limited access to advanced programs for students, and population departure (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

Review of the school improvement plan document (Table 1) revealed goals and objectives for task completion to improve the educational competencies of the struggling educational institution. The document comprised accountability indicators, plans, target dates, tasks, goals for completion, and percentages of task completion. Additionally, ideas and goals for school improvement through professional development, curriculum assessment, and instructional planning for classroom instruction appeared to be the main focus and the only avenues of the plan for students to achieve academic success.

During the faculty focus group interview, teachers expressed feelings of considerable pressure for successful student academic performance due to the constant and continued support from state and local universities intervening with learning objective goals to meet successful measurable percentages. Despite these efforts, however, low morale and attitudes of frustration permeated the faculty discussions on the current status of the school. Even with all of the dedicated instructional acumen

supporting student performance, academic achievement benchmarks ranked below successful designations to meet state requirements.

Furthermore, the improvement plan provided evidence that the instructional efforts, effective in some academic areas and less in others, did not induce or increase the school's academic achievement success for state benchmark designations, despite the additional curricular assistance. Additionally, there were no allowances to mobilize resources beyond the indicated improvements through traditional channels of professional development, pre and posttesting, extra tutoring, enhanced learning opportunities, and responses to intervention to improve adequate yearly percentages for successful rankings. No other responsive practices fostering the moral and character education of the school's students were noted in the improvement plan. Consequently, the lack of any responsive practices tied to community values of the rural school community population suggested a division between the school and the personal needs and cultural aspects of the students served by the school.

Elias (2006) asserted, "When schools implemented high quality, social emotional learning programs and approaches effectively, academic achievement of children increased, incidences of problem behavior decreased, the relationships that surround children are improved, and the climate of classrooms and schools changed for the better" (p. 5). Thus, implementation of character education initiatives established comprehensively and tied to the community values of the rural school district could be a definite enhancement for the rural school environment.

If the instructional leader and the state intervention teams perceived, viewed, and supported character education pedagogy as complementary to academic achievement and

not supplementary to the curriculum, this struggling rural elementary school might fare more respectably on state benchmark standards. Therefore, it would be beneficial for the principal to mobilize character education resources and embrace or at least try a new instructional strategy for implementation into the school curriculum. Research by Brown et al. (2003) concluded that effective character education

- articulates and makes explicit the values of the school and the community in which it is based, applies these consistently in the practice of the school, and occurs in partnership with students, staff, families and the school community as part of a whole-school approach to educating students and strengthening their resilience. (p. 12)

The Principal

After the face-to-face meeting between the researcher and the principal in an audiotaped, open-ended standardized question and probe format session, postinterview transcriptions indicated that the principal considered character education to be important for schools because it had always been part of school programs even when he had been a student. At the time of this study, however, no specific mobilization of character education program or resources had been initiated at the rural school with the current K-7 principal. Reynolds (1998) purported that if some type of character education were promoted and practiced through the school curriculum, students' conduct difficulties and challenges could be mediated. Nevertheless, character education has been viewed as ancillary to academic curricula with regard to federal and state mandates holding schools accountable for educational achievement each year (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Smith, 2006).

In light of federal and state legislation supporting and mandating character education pedagogy, the attitudes of the principal leading a low socioeconomic, isolated rural school, coupled with the leadership challenges associated with articulating curricular programs for academic success, were essential to understand because of their importance for the growth of the nation's future citizens under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Rural public schools are in need of responsive leadership; school administrators need to provide innovative methods for improving academic achievement, school safety, and the development of morally educated students (Copland, 2001).

The former principal of the school under study had implemented the Effective School-Wide Discipline program, ESD. The critical impetus for implementing ESD was the management of student behavior more appropriately and effectively. After the former principal exited her leadership position, the current rural school principal retained and continued the use of ESD at the K-7 elementary school. He described ESD as the school's character education program and preferred it for its reliance on extensive research, behavioral expectations for student problem-solving skills, a common language for school personnel to use from classroom to classroom, and effective strategies or approaches for faculty to employ in managing student behavior. The principal stated that the program was tied to respect for self, others, and property due to the formal process of providing resources to improve student behavior and academic achievement. On the other hand, Bulach (2000) had purported that the improvement of student behavior would be enhanced by a skilled and implemented character education program; Bulach et al. (1995) had asserted that a successfully implemented character education initiative would change the school climate and student achievement for the better.

Effective School-Wide Discipline. According to the Virginia Department of Education (2008), ESD is a state-directed initiative that provides positive behavioral and academic support to all students in the public schools. It is a system, however—a process to monitor and manage student behavior—not a comprehensive or modular character education initiative. The goals of the state initiative encourage school personnel to use specific strategies and fewer corrective discipline approaches to inhibit students engaged in behaviors requiring discipline action; they further enhance the instructional faculty's reliance on positive interactions with their students. The motivation to use the ESD system stems from a desire for better management of student behavior, with more positive discipline, at the school.

Although the system comprises several character education traits for encouraging appropriate student behavior, it lacks a comprehensive or integrated emphasis on the community values of the families living in the school district or encouragement of the moral and character development of the students served at the school. ESD is a management process system for monitoring student behavior; however, the current principal perceived it as the character education program and favored the administrative feedback from the behavioral data, in addition to the strategies that enabled assistance for teachers to approach issues proactively. ESD is not a comprehensive character education initiative. It does not purport goals and objectives focused on introducing lessons, events, and experiences that encapsulate empathy, caring, respect, responsibility, and ethical behavior with the goal of children's contributing as future citizens more positively to their communities. Lickona (1991) maintained,

Character education instruction provides direct teaching within the school curricula; promotes a process for implementing positive values when making decisions, and establishes a school culture that fosters positive peer recognition and empowers the school community to exemplify behaviors consistent with respect and responsibility, with parent, student, and community involved in decision making of the character education programs. (p. 2)

The principal perceived that the behavioral data and current management of student behavior categorized the school's character education initiative. He believed the school population was changing, including both teachers and students, and that control in the classroom was needed. Nevertheless, the principal believed ESD was used effectively and equally throughout the K-7 classrooms as a character education model, even though his faculty expressed different opinions about the use of the system at the school.

