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Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Character Education Program in a Single-Sex, Urban Charter High School: Learning from Teacher and Student Perceptions of Its Implementation.

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EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A CHARACTER EDUCATION
PROGRAM IN A SINGLE-SEX, URBAN CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL: LEARNING
FROM TEACHER AND STUDENT PER

CEPTIONS OF ITS IMPLEMENTATION

by

Kizawanda A. Olowe

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

of Doctor of Education

in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National Louis University

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Document Origination Statement for Digital Commons @ NLU

This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006).

For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The “program” can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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ABSTRACT

Students who are taught the Illinois State Board of Education's social and emotional learning standards are granted skills that help them make positive contributions to society. Well-rounded individuals have acquired abilities that allow them to make sound decisions, interact with others, and develop self-awareness skills. Adept individuals who have the skills to teach students strategies that help them to develop an emotional intelligence should implement character education programs using evidence-based strategies. Students who attended a single-sex charter school in an urban area participated in a program evaluation to determine if it was being implemented with fidelity. Students and program implementers completed surveys and participated in focus groups. Focus group participants were chosen using random assignment. An open coding method and grouping the data into themes were used to analyze the qualitative data. Using percentages, quantitative data was streamlined into graphs. I used the Character Education Program evaluation to determine that the program was not implemented as designed, there was a lack of staff and student buy-in, and that teachers lacked essential capacities required for execution. These findings could assist schools in developing and implementing high-quality character education programs. Executing character education programs in schools across the country will help accelerate social change, as members of society will be competent, capable of making sound decisions, and managing adversity.

PREFACE

I am passionate about social and emotional learning because I have spent my career as an educator infusing it into my instructional and school social work practices. My life has been dedicated to educating students with special needs and disadvantaged youth from urban areas. I grew up in an urban area and attended elementary and high schools in the City of Chicago. I observed the impact social and emotional issues had on the academic success of many peers. Unfortunately, several peers who graduated from 8th grade with me did not complete high school. Some ended up in the penal system, while others dropped out of high school because of unplanned pregnancies, family issues, and gang violence.

When I started working as a director of specialized services at a charter school in an urban area, I realized that the Character Education Program was not being leveraged as outlined in the school's program manual. The time spent in the class was not being used to teach skills and strategies that our students needed to navigate society. I worked as a teacher and school social worker for many years and I believe that schools should help students learn how to make sound decisions, become self-aware, and how to deal with traumatic experiences. I believed that it was possible to implement these practices because of my previous experiences and research.

Children are reporting to school with a myriad of family problems, self-esteem issues, and other tribulations that interfere with their ability to focus on their education. If we want students to reach their full potential, then we must embed character education programs into the school's culture and climate. All students should be taught the social

and emotional learning standards and educated about the non-cognitive variables that have a huge impact on adult outcomes. My research will be used to advocate for school social work support and the implementation of social and emotional learning standards in all schools in America. All students deserve an opportunity to thrive, persist, and have a positive impact on the world.

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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of my program evaluation was to determine the effectiveness of the Character Education Program as outlined in the Urban Prep Academies Program Manual (2014). The Chief Executive Officer and a group of African-American education, business, and civic leaders founded the nonprofit organization in 2002. The organization opened the first charter school on the South Side of Chicago in 2006, with the intent of providing a comprehensive, high quality, college preparatory education that resulted in the graduates succeeding in college. The charter school projected the ability to educate 1,600 students across the network. Despite ability levels, 100% of the charter school graduates have been admitted to 4-year universities, six years in a row.

Three charter schools served students in the high need communities in which they were located (Urban Prep Academies, 2014). The charter schools were non-selective schools; the schools did not require particular test scores; all students were admitted via lottery with no evaluation of test scores, academic achievement, or special needs. During the fall of each semester, the student recruitment department participated in high school fairs across the City of Chicago. Students and family members were given the opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the network of charter schools.

Students completed an application, which inquired about their demographics, current school, and the locations they were most interested in attending. Once applications were submitted, student names were uploaded into a computerized lottery system, and an unbiased third-party company assisted the network in drawing random

names. Students were notified via postal mail of their admission status and given a few weeks to accept a seat at the selected campus. Students who were not accepted via lottery were placed on the waitlist and given an opportunity to remove their names from the list. If they chose not to remove their names from the waitlist, and they were accepted at a campus, they were notified via postal mail if an opening was available. Waitlisted students were granted 2–3 weeks to accept a seat at a campus.

The network educated predominately African-American males in an urban environment. Currently, I am the Director of Specialized Services for a network of charter schools, located on the West and South Sides of Chicago. My interest in conducting this program evaluation drew upon my experiences as a student who attended Chicago Public Schools, a preschool teacher, a high school teacher for eight years, and licensed clinical social worker for six years. While attending Chicago Public Schools, I communicated with a number of peers who were unsuccessful in high school because they encountered social and emotional issues that negatively impacted their ability to stay on task, complete assignments, and manage their emotions. Several of my classmates did not complete high school, ended up in the penal system, had unplanned pregnancies, and dealt with a number of psychosocial issues that interfered with their ability to function in society. These early experiences left a lasting impression on me and led me to pursue a career in education and social work.

While working as a social worker in a south suburban high school district, I supervised several interns and oversaw a caseload of 2,000 students. I wrote social developmental studies, managed various crises, served as the district's local educational

agency, facilitated professional development workshops for teachers and parents, and facilitated psycho-education for students. These resources provided students, families, and educators with evidence-based strategies to circumnavigate their surroundings.

During my tenure as a school social worker and teacher, I realized the social and emotional needs of the students in the school were not being met. I hospitalized over 200 students with homicidal and suicidal ideations. Several of these students had made threats to bring weapons to the school, with the intent to cause bodily harm to staff and students. After students were stabilized in an in-patient facility, most would return to school emotionally inept. Students returning to school after a several day hiatus would be presented with lower grades and a host of questions from staff members and peers about their untimely absence.

Most students experienced the stigma of being prescribed psychotropic medications, this resulted in most students not taking their prescribed medication or following up with their therapeutic appointments. Students would continue to display mental health issues that would impede their ability to access the general education curriculum. Students who lacked appropriate coping skills were more likely to engage in non-compliant behaviors that lead to suspensions, absences, lower grades, substance abuse, and an increased high school drop-out rate.

My focus turned to ways to prepare students to navigate their academic and social environments. The need to offset these behaviors was addressed with the Character Education Program that would have the potential to have a positive impact on the students and the schools. According to Elias (2006), when schools implemented high-

quality social emotional learning (SEL) programs with fidelity, student grades increased, problem behaviors decreased and the shifts had a positive impact on the school climate. If the Character Education Program at the three charter schools were being implemented with fidelity, then unconventional behaviors both in and outside of school should dissipate (Osher et al., 2016). Once evidence-based SEL strategies were implemented in the school environment, students were able to engage in on-task behaviors, process information learned in classrooms, and use that information to make connections between various subject areas and their environment.

