HOW THE LEADERSHIP OF A CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT CURRICULUM EFFECTS THE STANDARDIZED TEST SCORES AMONG 3rd GRADE STUDENTS

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this non-experimental causal-comparative study sought to determine if character development curriculum directly impacted student success, specifically in the area of academics through standardized test scores. Many articles presented an explanation regarding the need for character development curriculum, but very little research has been done regarding the positive academic impact on standardized test scores. By utilizing a quantitative design, standardized test scores for 168 students in third grade were collected from one school district and analyzed to determine a difference between scores in Language Arts and Math through the statistical MANOVA test. The standardized test scores for the elementary students were compared between two schools in the same school district, where one school implemented the character development curriculum through the Leader in Me Program and the other school lacked implementation. Quantitative data in the form of standardized test scores were collected and analyzed in order to determine if the implementation of a character education curriculum had an impact on standardized scores, specifically the through a state system of school assessment. Results showed a significant statistical difference in the 3rd grade English Language Arts test scores and Mathematics scores on a State System of School Assessment between students who have been exposed to a character development curriculum versus students who have not. Elementary students exposed to The Leader in Me program do not overperform when compared to students at the same grade level, with similar demographics, and within the same school district. Recommendations for future research include looking at more grade levels, multiple years of implementation, and the overall implementation of The Leader in Me Program.

Keywords: character development, character education, moral education, academic performance, character development, academic outcomes, soft skills

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Dedication

What a long journey this has been. I first want to thank my God for bringing me through this process. I also send a heartfelt thank-you to my husband Matthew. Without your support from the very beginning, this would not be possible. There were many evenings you watched our children while I worked away at Panera Bread. You never complained and always expected me to finish the race. To my two little boys, thanks for sacrificing your mommy many nights and weekends while I worked. This process has taken many years, and I lost one of my biggest cheerleaders, my stepfather Paul. His steadfast support and encouragement, "Paging Dr. Sypolt," was the encouragement I needed when I felt like quitting. I am saddened to know he will not see me finish this journey, but I know he is watching from heaven. To my mother, thank you for making this a priority and encouraging me at every step. Even after I had a baby, you managed to help me keep my house in order, babysit, and continue to expect an end product. After each rejection, you were there praying me through and telling me God has a purpose and his faithfulness will endure. To my grandparents in heaven, your encouragement from a young age to value education and work hard was the groundwork for this process to even begin. You planted a seed in me to become a lifelong learner that I can never uproot. To my sisters Katie and Rachel and special aunts Lynda, Rita, Patty, Darleen, and Cindy, thanks for accepting this journey with me and providing another layer of love during the process. To my mother-in-law Mary Lou, Diane, teachers and coworkers, your support and kind words during this process were very much appreciated. I feel as though I had my own fan base to make this possible. To my dear friends, thank you for being willing to look over my paper and provide input in a time crunch. Through this process, I discovered how blessed and supported I am during the many rejections as God always made a way.

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Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Character development curriculum has the ability to affect many aspects of student's lives. At all levels of education, student well-being and personal relationships are researched as influenced by character development curriculum. School programming can either be targeted directly or indirectly as a means of impacting overall school culture, academics, or both. The problem of this study focused on the effects of character development curriculum on student academic success.

Background

Character development curriculums are helping prepare students to be leaders for tomorrow (Agboola & Tsai, 2012). Many behaviorists, counselors, educators, and economists agree a character development curriculum can impact many aspects of a school with positive outcomes. One of the main aspects of a character development curriculum is helping students regulate their thoughts and actions in ways that encourage achievement for personal attainment (Seider, Novick, & Gomez, 2013). Character development curriculum has also been described using other terms such as moral education, soft skills, moral reasoning, life skills education, and service learning (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).

A character development curriculum has the ability to completely alter the school culture and expectations within a school that also impacts student outcomes, both socially and academically. Schools across the country are looking at ways to include a character development curriculum within their core curriculum given the desired social results (Davidson, Khmelkov, & Baker, 2011; Snyder, Vuchinich, Acock, Washburn, & Flay, 2012). Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory parallels with the social implications character development curriculum

exemplifies. Yet, there is a high level of inquiry around the change academic student performance experiences with the establishment of a character development curriculum.

Many studies have been conducted regarding the overall increase in student well-being after the intervention of character development with research focused throughout elementary, middle, and high schools. The outcome of a character development curriculum can help students flourish academically and socially, especially students from urban backgrounds, when character strengths are increased (Oppenheimer, Fialkov, Ecker, & Portnoy, 2014; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). The overall outcome a character development curriculum develops, according to many character development curriculums, is student perseverance and performance character, academic integrity, moral character reasoning, school connectedness, and ethical development (Seider, et al., 2013). Students are also intrinsically looking at experiences for promoting a caring community and creating positive relationships with others (Johansson, Brownlee, Cobb-Moore, Boulton-Lewis, Walker, Ailwood, 2011). The approach a school takes to create and continue a character development curriculum is the factor in how successful a character program begins, its long-term systemic use, and overall perception by educators, students, and parents alike. The motivation in creating concrete strategies is the biggest factor socially and academically regarding student overall success (Seider, 2012; Seider et al., 2013).