Subsequently, acknowledging the complexities of character education initiatives and noting that the principal chose to label this system as the character education initiative, it seems possible that the principal did not truly understand the definition of a comprehensive moral and character development program initiative, despite the existence of state mandates for character education in public schools. Moreover, the principal believed most state mandates were unfunded, thereby making it difficult for a school to implement the initiative without reducing instructional time, especially in light of the school's unsuccessful accreditation status.

The State of Virginia allows public schools autonomy to choose character education programming by matching the needs of the school environment and specific goals for intended student results. Furthermore, between 1995 and 2001, communities

received more than \$45 million in grants for supported growth and initiatives of character education under the NCLB Act of 2001, to ensure funding eligibility, schools need to provide information that the character education program demonstrates clear objectives based on scientific research (NCLB Section 531 [E][2][A]). These funding vehicles provide avenues for schools to facilitate and choose their character education models. Williams (2000) maintained for any program to be effective the theoretical perspective for character education needs to be comprehensive and aligned with instructional approaches. Therefore, the ultimate decision as to what level of character education pedagogy becomes integrated into the school environment depended on the administrative leadership of the principal, the instructional leader.

Thus, the current practice of using the Effective School-Wide Discipline system as the character education program in the school provided an opportunity for the principal to rethink, influence, lead, and innovate within the school environment to focus on the facilitation of a comprehensive character education program to enhance the students' social, moral, and character development for connections to the school. Elliott (1995) found, for example, that schools instituting the responsive classroom framework noted gains in students' social skills, improved academic achievement, and a decrease in problem behavior. Therefore, it appears that a character education initiative requires a different leadership mindset, with the principal's decisions about character education pedagogy guiding and influencing the change process for true implementation within the school environment.

According to Berkowitz and Bier (2006), academic goals and objectives are enhanced by high-quality character education. For this to occur, a school needs to

implement character development initiatives to promote learning for support of the moral and character development and training of its student population. As this rural school continues to be held accountable for test scores and accreditation, and as the national focus continues its demands for academic performance, the complementary focus for this scrutiny becomes character education.

Vignettes. The principal was asked to answer prevideo questions about character education and to return responses to the researcher; the second step entailed his watching and reflecting on the vignette scenarios, which encompassed various character education dialogues of a pseudo classroom teacher and a pseudo principal referring to the moral and character development of students. An emphasis on the principal's postvideo viewpoints provided an in-depth understanding of the leadership decisions the principal might have employed regarding the scenarios.

The five prerecorded vignettes depicted a pseudo principal and a pseudo teacher in dialogue about the needs of the school and the promotion of a character education program. The vignette data provided the opportunity to discern the rural school principal's thoughts with pre and postvideo questions for before and after viewpoints to encapsulate perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about character education leadership decisions, all based on what his leadership decisions and ideas would be regarding the scenarios. Greenhaus and Powell (2003) touted the use of vignettes as a supportive method to understand perceptions and beliefs that are not always easily accessed with other research approaches. The vignettes presented avenues to gather in-depth knowledge about the principal's perceptions and conceptualization regarding

character education and leadership decisions for mobilization of resources for the school environment.

For some unknown reason, the six prevideo questions were unanswered by the principal. There might have been several reasons for the lack of responses. The omitted responses did not change the study focus, but responses to the prevideo questions would have provided more in-depth perceptions about the school leader's decisions related to character education. The researcher considered the prevideo questions to be specific in nature and thought they would have provided private, emotive, and resonant perceptions for emergent themes, possibly in comparison to the direct public responses shared previously with the researcher in the face-to-face interview. Nevertheless, the responses to the postvideo questions provided a viewpoint not expressed by the principal in the earlier public interview with the researcher. During the audiotaped interview, the principal shared his support for character education and agreed that the principal was the instructional leader to mobilize resources for any type of program initiatives into the school.

After reviewing the vignette scenarios, the researcher noted that the principal's viewpoint appeared to be in direct conflict regarding who should be responsible to lead the path for the character education initiative to be implemented in the school. Although the principal appeared to be open to listening to a request for character education programming, his focus and stance transferred leadership engagement of the program onto the teacher to follow specific procedures for building faculty momentum regarding the character education initiative. Nevertheless, the principal's lack of leadership decision making to support the teacher did not reflect either direct or indirect support for

promotion of character education in the instructional curriculum; it appeared to imply a noncommittal leadership mindset, thereby reflecting indirect support for character education integration in the instructional curriculum, even though the principal asserted a belief in character education

Focus group. Morgan (1993) wrote, “A focus group can help the investigator know the language that the population uses to describe their experiences, but can acquaint the investigator with the population members’ values and styles of thinking in communicating about the research topic” (p. 117). Teachers at the school under study expressed their frustrations about the constant challenges the school continued to experience: low student achievement, required outside assistance for achievement improvement, and the demanding pace for teaching objectives, remediation, and tutoring to improve achievement status.

The faculty members shared their beliefs and described the rural school’s student population as lacking in traits of respect, self-control, and moral and character development. In addition, comments suggested that their utilization of the ESD behavioral management system resulted from an administrative expectation directive for its use with their students in monitoring and managing behavioral issues. Teachers also believed that character education pedagogy was important and that their students needed a program for moral and character development; however, they indicated that the need for training and professional development to implement lessons and deliver instruction appropriately was equally important because none of them was aware of a faculty member in the rural school who had written, developed, or taught character education as part of the curriculum, even though it was sorely needed.