The founders of the charter school created the Character Education Program to give students a voice and opportunity to discuss academic and emotional issues that impacted their ability to access the curriculum. At inception, each teacher at the charter school was given a character education class that they were slated to work with from ninth to twelfth grade. The teachers had the necessary skill set to equip the young men with strategies to manage their emotions, learn to be an African-American male in the dominant society, and gather skills that would help them to enroll and remain persistent in college.

The Character Education Program was designed to teach students decision-making skills, manage personal and interpersonal conflicts, and develop their emotional intelligence. The Character Education Program had a service-learning component built into the program. Leyba (2010) suggested service learning could improve education attitudes and performance, decrease risk-taking behavior, and help students develop positive relationships with others. Service learning programs focus on fulfilling a

community need, expanding the material taught in schools, adding context to coursework, and building concrete skills.

The Character Education Program was created to help construct a sense of brotherhood among the young men in the schools. Elias (2006) stated that a combination of academic learning and SEL was a dependable norm for high quality education for the world we currently inhabit. Students in the Character Education Program remained with the same cohort of students as they matriculated through high school.

As outlined in the school's program manual, character education instructors were expected to teach the school's core values, and give students an opportunity to discuss issues that impact their lives and community. Instructors were charged with helping students learn evidence-based strategies that were known to help them manage their social and learning environments. The service learning project, academic methodologies, and relationship building programs complemented the design to build relationships, taught students the social and emotional skills they would need to persist in college, and acquire stable jobs that would allow them to support themselves and families.

Rationale

Evaluating the implementation of the Character Education Program was important to discern if teachers were implementing the program with fidelity. I wanted to gather qualitative and quantitative data to find out if educators at the charter school had the skill set necessary to assist the students in learning strategies that would help them to steer their educational and social learning environments. Exploring qualitative and quantitative

factors enabled me to use the data to shape the program to better meet the social and emotional needs of our students across the network.

The Character Education Program gave students an opportunity to discuss personal issues that were going on in their lives. Teachers should be equipping students with strategies that they could use to make evidence-based decisions that help them develop a sound emotional intelligence. Elias (2006) confirmed that SEL was sometimes entitled the missing piece, because it represented a part of education that links academics with a specific set of skills that were necessary for individuals to succeed in schools, families, communities, workplaces, and life in general.

My program evaluation was important to my stakeholders and the community, because the Character Education Program implemented with fidelity provided the students with their social and emotional issues addressed. Elias (2006) stated that schools should be considerate of difficult life events that happen to students and try to provide them with help and coping strategies during those distressing moments. The network collected data that enabled me to evaluate the implementation of the Character Education Program as well as the perceptions of the teachers and students.

Goals

My main goal for this study was to find out to what extent the Character Education Program was being implemented, and if the program was meeting the needs of our students. According to researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles (2001), the reality for many large urban schools was that well over 50% of their students exhibited substantial learning, behavior, and emotional problems. As the Director of

Specialized Services at Urban Prep Academies, my goal was to ensure that all character education programs were being implemented with fidelity, and that students were learning social and emotional skills that will help them to enroll and persist in college. Brown (2009) reported that Kindergarten through grade 12 school systems hindered African-American males more than it helped them. The Character Education Program was designed to create a sense of community, brotherhood, and help students learn academic as well as social and emotional skills that will help them be prosperous in life.

Research Questions

1. To what extent is the Character Education Program being implemented according to its intended design?
2. What evidence-based strategies have the students enrolled in the Character Education Program learned to help them navigate their academic and social environments?
3. What are the perceptions of character education instructors and network administrators as it relates to supports needed to implement the Character Education Program?
4. What recommendations do the character education teachers have for network administrators as it relates to the implementation of Character Education Program?

SECTION 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The wealth of knowledge assembled on SEL programs has been conclusive for several years. SEL programs had positive impacts on student learning and outcomes, when implemented with fidelity and evidence-based program goals. SEL programs have had a positive impact on academic performance, social and emotional development, and a progressive impact on the lives of adults who participated in these courses during their youth. Schools that have implemented SEL programs had less discipline issues, truancy, and more students who exhibited on-task behaviors in the academic environment. The literature review outlines the components of effective SEL programs and how they benefit the school, students, and community.

SEL Implementation

Implementing SEL programs in schools required forethought, resources, training, and program evaluation. Jones and Buofford (2012) stated that schools should infuse SEL standards into their daily interactions and practices with students. Implementing SEL standards across the school environment and in all settings helped students to be successful both inside and outside of the classroom. Well-implemented SEL programs were associated with positive social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2017) researchers suggested schools should implement SEL strategies across academic subjects in the school environment. The following tasks enabled teachers to embed SEL into activities:

1. Have students make age-appropriate face to depict feelings/emotions.

2. Provide scenarios and ask students how each situation or experience might make them feel.
3. Routinely ask questions in age-appropriate ways when students are experiencing different feelings to help them identify and express those feelings.
4. Set up a peace corner where kids can go and reflect on their feelings.
5. Provide age appropriate authentic feedback and ask open-ended questions that invite students to engage in deeper reflection about their own strengths and interest.
6. Analyze how current decisions may impact goal achievement.
7. Routinely models and talk about their goals.
8. Talking about perspectives of characters or identifying feelings and thoughts in literature.
9. Having students share their different cultural perspectives on situations, build on the diversity in the classroom.
10. Teach lessons on respect.
11. Develop and revise classroom rules and norms with students to work together to promote understanding and respect.
12. Lead discussions about who students can reach out to when they need help or advice.
13. Teach lesson on social boundaries.

14. Establish a conflict resolution process that is used school-wide any time there is a conflict.

15. Examine problems or moral situations from literature and examine other alternatives and impacts.

Jones and Buofford (2012) specified that the most effective SEL programs incorporated the following four components, which comprise the acronym SAFE:

- (1) Sequenced activities that led in a coordinated and connected way to skills,
- (2) Active forms of learning,
- (3) Focused on developing one or more social skill, and
- (4) Explicit about targeting specific skills.

In order for SEL programs to be implemented with fidelity, Jones and Buofford (2012) added that schools should monitor implementation, provide training to staff, and fully implement the curriculum. Implementation should involve all stakeholders in the school and professional development should be on going. SEL programs that provided continual support were more successful and yielded better outcomes.

Goals of Social Emotional Learning Programs

The goal of SEL programs was to create an environment where students exhibit proficiency processing their thoughts, learning from their peers, brainstorming solutions, and learning skills grounded in evidence-based policies and procedures. Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) sought the short-term goals of SEL programs beneficial to encouraging self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship, responsible decision-making skills, and develop student attitudes about self, others, and schools.

Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) recognized that SEL programming was based on the understanding that the best learning took place when students had an opportunity to forge supportive relationships that helped them deal with challenging and meaningful situations. Schools that implemented SEL programs and embedded the goals into instruction, culture, and climate of the school, prevented and reduced problematic behaviors. Ultimately, students performed better in society when they had strategies they could implement during arduous times. Students who participated in SEL programs learned academic grit, how to cope with adversity, grief, loss, and the importance of making evidence-based decisions (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). Successful students developed personal strengths because they learned social and emotional skills that enabled responsible and ethical decision-making.

Academic and Social and Emotional Impact

School laws were created to reflect the growing needs of our student population, wherein more students have had multiple psychiatric hospitalizations, and presented as victims of sexual abuse, bullying, and witnessed violence. Federal and state legislators have enacted Senate Bill 100, Erin's Law, and bullying protocols to address the social and emotional issues that have impacted student well being. SEL programs that were embedded throughout the school day helped to reduce academic and social problems in the community. Researchers at CASEL (2017) offered a 2011 meta-analysis of 213 studies, from which their researchers revealed that students who participated in evidence-based SEL programs showed an 11 percentile point gain in academic achievement when compared to students who did not participate in SEL programs.

Belfield et al. (2015) suggested a positive correlation between earnings and social and emotional skills. The benefits of implementing SEL programs in schools helped the students, economy, and community. A high fidelity program increased academic achievement, created a school culture more conducive to learning, and produced more productive individuals who can contribute to society. Kyllonen (2013) revealed that personality measures had been shown to predict mortality, divorce, occupational attainment, health behaviors, substance abuse, managerial success, leadership effectiveness, procrastination, creativity, job performance, absenteeism, team performance, and job satisfaction. Schools that developed non-cognitive skills as well as cognitive skills empowered students into the future, as non-cognitive skills drove workplace success.

Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) argued that schools had an important role fostering cognitive development and social and emotional development in raising healthy young children. With bullying and random shootings in society, students who received high quality academic and social and emotional instruction tended to be well rounded and were less likely to engage in detrimental behaviors or cause injury to others.

Progressive Impact of SEL Programs Across Adult Lifespan

SEL programs continued to have a positive impact on participants years after exposure to the standards and curriculum. Up to 18 years later, students who participated in SEL program in schools continued to have better outcomes than their same age peers who were not exposed to programming (CASEL, 2017). Positive impacts included

positive social behaviors and attitudes, less criminal activity, less emotional distress, lower rates of substance abuse, housing needs were met, and higher rates of employment.

The cost benefit analysis on the economy and the positive impacts SEL programs had on adults necessitates an increase in SEL programs in schools across the nation. Leyba (2010) stated that helping a child to develop self-efficacy in one area of life is thought to promote adaptation, coping, motivational, and achievement across other systemic systems. Students who were given evidence-based strategies that helped them navigate their world fared better than students who were not exposed to SEL standards during the academic school day.

Osher et al. (2016) believed that interest in SEL has been evident for over one hundred years. Students, who were given a host of tools and strategies to deal with adversity, made evidence-based decisions, managed their emotions, and were more likely to experience personal and interpersonal successes. Students who were dealing with a host of academic and environmental issues were impeded when focusing on their academics and transferring information from their short to long-term memory.

Nealis (2013) determined that social and emotional learning specialists helped students achieve academically and removed barriers to academic success. Students who participated in SEL programs were more likely to be attractive to potential employers and persist in post-secondary programs. Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) argued that schools should implement SEL programs that have an effective track record. Social and emotional learning standards should be embedded in the curriculum, and teachers should receive high-quality professional development that prepares them to infuse the skills into

all of their lessons (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). In order for SEL programs to be considered effective, they must become a part of the school culture and climate.

SECTION 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Design Overview

The Character Education Program was first implemented during the 2006–2007 school year when the first of the three charter schools opened. African-American males, who were already serving as mentors to at-risk African-American males in local communities, facilitated the program. The implementation of the Character Education Program was not properly monitored or formally evaluated since its inception. Challenges presented during the network expansion, including the demographics of the Character Education Program teachers had changed, and a focus on academic outcomes was inconsistent. In order to obtain updated feedback about the course to help modify the program, I used the network’s archival data that was collected during the 2014–2015 school year to determine the effectiveness of the program.

The 2014–2015 archival data that was collected from the surveys and focus groups was particularly useful to ascertain how stakeholders perceived the implementation of the Character Education Program in their buildings. I also documented the number of supports offered to character education teachers, the type of professional development workshops that have been created to assist character education instructors across the network, and the type of systems that have been implemented to help teachers gain information about the positive impacts of character education programs in schools.

A formative evaluation approach was used to gather information for my program evaluation. According to Patton (2008), formative evaluations focus on improving and enhancing programs. Data gathering techniques included both qualitative and quantitative

data. Reviewing qualitative and quantitative data from the information obtained from the surveys and focus groups helped me discern if the Character Education Program was being implemented with fidelity across the network. Qualitative research methods provided a means of capturing the complexity of my participants' views and thoughts about the program (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). The explanatory data allowed me to gain a deeper understanding about the impression teachers and students have about the Character Education Program.

Collecting qualitative and quantitative data assisted in various aspects of the research process (Patton, 2008). In order to prepare for the data collection, I facilitated several meetings with teachers, counselors, and administrators to draft the student and teacher character education questions for the surveys and focus groups. Each character education teacher and student enrolled in the Character Education Program was asked to complete the survey. The quantitative and some of the qualitative data were collected using a survey that was disseminated to all students and program teachers using Constant Contact. Students completed the survey during their character education courses and teachers were asked to complete the survey during one of their preparation periods. The remainder of the qualitative data was collected during the three focus groups with Character Education Program facilitators and four grade level focus groups with students across the entire network.

Teachers and personal counselors facilitated all focus groups that worked in the network. As the primary researcher, I served as the note taker and gave each participant a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. Using a laptop computer, notes were taken using

a Microsoft word document. Fifty-nine out of 62 character education teachers, and 790 out of 1,200 students completed the Constant Contact survey. Character education teachers were asked to respond to 10 forced response questions and two open-ended questions. Students were given nine forced response questions and one open-ended question. Both teachers and students had an opportunity to leave comments after each question. All forced response questions used a 4- or 5-point Likert scale.

Data Gathering Techniques

Data gathering techniques consisted of a mixed method design. Patton (2008) wanted evaluators to use a variety of tools that are to be extraordinary and flexible in matching research methods.

- 1) Descriptive statistics were used to make meaning of the information received from educators across the network. The information was reorganized using charts and categorizing information into themes.
- 2) Variance was used to scrutinize at the different responses from educators across the network.
- 3) Correlation was used to discern the perceptions of teachers and students as it relates to the implementation of the Character Education Program across the network.