Given the overall positive effects of a character development curriculum, administrators in schools with character development curriculums have decided to implement such programs through researching various options and determining the overall expected outcome after intended use. The positive correlation character development implementation has on school cultures and student outcomes has impacted school districts and administrators from both a fiscal and

curriculum viewpoint in determining whether to execute a character development curriculum (Snyder, et al., 2009; Zakin, 2012).

Historical Summary

According to Watz (2011), character education in America has included both implicit and explicit instruction, with historical foundations stemming from European influences. Both American and European character development viewpoints stem around similar moral components. Williams (2000) states that character development involves three aspects; focusing on realizing, desiring, and doing good for others. The character development term has evolved over time, with educators seeking to name the term character development. Character development was coined during a time when scholars had no description for their impact in forming the character of the younger generation by affecting their experiences. Personal knowledge, behavior, and awareness are seen as three aspects centered asround the development of character education (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006).

The term soft skills has been frequently related to character development curriculum in the past decade with a focus on students setting goals, increasing student motiviation, and focusing on positive character traits to use not only at school but in the future workforce (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). The soft skills individuals possess are also thought to have a link with overall success. The term of soft skill being a 'skill' implies that it is something that can be explicitly taught to an individual. The integration of soft skills is now commonly a term for personality traits related to character development (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Shields, 2011).

Effective school programs not only include core direct instruction and language-based curriculum programs, but also need an element of a school climate approach either school-wide or district-wide (Brooks & Kahn, 1993). The intensity of a character development curriculum

has changed based on political trends. Educational theorists such as Kohlberg, Dewey, and Piaget helped build momentum for a character development curriculum based on the Progressive movement (Howard, Berkowitz, Schaeffer, 2004). In the 1800s, character development was seen as a reinforcement of home values and was included in the public-school curriculum. All children, including those of immigrants, were seen as needing to know good characteristics. Education in American started as a Puritan viewpoint that evolved into a belief system seemly Protestant. The Bible was used to teacher moral principles, along with history, reading, and writing. Benjamin Franklin was a founding father who stressed the need for public schools that included curriculum taught with morals embedded in history (Watz, 2011).

In the nineteenth century, Horace Mann was a prominent politician who was instrumental in shaping the viewpoint and need for character development. He focused on educational reform and the necessity for explicit moral instruction inside school curriculum. His viewpoints stemmed around the idea students learn by example, specifically in the realm of moral development. His influence encouraged more educators to take a direct role in regards to teaching character development in a hostile free manner with realistic examples for learning (Watz, 2011). Subsequently at the same time, more Catholics immigrated to America. Parochial schools were formed to increase the seamless integration between student character development at school and home, with families seeking a solid partnership (McCormack, 2013).

Two educational approaches were evident before the turn of the century in 1890, with the first being an emphasis on students doing well and seeing and building fundamental habits. Students were expected to receive these habits both in school and outside of school through venues such as church or Boy Scouts. The other approach was process orientated and saw ethical decisions based on cultural contexts (Lickona, 1991). The viewpoint during the turn of

the century was the need for schools to step away from being the principal educator of character development (Sojourner, 2012).

The progressive movement over the next half-century continued the need for the development of each individual for the betterment of society. John Dewey created the Progressive movement that focused on a child-centered approach, which included the need for students to be able to problem solve and have access to multiple curriculums. This philosophy encouraged students to interact within their education environments and focus on desirable values (White, 2015). With the focus on values, public schools identified with the definition of character education, including character traits society views as desirable. At the same time, religious schools viewed the child-centered approach as a means to help foster individual moral and spiritual growth (Blain & Revell, 2002).

An increase in character development, however, began in the 1980s and1990s after a decline in the quality of public education between 1940 and 1970 with ethical dilemmas regarding what to include in character development curriculum (Lickona, 1991). Until the 1950s, character development was widely taught in public schools as part of the standard curriculum but was phased out due to the concern of the relationship between character development and religious teachings (Howard et al., 2004). School began to integrate character development curriculum in the quest to increase moral reasoning (Sojourner, 2012).