The faculty appeared to be in mutual agreement that a character education initiative would be beneficial for the school if time were allowed to integrate and use this type of pedagogy in their curricular and instructional delivery. Supplementing that view, however, were their beliefs that the administration needed a more proactive approach to character education pedagogy as a comprehensive initiative instead of a management system to monitor student behavior and that teachers needed to understand the importance of such an initiative, including reassurance that it was not just something else to do.

Another concern addressed by faculty reflected a cultural disconnect between the instructional staff and the diverse student population they taught. This disconnect was noted in the predominantly Caucasian, middle-class faculty members' observations, interactions, and descriptions related to the low socioeconomic school community, consisting of a population of more than 75% minority, Hispanic, and migrant students with approximately 80% participating in the free or reduced-price lunch program. To an even greater extent, the Standards of Learning requirements and the push to move the school out of its third year of unsuccessful status weighed heavily on the faculty, revealing their frustrations about the academic achievement issues as well as the cultural divide between the faculty and the students and community regarding how to eliminate the challenges. Echoing that sentiment, the principal said, "You have to work hard to be accepted in the community."

Document and audiovisual review. Posters throughout the school building, either student made or commercially produced, referenced classroom projects, reports, or holidays. "Think before you Talk," "Be Kind to Your Neighbors," and motivational

slogans, such as “The Sky’s the Limit” and “This is a Positive Thinking Area,” were relegated to hallways and areas outside classroom doors. Even though the slogan posters offered positive messages, no recurrent or central theme or effort of public and proactive encouragement and nurturing of students’ moral and character development was evident, with the exception of information about how to earn splash bucks through the behavioral management program. Although the school’s ESD faculty manual and pledge espoused positive behaviors and expectations for students to be respectful, responsible, and ready to learn in every area of the school building, the inspirational posters did not reflect important distinctions or displays of these messages in public areas of the school building, such as the cafeteria and library in. In other words, the ESD posters, each approximately the size of a student’s notebook paper, appeared to have lesser focus and importance based upon the manner of presentation in the school building. The signage was displayed in some classrooms, but unevenly throughout the building, depending on the implementation efforts of individual teachers.

Therefore, there was no evidence of a whole-school character education initiative encouraging, fostering, or nurturing these values on a day-to-day basis either through lessons or specific curriculum, even though the ESD document binder promoted the use of skits, common language, and role playing for teachers to demonstrate acceptable and appropriate behavioral expectations. Additionally, there were no instructional lesson plans designed to facilitate students’ experiencing events or engaging in activities to enhance their social, moral, and character development. Every ESD document focused on the behavioral management of students using rewards of splash bucks for appropriate behavior and disciplinary consequences for unacceptable behavior.

Summary of Findings

The literature highlighted the complicated trajectory of character education implementation in the nation's public schools, including the difficulty in obtaining data due to the vast differences in types of program and variances in goals, objectives, and pedagogical approaches for implementing character education initiatives within school environments. This study involved an investigation and a report of the tensions experienced in a rural school due to achievement testing pressures, low-socioeconomic and high-minority populations, fewer resources, reduced tax bases, and difficulties with the retention of qualified personnel for the school; these factors fostered difficulty for the rural school principal in making curricular leadership decisions for a school-wide comprehensive instructional initiative such as character education.

These problems magnified the federal and state Standards of Learning pressures and requirements in the high-stakes testing environment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which mandated successful benchmark percentages and serious educational differential interventions or worse for school communities unsuccessful in meeting adequate yearly progress benchmarks (VDOE, 2010). Furthermore, the rural school principal's expectations, tensions, and conflicts increased with regard to instructional leadership decisions about the mobilization, articulation, and facilitation of a rigorous curriculum to improve academic achievement (Catalano et al., 2002).

In addition, the promotion and incorporation of the social, moral, and character development of the nation's future citizens were deemed important by the State of Virginia ("Character Education Required," 2004) and the NCLB Act (2002), requiring school leaders to effectively implement character education pedagogy, thus

unintentionally creating greater competition for instructional time. This direct competition for both pedagogical domains—meeting students’ academic achievement benchmarks and enhancing the social and moral character development of students—created conflicts for the rural school principal’s leadership decision regarding how to affirm Virginia’s mandated Standards of Learning in both instructional areas.

Therefore, the case study analysis focused on critically examining and scrutinizing content related to the research question and subquestions in an effort to discern a principal’s perceptions and conceptualization of character education, how those perceptions affected program implementation, and the relationship between character education and student achievement in a rural public school located in a state mandating character education pedagogy.

The principal of the rural elementary school was under pressure to remove his school from improvement status due to its being designated for the third year as Accredited with Warning. Continuing to receive outside interventions from state and local universities, the faculty responded to the school community with interventions to increase and improve students’ academic performance and achievement status with state benchmark designations. Additionally, the school environment appeared to present a safe, orderly, caring, supportive place with positive relationships to foster students’ self-esteem and to educate them to become confident, competent, responsible, and productive citizens, as stated in the school’s public communication to community constituents.

During his public face-to-face interview with the researcher, as the main participant of the single-case design analysis, the rural school principal declared an affirmative pro character education pedagogical stance with his statements. Conversely,

in his private postvignette questionnaire responses, the principal demonstrated indirect or noncommittal support of character education. Each of the vignettes presented a principal briefing a classroom teacher regarding the accreditation needs of the school and the teacher's allotted time for remediation assignments designed to increase student achievement. Throughout the scenarios, the teacher purported that a character education model would benefit the student population whereas the scenario principal emphasized the needs of the school with regard to school accreditation requirements. The rural school principal answered the questions privately; the responses reflecting his reactions about the scenarios were returned electronically to the researcher. The principal's responses indicated that he believed the scenario principal should be open to how a character education program would help but that the scenario teacher should have been better prepared, bringing a group of staff willing to do the work to get the program off the ground.