Participants

Random assignment was used to choose students and character education teachers to participate in focus groups. Cherry (2017) defined random assignment as the use of chance procedures in psychology experiments. Randomness ensured that each participant

would have the same opportunity to be assigned to any given group. Study participants were randomly assigned to different groups, such as the experimental group, or treatment group.

An email was sent to all principals and counselors requesting the names of all Character Education Program teachers. Character education teachers were chosen from a list using random assignment. I randomly chose teachers, picking a name from each group of teachers. Teachers were grouped according to the number of years they have taught the character education course. Teacher experiences ranged from one to nine years. At my request, a list of students enrolled in each character education class was submitted to me via email. One student was chosen from each character education class.

In an effort to increase rigor and eliminate bias, my role limited the amount of contact I had with the students, so I chose the students without having any knowledge of their personalities, grades, or experiences. Teachers and counselors at each school facilitated the focus groups in March 2015. During all of the focus groups, I documented the responses of the participants using a Microsoft Word template I created prior to each process. All character education teachers and students enrolled in the program were sent an anonymous survey via email during the winter of 2015. In addition, teachers and counselors facilitated focus groups with character education teachers and students enrolled in the program during the spring.

Data Analysis Techniques

Baxter and Jack (2008) urged researchers to use multiple methods of collecting data. I analyzed the network's data that was collected during the 2014–2015 school year.

The network surveyed students, character education teachers, and convened focus groups for both students and teachers.

I reviewed the data and drew conclusions based on the information I obtained from various stakeholders. Patton (2008) stated that rendering a judgment involves applying values to the data and interpreting the findings, while he added that findings alone do not determine whether a result is good or bad. I analyzed the data to determine if the Character Education Program was being implemented as designed. My role as a facilitator and evaluator helped me to work with my team to analyze and interpret the data and share my perceptions about the findings. My goal was to use my data to inform and guide my recommendations.

Qualitative Data Analysis

I evaluated the responses I documented during the student and teacher focus groups at each campus. I compared the responses of character education teachers and students to determine patterns, themes, and personal reactions to how the Character Education Program was implemented. Patton (2008) expressed that numbers in isolation do not help researchers make evidence-based decisions. I analyzed the data to determine the factors that contributed to how stakeholders perceive the implementation of the Character Education Program across the network.

Coding allowed me to break down the data into first level concepts and subheadings. I used this method to highlight thoughts that kept appearing in the focus group and open-ended responses to the survey data (Biddix, 2017). I assigned pseudonyms to participants in the focus groups and identified meaningful themes in large

amounts of written data, in order to code the qualitative data (Vaughn & Turner, 2016).

Participants in the focus groups had their statements documented without using names or other identifiers.

The focus group responses were analyzed and coded using the open coding method. Several colors were used to highlight and the scrutinized the information. The information was then sorted into themes. Coding usually involves assigning a word, phrase, number or symbol to each coding category (Center for Evaluation and Research, 2012). The qualitative data was coded using the following themes:

- Teacher Capacity
- SEL Implementation
- Student Support
- Fidelity

Qualitative Data Analysis

Students and teachers who participated in the Character Education Program were asked to complete an online survey. Using a Likert scale, participants were asked several questions about their views and the outcomes of the Character Education Program. Using quantitative data measures, I searched for accuracy, concentrating on factors that could be calculated (Patton, 2008). In order to analyze my data, I used percentages on the charts so that the information was streamlined and easier to comprehend. Patton (2008) stated that data should be organized in a sensible format so that decision makers can recognize patterns. The charts helped stakeholders and other readers to distinguish relationships and

impediments that impact the implementation of the Character Education Program across the network.

I reviewed the percentage of participants who responded positively or negatively to closed- and open-ended questions. Patton (2008) specified that researchers should determine standards of desirability to establish if the program is considered highly effective, adequate, or inadequate. I analyzed and compiled the information into themes, and used the information to discern if the program was being implemented as the network prescribed. Using Constant Contact, I compiled the data into an Excel spreadsheet and assembled the number of individuals who responded to each Likert scaled question. The open-ended questions at the end of the survey were also assembled on the Excel spreadsheet and grouped into themes. Patton (2008) believed data should be examined using analysis, interpretation, judgment, and recommendations. The above methods were used to make sense of the data, understand its indications, and to verify if the program was being implemented with conformity.

SECTION 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

Ninth through twelfth grade students from three campuses were given an opportunity to complete the survey during their Character Education Program class. Instructors who facilitated the Character Education Program were asked to complete a Likert scale survey. Qualitative data was collected from students and instructors during the focus groups and during the open-ended portion of the surveys. The themes that emerged from the qualitative and quantities data analysis included:

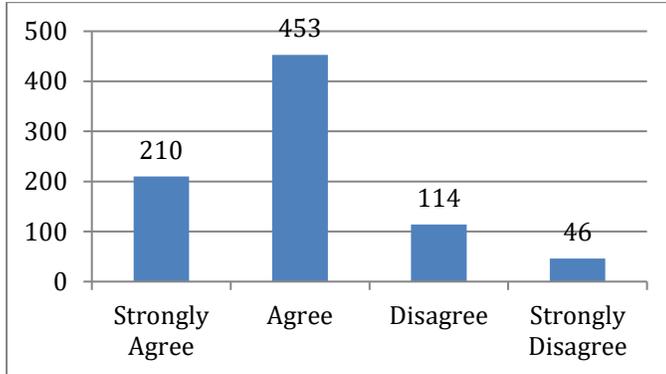
- Teachers were ill equipped to address the social and emotional needs of their students the Character Education Program.
- Students reported that they used class time to talk with their brothers, play games, and complete homework from other classes.
- The Character Education Program was not being implemented as designed.

Student Survey Data

Out of the 1,200 students who were enrolled in the character education course across the network, over 790 students completed the Likert scale survey including, 235 freshmen, 195 sophomores, 198 juniors, and 167 seniors. Students were given one week to complete the survey during the character education class. All results were reviewed collectively to determine if the network had implemented the program as intended. The students were asked several closed- and open-ended questions.

Table 1

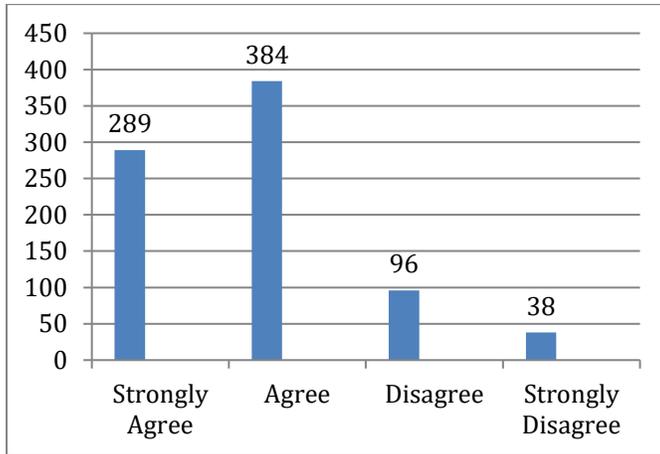
Student Survey Response 1: I share a special bond with my Pride brothers.