When looking at current trends in the culture across schools in America, not all schools include a direct and explicit character development curriculum or instruction that includes soft skills. The last two decades in education have revealed a need for moral development, pushing the desire for school districts to seek a relationship between students and teachers within schools (Oppenheimer et al., 2014). The need has primarily been focused on increasing overall student

success with a character development curriculum. Numerous studies have been conducted noting the positive relationship between a character development curriculum and student success socially (Bierman, Coie, Dodge, Greenberg, Lochman, McMahon, & Pinderhughes, 2010; Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Sanderse (2013) noted that character development curriculum provided an opportunity for positive relationships to form along with the ability for teachers to role model moral and character values to their students (Lee, Chang, Choi, Kim, & Zeidler, 2012). Oppenheimer et al. (2014) observed urban adolescents over a period and noted an increase in student behavior. Students began to look at the future and set goals for future endeavors after the implementation of explicit lessons on character strengths. What was missing as a future research effect in this particular study was the relationship between academic achievements among the urban adolescents (Gillham, Adams-Deutsch, Werner, Reivich, Coulter-Heindl, Linkins, & Seligman, 2011).

In addition, whole-school change and an increase in school climate through social and emotional learning was investigated in Hawaii; the study looked at the overall environment at the elementary level. Given the ability to implement change and address unsafe school conditions, the character development curriculum implemented at the schools in this study noticed a positive correlation. Schools, families, the surrounding community, and most importantly students, were all seen as benefiting from increasing social learning skills and character development. The finding presented encourages schools to consider the use of a character development curriculum for similar results (Snyder et al., 2012).

Skaggs and Bodenhorn (2006) presented the most comprehensive review of the effect on academics with the utilization of a character development curriculum and how a program that focuses around soft skills can impact student academics. This study was the first of its kind

comparing greater improvement in perceived character driven behavior with related academic connectedness. A noticeable improvement in character-related behaviors was observed with the initiation of a character development program in five school districts over a five -year period that included both rural, urban, and suburban populations. Given the responses from a school-wide survey, behaviors resulting in suspension and student dropout rates decreased, but student academic achievement revealed a lack of positive relationship (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). Schools were expecting to see a relationship between the implementation of a character development curriculum with overall student gains, but little direct influence was noted. The idea of an improvement in overall student success was evident, but the goal of implementing a character development curriculum beyond improved student behavior and a positive school climate was impractical. Since this study, much research has been done in the area of character development, what it entails, and how it changes school culture (Seider et al., 2013) in the past half century; especially with research by Walker, Roberts, and Kristjánsson (2015) setting the pathway of a new era of character development beyond just theory but practice (Arthur, 2010; Lewis, Robinson, & Hayes, 2011).

Social Impact

Character development helps prepare students for the challenges of life, through building a sense of empowerment through resiliency (Elias, 2014). Determining the present school culture and 'rewiring' the culture systemically can display remarkable benefits for the staff and students alike (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). With an increase in negative behavior among school populations, many schools are beginning to see the increased need for a character development curriculum (Agboola & Tsai, 2012). Davidson (2014) explained the human costs and possible economic costs associated with not educating students to respond morally and

ethically. The younger a child is exposed to character building skills, the more likely they are to experience positive outcomes socially and emotionally (Ji & Flay, 2013).

The 'conscience of craft' is termed as a way of helping students develop a moral conscious to handle social concerns and respond appropriately. Providing an opportunity for students to practice their social skills in a safe environment before expecting mastery builds competence in students socially. Providing real-world activities and simulations allows students at different developmental levels to have access to competence in thinking and behavior (Davidson, 2014).

Thinking and behavior skills gained from character development help students socially handle self-management skills, understand self-awareness, make decisions, handle 'themselves and relationships' effectively, practice relationship building skills, and all together grow socially and emotionally. When students are provided with opportunities for social and emotional learning, negative outcomes and events are decreased with an increase in overall positive student outcomes, social competence, and academic achievement (Ji & Flay, 2013; Neophytou, 2013). Outcomes of a character development curriculum work together and are not seen in isolation. Beyond social skills, overall school absenteeism is one other factors affected by the impact of a social-emotional and character development program (Snyder et al., 2012).

The students from the most concerning environments are at the greatest risks for developing vital character skills if they are lacking exposure to these traits in their formal education. Character development programs are known to impact factors of resiliency and handling risk appropriately in low-income, urban schools. Many of the research studies regarding the outcome of character development programs tend to focus around urban students

and the overall impact on including the community a character development curriculum has the potential for influencing (Bavarian et al., 2008).

When looking at different character development programs, one of the most crucial elements that first must be reflected upon is not only the current culture of the school, but the cultural acceptance of the program by all students within the school. In order to fully implement a character development curriculum, school leaders need to understand the values and beliefs of the students and the staff. Teachers and students both contribute wholly to the school culture (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015).

Theory

The theoretical framework that guided this research study was based on the work of psychologist Albert Bandura. The Social Learning Theory by Bandura provides a basis for understanding how observation, imitation, and modeling affect overall student academic performance (Bandura, 1977, Grusec, 1992). Bandura's Social Learning Theory postulated that learning is a cognitive process where modeling provides students with the ability to self-regulate their behaviors through continuous reinforcement (Sivo, Karl, Fox, Taub, & Robinson, 2017). Research demonstrates that when children are exposed to specific changes in modeling behavior and thinking (Grusec, 1992), the outcome can affect academic performance.