In addition, the principal shared his belief that the teacher should have employed specific procedural steps or an outline of tasks for such a program, providing information about how the character education would help testing and what it would look like, as well as how it would help school morale. Moreover, the rural school principal said, "The teacher should have done her homework and involved fellow staff in the process if she is serious about the program." He also declared that it was the scenario teacher's responsibility to bring this information to the school improvement team for approval and implementation efforts.

Based on these responses, the researcher perceived that the principal was indirectly forfeiting the leadership initiative regarding the character education program as

a consideration for curriculum innovation. Although open to hearing about the character education proposal, with regard to support for the additional curriculum initiative, the principal appeared to impose the leadership decision on the teacher to mobilize resources for the character education initiative. This stance implied less than definitive administrative decision making regarding the initiative and promoted a noncommittal leadership strategy rather than a collaborative supportive approach to guide the teacher with the proposal idea. Additionally, with the scenario teacher's time allotted to remediation, there would be no venue for the teacher to lead the charge for the character education initiative without administrative support. If the character education model could supplement or complement student achievement and enhance the moral and character development of students, the leadership support of the principal would need to be the impetus and catalyst for curricular enhancements because, ultimately, the school leader influences the success or demise of curricular efforts for implementation.

Therefore, the principal's responses appeared to provide less clarity and a lack of direct support for the promotion of character education integration into the instructional curriculum; perhaps he did not like to change or embrace new educational proposals in general. Thus, the principal's public statements seemed to offer more support for character education than his private comments, which placed the leadership emphasis of implementing a character education initiative on the classroom teacher versus the school leader.

Moreover, the principal's statements in the public interview and his postvignette responses were in contrast; he believed in character education, but rather than encourage a collaborative stance with the faculty, he expected his instructional staff to shoulder the

burden of proof as to how it would benefit the school. Based on those perceptions, the principal appeared to refrain from making curricular decisions; to use programs with which he was most familiar; to place the burden of mandates on the state for lack of funding, even with character education funding available; and to impose leadership responsibilities on faculty for a curricular initiative, despite knowing that curricular decisions are based on the importance the instructional leader places on the education initiative. In fact, the first research subquestion—How does a rural school principal's perception of character education affect program implementation in the school?—was answered by the principal's not making a decision, not seeming to understand what a true character education program resembles, and employing an indirect approach of supporting and using a behavioral management program as the school's character education focus. Therefore, those perceptions dramatically affected character education implementation in the school environment even though the principal said the curriculum pedagogy was important. A school without comprehensive implementation efforts provides no benefit to the student population.

In summation, the principal's perceptions highlighted the rural school leader's decisions or lack thereof about character education through his use of the Effective School-Wide Discipline program, which was in place when he began his administrative term at the school. The ESD was a behavior monitoring and behavioral modification program, not a character education initiative, even though it included efforts to motivate students to make responsible decisions. According to feedback from the focus group, however, the faculty was expected to implement the program in every classroom throughout the school; the principal believed this was being done, although his faculty

believed it was not implemented evenly from classroom to classroom. In addition, the ESD system focused on extrinsic rewards versus teaching and exposing students to proactive models of moral and character behavior through the influence of teachers and peers using problem-solving techniques and promoting high expectations for academic excellence and positive attitudes with peers and school, with all elements' being encouraged by the educational environment (WWC, 2006; Williams & Schnaps, 1999).

Therefore, it appeared that professional development in how to identify and analyze a character education initiative to meet the needs of their student population and community would benefit the school administration and faculty. Professional development would provide training in how to implement a more comprehensive approach to character education in an educational environment (Calabrese & Roberts, 2001; Calabrese & Roberts, 2002). It would also promote and support the benefits of the moral and character development initiative with regard to academic achievement, a positive school arena, and good future citizens, rather than present the initiative as just something else to do. If professional development and related goals created outreach objectives to connect to the school's community population, the principal and faculty might embrace character education as complementary, rather than ancillary, to academic achievement.

For this rural elementary school, despite federal and state mandates, a focus to work with students and the community to build a connection to motivate and enhance students' moral and character development might benefit the school in balancing the tensions of academic achievement with a collaboration of character education pedagogy. As a focus group teacher stated, "finding those connections between people is

important...in fact they are the keys. That's what the whole school system should be about." Especially in the current high-stakes testing arena, being open to character education and implementing character education pedagogy might provide better results for academic achievement.

A number of studies indicated that a school community in which students felt connected to their school not only produced positive results in meeting accountability standards but also increased academic motivation, social understanding and competence, altruistic conduct in school, and trust and respect for teachers (Osterman, 2000). Rouse et al. (2007) maintained that accountability pressures related to those issues have the potential to improve test scores in low-performing schools and that such pressures can induce school administrators to change their behavior in educationally beneficial ways. Therefore, implementing character education with the support available from the state would certainly be worth the effort.

Limitations

Limitations of this research included the primary researcher of the study. The researcher, having served as an elementary school administrator for more than 13 years and a guidance counselor for more than 20 years, had taught and developed character education programs, lessons, and initiatives in various public and private elementary schools within the State of Virginia. The researcher, therefore, had a personal interest in the investigation of character education implementation and leadership influences that affect instructional pedagogy. The researcher purposefully selected an elementary school due to the familiarity of the researcher's own past work experiences with administration and moral and character development initiatives and programs. To avoid and eliminate

biases for future studies about character education and principal leadership, it would be beneficial to have a researcher not familiar with character education.