As observed in Table 1, 663 of the students enrolled in the character education class reported that they had a strong bond with their brothers in the Character Education Program.

Table 2

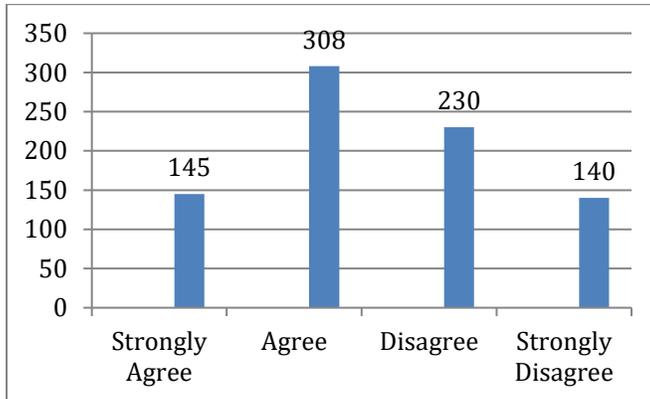
Student Survey Response 2: Each day I know what to expect in my Pride period.



Within Table 2, I was able to understand the correlation between the 673 students who reported they know what to expect when they report to class and that their character education instructor is consistent.

Table 3

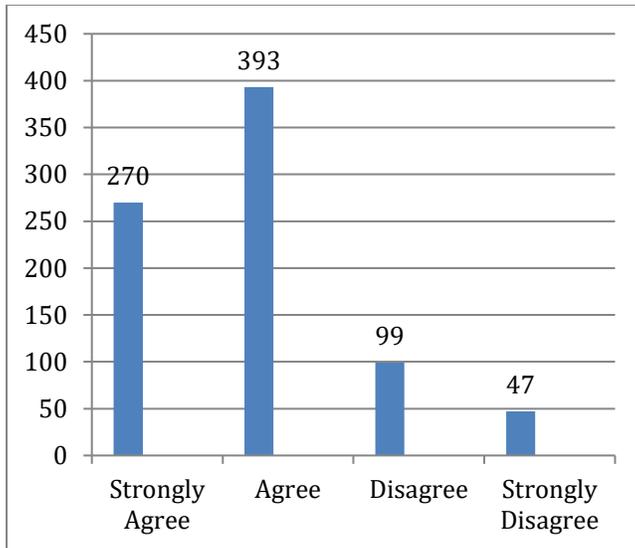
Student Survey Response 3: Pride is just important as my academic classes.



Illustrated in Table 3, 453 students reported they felt that the Character Education Program was just as important as their core content area courses. Alternatively, 370 students reported that they disagreed that the character education course was just as important as their other classes.

Table 4

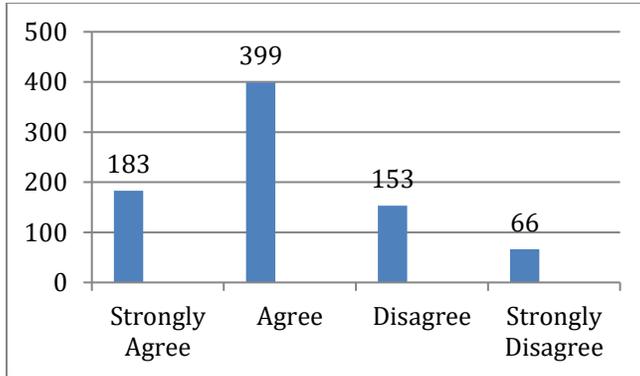
Student Survey Response 4: In Pride, we discuss the importance of making good choices inside and outside of school.



Illustrated in Table 4, 663 students reported that the Character Education Program helped them learn decision-making skills that led to them making better choices outside of school. Students reported that their character education teacher and peers gave them advice and shared experiences that helped them make informed decisions. Alternatively, 147 students documented that their character education instructor did not discuss the importance of making good decisions with them during class.

Table 5

Student Survey Response 5: I have learned strategies in Pride that help me deal with challenges that I face with challenges that I face.

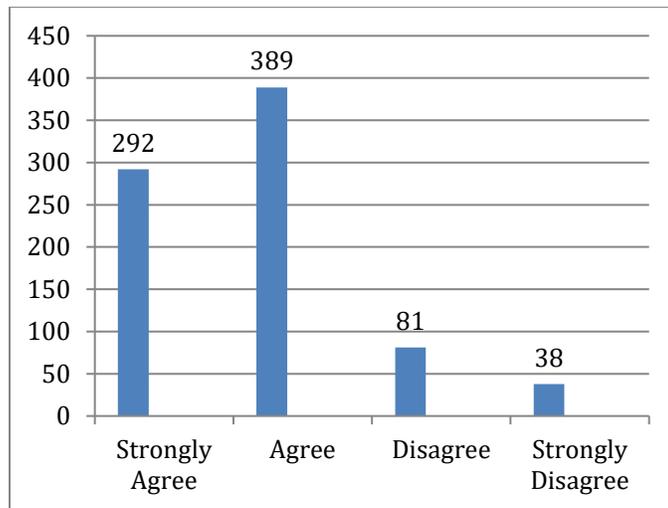


Illustrated in Table 5, 582 of students across the network have learned skills that helped them cope with personal issues they face both in and outside of school.

Alternatively, 219 students stated that they did not learn strategies in class that helped them to deal with the adversities they face in life.

Table 6

Student Survey Response 6: My Character Education Instructor leads discussions about school and non-school issues that my brothers and I may have.



Within Table 6, 681 students reported that their Character Education Instructor discussed issues during the class that they have to contend with outside of school.

Summary of Student Survey Data

Within my query using the Pride surveys and focus groups, I understood that students and teachers reported that Pride was important and valuable, both students and teachers reported in the focus groups that Pride gave them an opportunity to focus on other priorities. Teachers reported that they did not have the skill-set to implement the Character Education Program, as the network had outlined and prescribed. Students reported that they were playing trasketball, cards, doing homework for other classes, and talking to their brothers during class.