Bandura's theory explains how motivation that a character development curriculum provides affects the learning outcomes of students (Skaggs and Bodenhorn, 2006). Long (2011) further explained this affect by asserting that Bandura's Social Learning Theory provides students with the ability to self-regulate their behaviors through continuous reinforcement that can enhance student achievement tremendously (Sivo, et al. 2017). Ultimately, feedback academically through student cognitive activities academically helps enhance intrinsic self-

motivation. Findings demonstrate the idea that modeling self-efficacy skills, along with personal experiences increase in individual's student academic success (Zimmerman, 1998). Sivo, et al. (2017) further agrees with Zimmerman (1998) in regards to school climate, created by self-efficacy development, being as importance as school curriculum when encouraging the success of students.

Student data is one practice interrelated with both student academic and social functions that allows for personalization in meeting student needs and to make informed decisions in schools (Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin, & Roberts, 2015). In order for character development curriculum to be productive for students, assessment is necessary, as dictated through educational best practices (Beaumount, O'Doherty, & Shannon, 2011). Student assessment could be in the form of state standardized testing. Modeling character development curriculum repeatedly, focused around leadership, improves overall academic performance, thus leading to improved assessments. Further research shows additionally modeling for students in disadvantaged school districts influenced standardized test scores when exposed to continuous modeling provided by their school (Snyder & Flay, 2010).

Problem Statement

Throughout the United States, many schools have incorporated character development programs, however; research is limited in regards to how character development affects early adolescence individuals through promoting personal achievement and purpose for success (Malin, Liauw, & Damon, 2017). If a school district financially invests in a character development program, the implementation of the program should demonstrate a positive impact, academically, and improve school culture for students during regular school hours (Snyder 2015).

Jones, Barnes, Bailey, and Doolittle (2017) mirror the perceptions presented by Snyder (2015) in stating that social-emotional learning (SEL) is a critical variable in academic achievement for students. SEL skills should be explicitly taught during elementary school years. A study conducted by Grier (2012) observed an afterschool program centered around an educational enrichment and character development curriculum for at risk students between third and sixth grade students. There was an increase in Lexile levels for only students enrolled in the after-school program. Snyder et al., (2012) had a similar mission in exposing how a character development curriculum influenced overall school culture through school personnel perceptions. While students did improve academically with the Positive Action curriculum during the second year of implementation, the results were based solely on perception from individuals working with the students. Jones and Doolittle (2017) further highlight challenges in character education programs after evaluating 11 different SEL programs with a need for a SEL program to embrace an entire school environment. School wide training to effectively teach SEL skills and available data regarding the academic effect in SEL programs is a continuing concern.

Research is limited in regards to how character development affects early adolescence individuals through promoting personal achievement (Malin, Liauw, & Damon, 2017). A character development curriculum that focuses on promotion and growing intellectual virtues in relationship to traditional character education has been underexplored (Baehr, 2017). Research shows that character development is a pathway for individual positive development and personal betterment (Seider, Jayawickreme, & Lerner, 2017). With a momentum for promoting character development, evidence shows that students who have higher expectations and positive beliefs in themselves experience increased academic success (Corno & Anderman, 2016).

The studies, beforehand, demonstrated the need for continued research regarding the

impact of character development curriculum on academic student performance, specifically on standardized test scores for students (Elias, White, & Stepney, 2014). In order to measure the impact of a character development curriculum on academic performance, a school-wide character development program with lessons as part of the regular school day, explicit SEL skills taught to school staff, and positive results on student assessment outcome is crucial. This gap is evident in the need for high-quality leadership to successfully implement a character development curriculum in an effort to improve student academics (Steinberg, & Li, 2014). While there has been some research on the effects of character development on student achievement and positive behavior (McCormick, Cappella, O'Connor, & McClowry, 2015; Finn, et al.; Elias, et al, 2014; Corcoran, Reilly, & Ross, 2014), a gap still existed in the literature with regards the effects of character development on normative achievement; therefore, the problem of this study was to determine the effects of a character development curriculum using standardized test scores from 3rd grade students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this causal-comparative study was to add to the research on character education and determine if there was a difference in standardized test scores between third grade students who have been exposed to a character development curriculum or have not. The independent variable was defined as a character development curriculum that embodies a different paradigm focused on intrinsic motivation and using a common language ubiquitously throughout an elementary school. There were two levels of independent variables. Only one school received a character development curriculum; a second school did not receive a curriculum. Standardized test scores for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) in the subject areas of Language Arts and Mathematics were the dependent variables. The