Lack of prior knowledge about character education would prevent preconceived judgments or personal opinions of participants and programs regarding pedagogical implementation in states with legislative mandates for character education in public schools. It would also support and provide an unprejudiced understanding of the relevant facts of future investigative analyses. Additionally, the researcher's inexperience with investigative analysis might have inhibited the research investigation due to the study participant's lack of responses to the prevideo questions before reviewing the character education vignettes.

Recommendations

The phenomenon of character education and the debates and complexities related to implementation in the nation's public schools, in addition to the federal government's and states' encouraging and mandating character education pedagogy, cause principals to continually balance their accountability needs for academic achievement with the needs for moral and character development of their students. Ellison (2002) maintained that the level of importance for a character education initiative varies according to pedagogical training, school ethnicity, and percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Van Orden (2000) discerned that principals believe character education to be important but that collaboration with the school's community is central in enhancing and supporting moral and character development of students. Therefore, in summation, the culture of the school, the principal's leadership, and the professional development of the

faculty are crucial to effective character education initiatives for students' moral and character development benefit.

For character education to be truly implemented into the school environment, especially in schools that are drowning under the federal and state accreditation standards, further study is warranted with disparate populations, especially in rural schools where economically deprived communities lack resources and programs to foster and nurture character development in students. Administrators need to be willing to take risks with character education, especially in identifying and analyzing programs that fit the needs of their students. Additionally, teachers need to have time to foster and nurture their students with appropriate strategies for becoming successful future citizens, while still working to improve academic achievement. Consequently, providing further research on how to measure character education effectively with regard to the enhancement of a school's program might promote less conflict regarding curricular decisions for effective pedagogy to be perceived as a positive and complementary integrative component to academic achievement standards. The principal's leadership is necessary to influence, lead, and create an environment to focus on the facilitation of student's social and moral development and their connection to school.

Conclusions

As principals focus on meeting state and federal accountability requirements with the obligations to lead their schools to successful academic achievement, expectations to improve students' moral and character development are creating additional curricular dilemmas regarding how to integrate these initiatives instructionally. In addition, how rural school principals fare in the high-stakes testing arena and contend with the

difficulties rural schools encounter, while assuming multiple roles, continue to develop conflicts for principals in providing strong academic programs and implementing character education initiatives, too, even when mandated by the state. The fact that academic accreditation standards are measured does not mean that the moral and character development of students can be ignored in the school environment, even though personal expressions and thoughts and feelings are not easily measured. Despite the difficulty of measurement, those factors are not any less important for the successful growth of students. These tensions with internal and external influences of state and local accountability expectations can inhibit principal leadership with regard to curricular decisions, but such decisions do not have to be all or nothing. Despite the information culled from the existing research, there does not seem to be substantive evidence that a principal's perceptions of character education affect implementation and student achievement based on their beliefs about character education pedagogy. The myriad types of character education programs existing in schools might explain the lack of rigorous research on this specific component of character education; that phenomenon does not mean a principal's perceptions are unimportant. Future research on this topic would be beneficial.

DeRoche (2000) maintained that principals should be risk takers for character education leadership and organization, even with the pressures of accountability, because "the risk taking principal actively identifies and solves problems...and taking those risks can motivate teachers to higher levels of competency and success" (p. 5). Therefore, in a school with a diverse student population or a school with undesired accreditation benchmarks, "it will be contingent on the principal's leadership to meet the needs of the

students regarding diversity, drug education, violence, character education, and so forth” (Hausman et al., 2000). Sustaining change is critical for school improvement efforts and important for school principals in leading faculty to sustain character education pedagogy.

Unintentionally, the high-stakes testing environment has marginalized scientifically research-based character education initiatives for the moral and character development of students. Future research to correlate the demands of academic standards with character education in efforts to weave them together without demise of one instructional mandate over the other might be the path for principal leadership, rural school improvement, academic achievement, professional development, and students’ moral and character development in the nation’s schools. As Lickona (1993) stated, “not to teach children core ethical values is a grave moral failure” (p. 9).

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Appendices

Appendix A: Superintendent Permission Letter

Superintendent of Rural School District, VA

March 2011

I am asking permission to conduct a qualitative research study investigating principals' perceptions of character education in a rural school district. A principal will be asked to volunteer to be a study participant. The principal's character education initiative will be observed for a 45-60 minute teaching experiences, he or she will meet face to face with the researcher for an audio or videotaped interview at a time and place of the principal's choice for 60-90 minutes, and the researcher will conduct a document review of plans, notes, and instructional materials regarding the character education program or initiative. The participants may refuse to participate in the entire study or part of the study and, if choosing participation, are free to withdraw at any time without consequence or negative effect.

The researcher will provide all forms and materials needed for completion of this study. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study. The identity of study participants will not be released to anyone, other than you, and findings will be reported in aggregate only. Only the researcher will have access to the data, none of which will be shared. Participants will not directly benefit from participating in the study; however, the expected benefits will include an understanding of the methodologies and experiences that emerge in the use of character education in teachers' pedagogy.

There will be no compensation for the participants in the study. Questions concerning this research may be addressed to Sandra H. Harrison at sharr026@odu.edu, and complaints about the research may be addressed to Dr. K. Crum at kcrum@odu.edu.

Your consent to permit this research is voluntary, and you may support all or part of the study. If granting permission, you are free to withdraw consent at any time without consequence or negative effect. If any participant withdraws, data related to the participant will be excluded from the findings. If you sign the consent form, you will receive a copy, signed and dated by the research investigator of the study.