My exploration helped me bring to light the notion that implementing a social and emotional learning program in schools required knowledge of SEL standards, and how they could be infused into the Character Education Program. Student participants

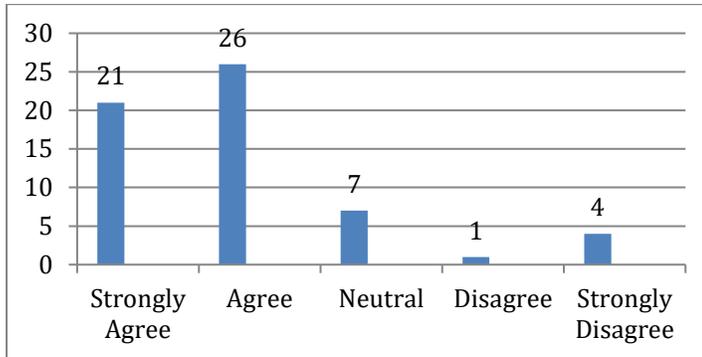
indicated that although they received some benefits from the course, they did not understand the goals of the programs and could not articulate any SEL standards or how to implement them. Although the students were not given evidence-based strategies, it appeared as if some of the instructors had a positive influence on the decisions that students made outside of the academic environment.

Teacher Responses to Survey

Fifty-nine out of 61 Character Education Instructors responded to the survey. Twenty-four respondents were from a campus in Englewood, 13 respondents worked at a campus on the West Side, and 22 participants worked at a campus near downtown Chicago.

Table 7

Teacher Survey 7: Response I understand the purpose of Pride.



Within Table 7, 47 instructors reported that they understood the purpose of the Character Education Program, while seven instructors remained neutral, and five disagreed with the statement.

Table 8

Teacher Survey Response 8: Pride a necessary component of the school experience.

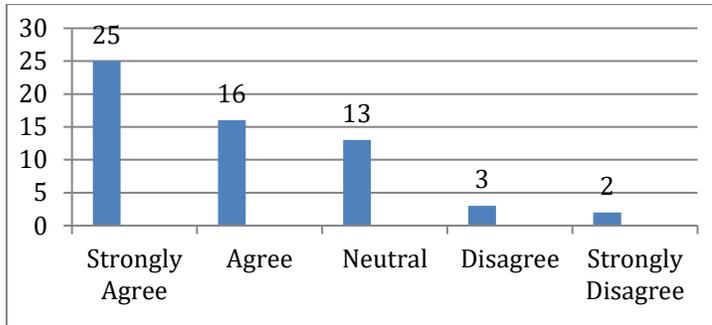
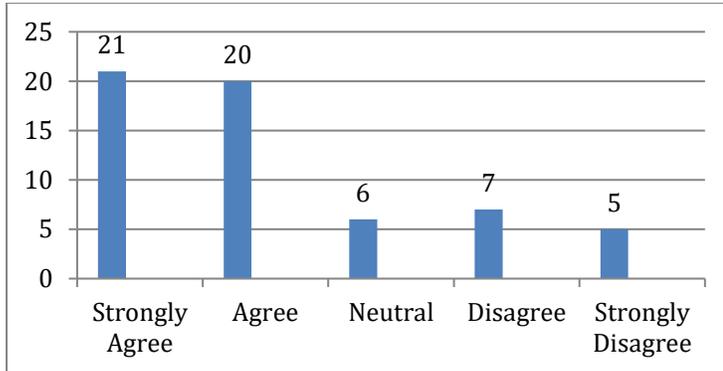


Table 8 helped me recognize a need to explore the divide among the 41 teachers reported that the class was an important part of the network experience, the 13 who remained neutral, and the five that reported that they disagreed with the statement.

Table 9

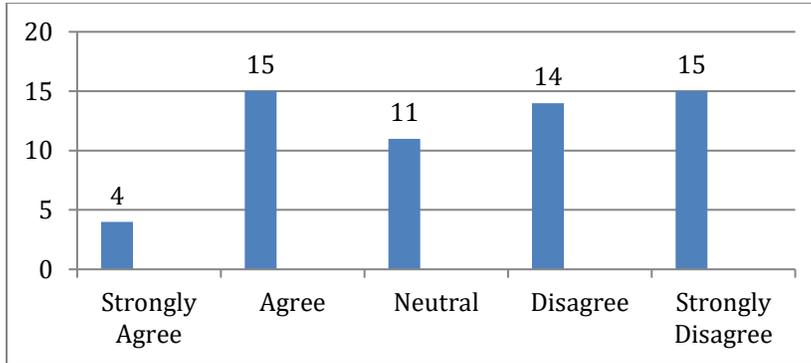
Teacher Survey Response 9: I think it is realistic that a Team member can be an effective teacher and Character Education Instructor.



Within Table 9, I discovered the notion that 41 instructors reported that they felt it was possible to be an effective character education and core content area instructor at the same time. Collectively, 18 instructors reported feeling neutral or disagreeing with the statement.

Table 10

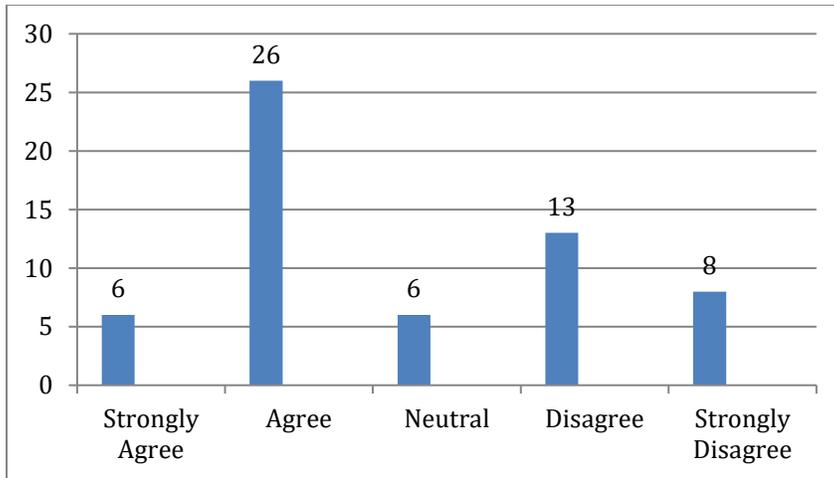
Teacher Survey Response 10: I am familiar with the ISBE Social Emotional Learning Standards and have taught them successfully in Pride.



Within Table 10, I discovered 19 out of 59 character education instructors reported that they have taught the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) SEL standards in the program. The information seemed to go against our objectives, as 11 instructors remained neutral and 29 teachers reported that they were unfamiliar with the ISBE SEL standards.