Sandra H. Harrison, Doctoral investigator, Old Dominion University

Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix B: Principal Permission Letter

Principal of Rural School USA

March 2011

The superintendent has approved a request to conduct a research study in your school district. Principals are being asked to volunteer to be participants for a study investigating a principal's perceptions of character education in rural public schools. I am asking your permission to conduct the qualitative research investigation at your school. If you participate, the character education initiative will be observed for a 45-60 minute teaching experiences, you will meet face to face with the researcher for a 60-90 minute audio or videotaped interview at a time and place of your choice, you will be asked to watch a vignette and reflect on the scenario, and the researcher will conduct a focus group as well as a document review of plans, notes, and instructional materials regarding the character education program or initiative. Participants may refuse to participate in the entire study or part of the study, and, if they choose to participate, are free to withdraw at any time without consequence or negative effect.

The researcher will provide all forms and materials needed for completion of this study. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study. The identity of study participants will not be released to anyone, and findings will be reported in aggregate only. Only the researcher will have access to the data, none of which will be shared. Participants will not directly benefit from participating in the study; however, the expected benefits will include an understanding of the methodologies and experiences that emerge in the use of character education in teachers' pedagogy.

There will be no compensation for the participants in the study. Questions concerning this research may be addressed to Sandra H. Harrison at sharr026@odu.edu, and complaints about the research may be addressed to Dr. K. Crum at kcrum@odu.edu.

Your consent to permit this research is voluntary, and you may support all or part of the study. If you grant permission, you are free to withdraw consent at any time without consequence or negative effect. If any participant withdraws, data related to that participant will be excluded from the findings. If you sign the consent form, you will receive a copy, signed and dated by the research investigator of the study.

Sandra H. Harrison, Doctoral investigator, Old Dominion University

Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C: E-Mail Communication to Study Participants

Dear ...

Thank you for agreeing to be a participant in my study and helping me fulfill a requirement of doctoral coursework at Old Dominion University. I would like to reconfirm the purpose, participant agreement, and confidentiality of your participation in the study. The purpose of the study is to gather data on how the principal's perceptions of character education affect program implementation in the school, the leadership and decision-making processes, and the relationship between character education and student achievement. The study involves a 45-60 minute classroom observation of the character initiative, a 60-90 minute audio or videotaped individual interview with the researcher, and a review of documents, meeting notes, and instructional plans.

All information will be kept confidential, and findings will not have any identifying linkages to participating respondents. Review of lesson plans, notes, and instructional materials will have no impact on your personnel evaluation for employment. Additionally, transcripts, memos, and other files will contain no names connected with the data; any findings will be presented in aggregate and no names will be cited. All information will be kept in a secured file cabinet located in the researcher's office.

After looking at your schedules, and selecting a date and time of your choosing for the site visit observation, we will begin the observation the week of ???. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Again, thank you for being a participant in this study. I look forward to visiting you and your school.

Sincerely,

Sandra H. Harrison

Appendix D: Informed Consent Document

Old Dominion University

PROJECT TITLE:

A Principal's Perspective of Character Education in a Rural Public School

INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this form is to give you information that may affect your decision to say YES or NO to participation in this research, and to record the consent of those who say YES. The research study, 'A Principal's Perspective of Character Education in a Rural Public School' will be conducted in a rural school district in Virginia.

RESEARCHER:

Sandra H. Harrison, Ph.D. student in Educational Leadership, will be the responsible Principal Investigator of this research study, from Old Dominion University, in conjunction with the Darden College of Education, and under the guidance of Dr. Karen Sanzo, Dr. Steve Myran, and Dr. Tammi Milliken.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY:

Several studies have been conducted looking into the subject of character education. None of them have explained the leadership perspective and conceptualization of character education in the school, how that perception affects program implementation in the school, and how the principal perceives the relationship of character education and student achievement.

If you decide to participate, then you will join a study involving research comprising a 45-60 minute observation of the character education initiative, meet face to face with the researcher for a 60-90 minute audio and or videotaped interview at a time and place of your choice, view a 15 minute video vignette for reflection and response to the scenario(s), permit a document review of plans, notes, and instructional materials regarding the character education program or initiative, and permit the researcher to moderate a focus group, approximately two hours, on the topic of character education, with audio or videotape recorded interviews comprised of faculty members, at an amenable time and place at the school. If you say YES, then your participation will last for approximately two-three days.

EXCLUSIONARY CRITERIA:

You should have completed all certifications for principal leadership of a school in the state of Virginia. To the best of your knowledge, you should not have less than a master's degree that would keep you from participating in this study.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

RISKS: There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study. The researcher tried to reduce risks by maintaining anonymity and confidentiality with subject participation through acknowledgement and provision of all forms and materials. If the participant prefers not to be recorded during the interview, only notes will be taken during the interview period.

BENEFITS:

The main benefit to you for participating in this study is indirect. This indirect benefit includes the understanding of what methodologies and experiences emerge in the use of character education in teachers' pedagogy, how a principal perceives and conceptualizes character education in the school, how those perceptions affect program implementation, and how a principal perceives the relationship between character education and student achievement.

COSTS AND PAYMENTS:

The researcher wants your decision about participating in this study to be absolutely voluntary. Yet, it is recognized that your participation may pose some inconvenience of your time. You will receive no payment to help defray incidental expenses associated with participation. Therefore, the researcher is unable to give you any payment for participating in this study.

NEW INFORMATION:

If the researcher finds new information during this study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then it will be given to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

All information obtained about you in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations and publications, but the researcher will not identify you.

WITHDRAWAL PLEDGE:

It is OK for you to say NO. Even if you say YES now, you are free to say NO later, and walk away or withdraw from the study—at any time. Your decision will not affect your relationship with Old Dominion University, or otherwise cause a loss of benefits to which you might be otherwise entitled. However, the researcher reserves the right to withdraw your participation in this study, at any time, if she observes problems with your continued participation.

COMPENSATION FOR ILLNESS AND INJURY:

If you say YES, then your consent in this document does not waive any of your legal rights. However, in the event of (harm, injury, or illness) arising from this study, neither Old Dominion University nor the researcher are able to give you any money, insurance coverage, free medical care, or any other compensation for such injury. In the event that you suffer injury as a result of participation in any research project, you may contact, Sandra H. Harrison, principal investigator at 757 461-6236 or Dr. Karen Sanzo at the following number: 757 683-6689 or Dr. Ed Gomez, the current IRB chair, at 757 683-6309 at Old Dominion University, who will be glad to review the matter with you.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT:

By signing this form, you are saying several things. You are saying that you have read this form or have had it read to you, that you are satisfied that you understand this form, the research study, and its risks and benefits. The researchers should have answered any questions you may have had about the research. If you have any questions later on, then the researcher should be able to answer them.

Sandra H. Harrison, work: 757 461-6236; home: 757 420-9083; cell: 757 536-0689

If at any time you feel pressured to participate, or if you have any questions about your rights or this form, then you should call Dr. Ed Gomez, the current IRB chair, at 757 683-6309, or the Old Dominion University Office of Research, at 757 683-3460.

And importantly, by signing below, you are telling the researcher YES, that you agree to participate in this study. The researcher should give you a copy of this form for your records.

Subject's Printed Name & Signature	Date
------------------------------------	------

10. When signing consent form, participant will receive a copy, signed and dated by the investigator.

Signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's
Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix E: Observation Coding Protocol - Physical–Atmosphere

				COMMENTS	DESCRIPTION
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT					
LIGHTING					
WALLS					
DECORATIONS					
FURNITURE					
SCHOOL ATMOSPHERE					
WELCOMING					
UNIVITING					
LOUD					
QUIET					
VOICE					
FEMALE					
MALE					
PITCH					
TONE					
INSTRUCTOR'S BODY LANGUAGE					
OPEN					
CLOSED					
POSITIVE/NEG.					
EYE CONTACT					
PURPOSE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION LESSONS					
LEARNING					
PRACTICING					
CONNECTIONS					
PATTERNS					
FRAMING					
OTHER SUBJECTS					
DISCUSSION					
THINKING					

Appendix F: Observation Coding Protocol - Instructional

	TEACHER	STUDENT	COMMENTS	DESCRIPTIONS
INSTRUCTIONAL METHODOLOGIES				
WORDS				
STORIES				
ANECDOTAL				
METAPHORS				
DRAMATIZATION				
ROLE PLAYING				
REAL PROBLEMS				
GAMES				
REPRESENTATIVE RESOURCES				
TEXTBOOKS				
WORKSHEETS				
FILMS				
CDS				
SKITS				
COMPUTERS				
SOFTWARE				
MUSIC/ART/DANCE				
INTEGRATIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION EXPERIENCES				
DOING IT THE RIGHT WAY				
CHARACTER WORD				
CLARIFY & JUSTIFY				
DISCUSSION				
INTERACTIVE				
SHARED EXPERIENCE				
INVOLVED				
UNINVOLVED				
WHOLE GROUP				
SMALL GROUP				
PAIRS				
INTEGRATIVE CHARACTER EDUCATION EXPERIENCES				
INDIVIDUALS				
STUDENT INITIATED				
TEACHER INITIATED				

Appendix G: Critical Incident Interview Protocol and Questions

E-mail the participant a week before the scheduled interview to confirm date, time, and place. Next, meet participant, introduce yourself, and establish rapport.

"I am a doctoral student at Old Dominion University and would like to know more about your experiences and use with character education in the school. I would like to discuss your perceptions about character education and any implementation of the current character education model your school uses.

I would like to audiotape and or videotape our conversation so I can have an accurate record. Are you comfortable with that? If not, I will just take notes. I would like to remind you that our conversation is confidential, and I will not use your name or any identifying linkages in discussions or writings related to the research. Only group data will be recorded. Is that ok? Do you have any questions before we begin? If not...let's proceed."

1. Tell me about your experiences as a principal at ?????school.

- How many years have you been an administrator?
- What grade level(s) did you teach before becoming a principal?
- Describe your school.
- Why did you decide to be an administrator of a rural school?
- Current expectation of your faculty, both formal and informal

2. Context: Tell me, what are your perceptions of character education?

Topics to be used for probing questions if participant cannot think of any experiences.

- Definition, purpose, practices, programs, worthwhile or not? Why?

3. Context: Describe a character education event, what led up to it, and what happened as a result.

4. Describe what led up to the situation or made the school initiate a CE program.

5. What were the circumstances surrounding the character education incident (initiative)? Why was it a problem?

6. What will you do if you are faced with that situation again?

7. Whom would you ask for help?

8. Behavior: What exactly did the school or leaders do for the character education program?

9. Especially effective/ineffective? Why or why not?

10. Could the incident (CE) have been avoided?

11. Consequence: What was the outcome or result of this action?

12. How long ago or how often did the character initiative occur, or is it ongoing?

13. What you observed with character education, is it being done, or not being done with character education in.....?

Lessons, Activities, Curriculum, Social, Management, Leadership concerns/decisions, Relationship to Student achievement

12. What resulted in mobilizing instructional resources that led you to believe the action was effective or ineffective?

13. Please describe some descriptive information about character education and its future in public schools with legislative mandates from the state.

- Reason, Goal, Importance, Pros and cons, Problems

14. Rural Schools have their own challenges; what are those challenges?

Topics to be used for probing questions if participant cannot think of any experiences.

- Feelings, Values, Virtues, Words, Worthwhile, Effective?

14: How do you balance the requirements with federal and state obligations for accountability, and what is your perception about character education and student achievement?