Table 11

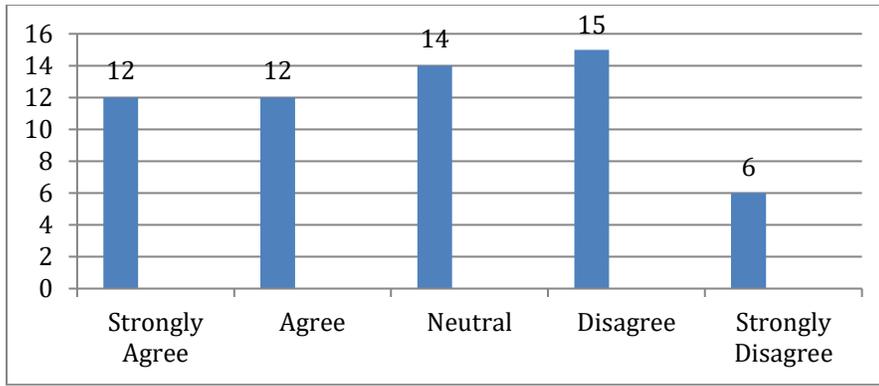
Teacher Survey Response 11: I have been able to successfully balance my Character Education Instructorship and teaching responsibilities.



In Table 11, 32 out of 59 teachers reported that they felt they could simultaneously balance being a character education and a core content area instructor. Twenty-six instructors did not agree that it was feasible and realistic for them to have to focus on academics and social and emotional learning.

Table 12

Teacher Survey Response 12: Teaching academic courses impedes my ability to function as an exceptional Character Education Instructor.



In Table 12, 35 out of 59 teachers reported that they felt teaching a character education class interfered with their ability to be a great SEL instructor, while 24 teachers reported that they could balance both responsibilities.

Summary of Character Education Survey Instructor Data

Character education teachers reported that the program was not being implemented with fidelity. Most teachers reported that they were assigned to teach a character education course and that they did not have enough time in their day to plan and implement lessons. Additionally, teachers reported that they were not trained on social and emotional learning standards and that they were unaware of evidence-based strategies.

Although instructors were expected to teach SEL standards in the class, it was apparent that most teachers never looked at or attempted to infuse the standards into their lesson plans. Teachers indicated a high frustration with teaching in the SEL program.

Some teachers reported that they enjoyed facilitating discussions; they were not equipped to implement any evidence-based strategies.

Qualitative Data

Students and teachers were chosen during a random assignment to participate in focus groups across the network. One grade level focus group was held for each grade level in the network of three schools. The focus groups were held at various campuses across the network in the Spring of 2015. Teachers from each campus participated in separate focus groups. The qualitative data was organized according to themes.

Teacher Capacity

Teachers who facilitated the Character Education Program reported that they had neither any formalized training in SEL, nor knowledge on how to implement the standards in the classroom. Jones and Bouffard (2012) reported that teachers typically received little training on how to promote SEL skills, deal with peer conflict, or address other SEL issues in the school environment. As a result, one of the most important skill sets our students needed was being overlooked and disregarded.

Teacher A reported the following:

Is this something that teachers have to learn to be character education instructors?

Now we're back to this being an additional class to prepare for. For the teachers who already teach two different contents, which is most of us, you're asking that we prep for classes and Pride.

Teacher L reported:

I am not at all familiar, and was unaware that they were a requirement as part of a Pride curriculum. I think social emotional learning could be a huge benefit to the Pride structure, but I do not have any experience with this or have any idea how to go about instituting this in the context of Pride.

Teachers also expressed concern about their ability to balance lesson plans and facilitating the SEL program. Jones and Bouffard (2012) reported that academic and SEL skills develop and operate together and should be designed and promoted simultaneously.

Teacher B said:

I have three different classes excluding the Pride. Pride takes a back seat. Core classes always take precedence.

Teacher C stated:

I focus much more on my teaching responsibilities.

Teachers also echoed the notion that they felt teaching both classes was “unfair” and “impossible.” One teacher said, “It is impossible.” Another Teacher responded to the question, “As the aforementioned states, I believe Pride should be led by someone who deals EXCLUSIVELY with the social and emotional health of students.”

SEL Implementation

Most teachers reported that they were unfamiliar with the ISBE SEL Standards. Jones and Bouffard (2012) stated that when teachers have low SEL skills, they tend to have more academic and behavior problems in their classrooms. Teachers stated that they had not received guidance or support for the SEL program. Some teachers reported that

they were supposed to receive weekly lesson plans from the administration, but did not.

Teacher E stated:

Teachers can be effective at both if they are properly trained and know the goals and expectations in advance. The admin team should also discuss with teachers in advance that they have been selected to be a character education instructor so they are not surprised. Admin should offer support when needed for a higher level of effectiveness. Teachers and character education instructors should also receive the Pride curriculum in advance. Character education instructor duties should be included in their evaluation.

Others stated that the information they were given was not helpful and that they were not equipped with a skill-set that would allow them to implement the program. Of course this could have been the cause for the resulting responses from the students.

Student A reported the SEL program was “study hall pretty much.” Other students reported they did not do anything SEL related in class. Students reported playing trasketball, sleeping, working on homework for other classes, playing cards and talking to their peers. Another student replied, “We don’t do anything, I just chill.”

Student B stated:

I think Pride is not really a class, it’s somewhere you are supposed to go, you just need to go there, some things in Pride, we don’t really do stuff, we just sit there and do nothing, we just sit around, she does her business and we do our business, she be trying to do her work and tell us to quiet down, other Prides do stuff, we don’t really do anything.

The positive impacts of SEL programs had been well documented in the City of Chicago, as well as other localities in the United States. Students with higher SEL competencies performed better on multiple measures that included higher academic achievement, attendance, GPAs, graduation rates, and fewer suspensions. Students with high social and emotional competence had a math proficiency rate that was 21 percentage points higher than their counterparts with low social and emotional competence; students with higher competence were 20 percentage points higher for English and language arts (CASEL, 2017). Having high social and emotional competence might have buffered students from the negative impact of factors such as suspensions, transiency, and weak attendance that often place them in high-risk academic status.

Student Support

Several students in the Character Education Program reported that they had a great bond with their character education instructor, and that their character education instructor provided guidance, support, and structure. Other students reported that their character education instructor did not help to facilitate a relationship between themselves and their peers in the same class. SEL programs were needed in schools to support student success and behavior (CASEL, 2017). SEL also helps avoid or reduce negative outcomes linked to being chronically disengaged and overwhelmed. SEL helped students overcome challenges such as these and gave students the opportunity to succeed in school and in life.

Student D stated:

My Pride has a bond but that is from us having class with each other, my character education instructor does not do anything to help strengthen it.

Students reported that they had multiple character education instructors during the year and instructors changed from year to year.

Student E said:

Tell someone that we should stick to one character education instructor, you get to know them well and then it just switches up. I can talk to my current character education instructor and I wish I could have had him all four years. When you have the same character education instructor, you get a bond.

Teachers reported that they did not have time to focus on their character education class when they had several other classes they had to teach and grade papers for.

Teacher A stated

The greatest challenge surrounds the attempt to have a successful Pride class while other teachers do not attempt to have similarly successful classes. My students have commented about how other teachers do not take Pride seriously but how I do. They see it as unfair. It is hard when Pride period is used as a time to roam the hallways, give out a multitude of passes, and play cards.

Lack of Fidelity

From talking to multiple stakeholders across the network, it was apparent that the Character Education Program was not being implemented with fidelity. Jones and Bouffard (2012) reported that the most effective SEL programs incorporated SAFE, which represents sequenced activities, active forms of learning, focus on one or more

social skills, and explicit target on specific skills. Some character education instructors reported that they love teaching the class while others reported that it was a burden and that they were chosen to teach the class because they had an open class period.

Teacher F said:

I believe teachers should be asked whether or not they'd like to teach a Pride. I would much rather teach another academic class, as Pride is the class that provides me the most exhaustion and unhappiness; however, I know other people enjoy being character education instructors. As a result, maybe those who elect to teach a Pride could get some sort of compensation.

Systematic SEL implementation was possible even if there were leadership changes in the building. If the program was implemented with fidelity and involved all stakeholders in the network, the program would be sustainable despite teacher turnover or leadership fluctuations (CASEL, 2017). Students reported that the teachers were inconsistent and that the class was not graded.

Student F stated:

It's good because we do fun things in Pride like eat, watch movies. Pride is boring and he does not believe in having fun in Pride, he believes that we should do work, Fridays we can chill and Wednesdays we talk to our teachers.

Students reported that they saw little value in the class because it did not count towards graduation and they did not receive any academic credit for completing the course.

Student G stated:

No, I never take Pride serious. I know that when I go to Pride that we never have any work or do anything. It's basically a chill period, where we can do whatever we want to, like sleep, listen to music, talk and just hang out. Its 9th period so nobody do anything anyway.

The lack of fidelity and education around SEL led teachers to have a keen focus on academics without the understanding of how the Character Education Program would positively impact their student's academic performance. Teachers stated that because the program was not graded, they struggled to entice the students to pay attention and complete assignments. Jones and Bouffard (2012) argued that teachers who effectively integrated SEL programs into their classroom practices had students who exhibited more on-task behaviors.

Teacher B stated:

There is very little time to plan lessons for Prides. Because there isn't a grade associated with Pride, the students don't take assignments very seriously.

During the focus groups at one of the campuses, Teacher C said:

They don't want to do work but they know if they don't do it, we can call parents and say they are failing homeroom that has only been our only saving grace. The class needs to be worth a credit and if students don't pass, they have to make it up, and it should contribute to their GPA.

Jones and Bouffard (2012) stated that SEL programs were not seen as a core component of the schools focus. As a result, teachers and other staff members did not

make efforts to incorporate the standards into their lesson plans and daily interactions with students (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Judgment and Recommendations

Judgment

The purpose of the Character Education Program evaluation was to determine if the network was implementing the program according to the school's program manual. The respondents who participated in the survey and focus groups provided responses that suggested the program was not being fully implemented as designed. Both teachers and students were unable to articulate the goals of the program and the impact it should have on academics, behavior, and the culture and climate of the school. The network seemed to have a keen focus on academics, rituals, and its mission to ensure that all graduating seniors were accepted into a 4-year university.

In sum, the responses from teachers and students outlined the reality that ISBE SEL standards were not being implemented in the program. Students were not receiving acceptable social and emotional support, teachers lacked the knowledge and capacity required to implement the program, and there was a clear absence of program fidelity.

Recommendations

The findings from the program evaluation were conclusive. The Character Education Program was laden with inconsistencies. Some teachers and students reported that the program was beneficial, while others reported that the class was used to talk, play, sleep, work on assignments, or plan lessons. Based on the data I collected and

analyzed, my recommendations would create sustainable systems that would allow the program to be implemented with reliability across the network.

I recommend that the network should hire individuals who already have backgrounds in the field of social work, counseling, or psychology. Hiring individuals who have knowledge about SEL competencies and how to implement therapeutic interventions in the classroom environment would address the lack of capacity students and staff reported. SEL program implementation would be negatively impacted if staff members were overburdened, overwhelmed, and if the schools lacked adequate staff development and continuing support for program implementation (CASEL, 2005).

Recruiting staff members with the knowledge and capacity to implement the SEL curriculum would increase the likelihood that the students were being taught evidence-based strategies, and reduce the amount of training the facilitators would require. Trained mental health providers that work in schools with teachers could help create a culture that helped students practice skills as part of interventions (CASEL, 2008). In addition, the network could have a keen focus on development, implementation, and evaluation if they had the right individuals implementing the program.

Recommendations for schools looking to improve SEL programs include the following strategies (CASEL, 2008):

1. Provide practical and easy-to-use ideas for teachers and school staff to promote children's mental health.
2. Review the initiative's logic model in terms of SEL competencies, assess gaps in services and create a comprehensive vision for the skills and

competencies for all students to develop as a result of the collaborative partnership.

3. Engage all staff in thinking through the curricular and instructional value of coordinated school wide SEL.
4. Provide professional development and support for those implementing the programming.
5. Add a social and emotional learning goal to the School Improvement Plan.
6. Establish high expectations for academic achievement and teachers.
7. Provide specific feedback on students' work rather than more global praise.
8. Create physically and emotionally safe environments for students.
9. Facilitate the use of data to drive decision-making.
10. Coordinate with school mental health providers to provide resources and professional development for teachers on the signs and symptoms of common mental health issues.
11. Communicate regularly with parents to let them know about SEL-related classroom activities.
12. Be consistent with rituals, rules, and routines in the classroom.
13. Connect with schools and districts to learn about ongoing SEL programming.
14. Employ a strengths-based strategy.

15. Develop supportive programming for at-risk students that provide opportunities for them to practice the skills in multiple settings.

Jones and Bouffard (2012) reported that an SEL program that was implemented with fidelity would have a positive impact on the entire school environment. The network should create a grade level SEL curriculum or purchase an evidence-based curriculum from an SEL organization. All staff members across the network should be educated about SEL standards, outcomes, and how to implement them into the common core curriculum. The character education teachers should receive more in-depth training and create common assessments to determine if the students were learning the skills. The freshman-on track, attendance, and discipline data should be used to determine if the program was having a positive impact on the culture and climate in the school.

“Demand for SEL is at an all-time high. Teachers recognize the importance of it. Employers are requiring it. Parents value it. Communities are being transformed by it. And, most important, millions of students already are benefitting from it” (CASEL, 2017, p. 24). The highly skilled character education teachers could also be used to support SEL development in staff members and facilitate professional developments around bullying, Erin’s Law, teen depression, and protective factors. The recommendations for the Character Education Program should be used to modify the program and its implementation. The data was conclusive; SEL programs had a progressive effect on the lives of students who participate in them.

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