Topics to be used for probing questions if participant cannot think of any experiences

*Annual yearly progress, resources, leadership, collaborative planning, professional development

Appendix H: E-Mail Communication for Participants with Document, Audiovisual Review

Dear...

Again, thank you for participating in the study of a principal's perceptions of character education. In the Research Agreement document, your signature acknowledged Sandra H. Harrison, the researcher, a doctoral student at Old Dominion University, to have access to review your educational documents. The document review involves a review of plans, meeting notes, activities, and instructional materials for planning and preparing educational lessons and activities regarding character education.

All information will be kept confidential and data will not have any factors identifying participating respondents in the final analysis. All information will be placed in a secured file cabinet located in the researcher's office.

After looking at your schedules, please select a date and time for me to review the documents described above. The document review needs to be completed no later than ?????? 2011. If you have any questions, please let me know.

I look forward to reviewing your documents and appreciate your help in supporting this requirement for my doctoral coursework.

Sincerely,

Sandra H. Harrison

Appendix I: Document–Audiovisual Review Protocol Checklist

CATEGORY	CHARACTER EDUCATION RELATED	COMMENTS
(1) INSTRUCTIONAL		
	*Textbooks	
	*Teacher Manuals	
	*Lesson Plans	
	*Charts	
	*Bulletin Board Activities	
(2) TECHNOLOGICAL		
	*WebPages	
	*Software	
	*CDs	
	*Films	
	*Smart boards	
	*Computers	
	*E-mails	
(3) COMMUNICATION		
	*Lesson plan notes	
	*Collaborative grade level notes	
	*Letters	
	*Files	
	*Proposals	
	*Reports	
	*Homework Assignment bulletin	
(4) VISUAL MATERIALS		
	*Bulletin board themes	
	*Wall art	
	*Student art	
	*Word messages	
	*Photographs	
(5) EXPENSES		
(6) OTHER		

Appendix J: Focus Group Questions

Moderator:

Good morning and thank you for being part of the focus group. Our discussion today should not be more than two hours or less. I appreciate your time in helping me with my research project. The topic for the focus group is character education, which is mandated by the State of Virginia, supported by the federal government, and expected for implementation in public schools. I'd like to see what your views are on character education.

Before we begin, I would like to reconfirm audio-taping of the group process. For data collection, no identifying features will represent any individual, and all data will be compiled in aggregate. If everyone is all right with that, we'll begin. Please let me know if you are uncomfortable with that format. If not, I will take notes.

First, I would like each one of you to introduce yourself, describe your role in the school, and share an experience you have had with character education. If you have not had an experience, that is fine. I'll start and we'll go around the room. Thank you.

Moderator:

1. What moral character development problems appear to be the most common in the school environment?

2. What is this group's opinion on school problems and character education programs in a rural school district?
3. What seems to be the group's opinion for the causes of student behavior with peers, teachers, and academics?
 - 3a. What are the barriers to these problems?
4. What needs to be implemented to handle these issues or problems?
5. Do you feel there is any character education pedagogy to assist these school issues? Why or why not?

Appendix K: Vignette**Part I: Prevideo questions**

Section 1: Reflect on your own experiences. Do you have any concerns about legislation for schools to implement character education?

Section 2: Pressures exist in every educational setting. Can you think of ways your school programs are compromised? Briefly explain these ways, or if your answer is 'No,' briefly explain how they are not.

Section 3: Have you ever felt your concerns for what curriculum programs your school needs are dismissed? Briefly explain what you would do in this kind of situation.

Section 4: Have you ever been required to implement curricular programs about which you had reservations? Briefly describe.

Section 5: Recall a time when you questioned your judgment about character education. Briefly describe your emotions and thoughts.

Section 6. Have you ever felt obligated to make adjustments to curricular programs based on testing pressures? Briefly explain.

Part II: Video Clip Summaries and Postvideo Questions**Section 1:**

The state has mandated that character education is expected in the public schools, and your school district struggles with resources, low-income communities, and being accredited annually. A faculty member has just heard of a great character education program she'd like the school to implement. The principal assures her that it is important, but that she will be required to work with those students below grade level to catch up to pass the SOL.

Question: Although the teacher is supported for her CE idea, can you identify any additional questions she might need to ask to make the initiative become important for curricular implementation?

Section II. The principal briefs the teacher on the needs of the school and the students for school accreditation. The teacher argues that these students also need programs that nurture their moral and character development.

Question: Think about the principal's role in this scene. What do you think he should do?

Section III. A week later, the teacher is frustrated because her time is allotted only to remediation and there has been a cheating incident and argument between students in the class. The teacher talks to the principal about the students and their actions.

Question: The teacher is at an impasse. Briefly describe her options. Is there something else she can do with the administration and her belief about the moral and character development of students?

Section IV: The teacher decides to work with her students in the new CE model she is excited about without administrative support. The students like the new approach but the initiative is not encouraged by other faculty members, even though some like it.

Question: A group meeting with other faculty members might be a place to share new ideas; however, when the teacher tries to share new ideas about the program, it is not well received due to impending SOL requirements.

Section V: The teacher vents her frustration to the principal. He explains his thoughts about CE, but asks, "How is the school going to implement another curricular program?"

Question: Briefly describe the actions the principal and teacher should take in this situation for the eventual outcome of this incident.

Vitae

Sandra H. Harrison

Educational History

Doctorate of Educational Leadership, December 2011

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia

Dissertation Title: A Principal's Perceptions of Character Education in a Rural Public School

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Tidewater Park Elementary School, Grades 4, 5, 6, Teacher

Norfolk Public Schools

1971-1976

Central Texas College, Instructor

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Old Dominion University, Instructional Curriculum Supervisor

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Bayside Elementary, Guidance Counselor

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